

# New Pathways for Rethinking Literary Studies in the 21st Century

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In the year 2000, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak delivered a lecture at the University of California Irvine entitled *Death of a Discipline*, subsequently published in 2003. In that lecture, Spivak contended that, in our increasingly globalised world, literary studies (and more particularly comparative literature) could only survive by undermining and undoing “the definitive tendency of the dominant to appropriate the emergent” (Spivak 2003: 100). Beyond methods already traversed by post-colonial studies, Gayatri Spivak suggested in her lecture that it was from the starting-point of pre-modern societies and traditional cultures that the future of literary studies should be envisaged: “The planetarity of which I have been speaking in these pages is perhaps best imagined from the pre-capitalist cultures of the planet” (Spivak 2003: 101). While this point of view will no doubt appear a little extreme, we for our part are persuaded that sociological analyses of pre-modern oral traditions provide the best perspective for assessing the limitations of literary studies as they are currently conceived and also for opening up new pathways for their adaptation to the contemporary world.

In actual fact, whatever efforts are made to escape an ethnocentrist conception of the object of literary studies, that is, of Literature in terms both of a cultural heritage and of a creative process, this object itself is never questioned in its foundation to any radical extent. Yet it is apparent that this object is not the corpus of “written [and oral] work valued for superior or lasting artistic merit”, which is one of the major definitions of the generic term “literature” provided by the Oxford English Dictionary. As a result, one can easily give oneself over, with a delicious and terrible sense of impending doom, to the prospect of the imminent death of literature, without having to rethink the essence of the notion itself, nor that of the discipline that studies it. Yet it is urgent that such should be done.

## National literatures and comparative literature

Literature was not constituted as an independent object of study until relatively late, that is, until the course of the 19th century, when it became closely associated with the emerging concept of the Nation-State. Its relative newness as a discipline can best be appreciated by studying the growth of public education systems during that era.

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If we follow the gradual implementation of public education in France throughout the 19th century, from primary schools to universities, the political dimension of this process, in the sense of the establishment of a type of State organisation, is irrefutable. Pierre Albertini concludes his work *L'École en France* (The School in France) with the remark that “the French public school thus remains in essence fundamentally political in nature” (Albertini 1992: 169). It's worth making clear here, and something we will bring into sharper focus later, that this does not simply mean that the curriculum had a political content, but that the very structure of the education provided was closely associated with a precise and historically specific ideology: that of the so-called myth of the nation.

Following Albertini's line of argument, let's go on to consider the example of the teaching of literature in the universities. Albertini asserts that, at the beginning of the 19th century the prevalent framework was that derived from the Ancien Régime. The very small number of faculties of Arts and Letters existing at the time dispensed a general education dominated by the classics (works of Greek and Latin antiquity) together with translation exercises into and from these languages. With the spread, from around 1895, of the approach to literary studies propounded by Gustave Lanson, faculties of Letters were assigned a new objective: “to educate the educators of the Republic; to lay down the broad lines of the Nation's ideology” (Albertini 1992: 109). From the very beginning the institutional study of literature thus excluded, for example, popular or regional literatures. It embodied a clearly ideological purpose: to cultivate a sense of national identity around commonly held values and to give substance to a citizenship associated with a territorial space. To achieve this, more recent authors were introduced, attention was broadly called to the links with political history, and composition in French and the *explication de texte* forms of analysis became generalised. “Because the links with the ideology of the regime were more visible there than elsewhere [...] the faculties of Letters [...] provoked diatribes from those who strongly objected to their averredly politically-oriented direction” (Albertini 1992: 110). Charles Péguy with great pertinence denounced the “shaping of minds” (Albertini 1992: 114) that this policy was producing.

It may be claimed that such times have largely passed, that, broadly speaking, May 1968 saw the demise of this approach to literary study. The content of the latter has certainly changed, even if, in Albertini's view, this change has been a limited one. Nevertheless, the general framework remains. In the 20th century, the questioning of the politicisation of literary study never fully followed through with its initial critique. Granted, there have been some, admittedly salutary, internal differentiations accepted within the national literature, but the continuing legitimacy of the latter as a base from which to structure study has gone without examination: thus, while class-based, gendered, ethnic and popular literatures are now visible, they still are incorporated within a national framework! One has only to stand back a little when perusing the literary anthologies used within the secondary education system in France to see clear signs of an organisation and hierarchical arrangement of works according to a perceived social consensus. As a result, authors such as Agrippa d'Aubigné and Louise Labé, themes like *préciosité*, the Baroque and libertinage, socially or politically committed writers such as Jules Vallès or, from a different perspective, Léon Bloy, occupy a very limited place. The literary history that is taught thus definitely equates to the ideological memory that a society chooses to retain, for “in every age [...] it is literature in its entirety which is the ideology” (Sartre 1988: 233).

Nowadays, between manuals that perpetuate values that have largely been left behind with respect to modern-day France and the attempts of teachers to pass on values of creativity, critical vision and freedom, the crisis afflicting literary studies can well be understood: it is itself no doubt a reflection of the crisis of a society that is no longer exactly certain of what is the basis of the social bond. In another 20th century attempt to extirpate the ideological element, structuralists

and other formalists went off in search of universal canons, but these in fact were rarely located beyond the bounds of narrowly ethnocentric enquiry. Such theoreticians quite naturally took as their corpus their respective national literatures, which, from the methodological point of view, is rather awkward when one claims to be advancing supposedly universal forms! When Gérard Genette posed the problem of the history of literature, he never addressed the issue of the national dimension, taking as his recommended example Jean Cohen's work on the *Structure of Poetic Language*, which certainly does establish a history of the forms, but within the strictly national poetry of France (Genette 1972: 19).

It may well be claimed that this idea of literature as an institution is valid only for France itself. Certainly in some respects the French model is an extreme one, but we should take careful note that the idea of a national literature is very widespread, and that it still underpins the way literary studies are structured in the West under the more generic label of literature. One can also see in the appearance of comparative literature as a new branch of literary studies another possible escape-route from the influence of ideology. According to Jean Bessière (2000: 10):

Comparative literature emerged as the literary discipline which is constructed upon and applied against the limitations of the dominant orientations of literary studies, in any one country, in any one group of countries, in any one institutional, historical or epistemological context.

But it is clear that the approach to opening up literary study embodied in this quotation does not really challenge national boundaries, which remain the basic structuring element from within which critical thought is exercised. Comparative literature, outside of its worthy goals of bringing peoples and cultures together, has become thus, through a ricochet effect, a hostage of its own definition, as its initial intent was in fact to compare national literatures. As the victim of this fundamental misapprehension, it would be the constant resort of the "margins" of literary production: literatures of social class, or of minorities, regionalist or ethnic literatures, literatures of supra-national language domains (e.g. Francophone or Anglophone literatures). But the concept of a national literature still retains its dynamism: witness the attempt to bring forth a literature of Europe, the appearance of national literatures in sub-Saharan Africa, along with other examples. So, is it not time to undertake a rigorous and seriously motivated analysis of just what literature is?

## What is literature?

In any given society, can literature be in fact anything other than a national literature? Let's start from the idea that, generally speaking, the role of literary studies is largely to transmit a cultural memory – that of the literary works of the past – and to analyse this memory and transpose it. Now, in the view of the philosopher Bernard Stiegler, "memory is always subject to a political winnowing, that is to say a criteriology through which events are selected as needing or not to be retained" (Stiegler 1996: 17). Thus literature as a symbolic heritage particular to a given culture is organised around implicit but effective criteria whose purpose is to give meaning to this heritage at the level of the community. This memory becomes thus transmitted, and if we follow the argument of Régis Debray in introducing the new science he called "mediology" whose object is the study of the interactions, past and present, between technology and culture, then "to transmit is to organise, and to organise is to establish hierarchies" (Debray 2000: 10). Viewed from this perspective, the study of literature is the end point of a collective process that consists of organising literary products and arranging them in hierarchies with a "political" end in view, that is, the aim of achieving and maintaining social integration and cohesion.

According to the contemporary philosophers we are drawing upon, the organisation and hierarchisation of the literary heritage is achieved through a series of mediating procedures such as the publishing process, literary reviews, library acquisitions or, as we have seen, the educational process. These conservatory activities are as necessary to the society as is artistic creativity, though their functions are very different. There was thus good reason for the charges brought in the courts against Flaubert or Baudelaire to be extended to include their publishers and even the printers of their works! The prosecutor Pinard made this very point in relation to the *Fleurs du mal*: “I hasten to add that a book is not a mere trifle which will quickly become lost and forgotten like today’s newspaper. When a book is published, it is permanent; it remains in our libraries and in our homes as a sort of portrait of the times” (Baudelaire 1961: 1209). A book thus ensures the transmission of the heritage and exercises an influence on the very nature of this heritage through the choices made in its publication. Consider this more recent example from the *Monde des Livres* of 14 June 2002. It concerned the publication of the English translation of a book written in French by Algerian author Anouar Benmalek entitled *The Child of the Ancient People*. The Australian translator wanted the author to “correct” certain “geographical and anthropological inaccuracies”, whereas the author saw in this proposed intervention an ideological judgement which he was unwilling to sanction (see *Le Monde des Livres* 14 June 2002, p. XII). The fact is that this book invited Australians to revisit their colonial past which they interpret according to their own cultural frames of reference, denying the genocide of the Aboriginal peoples of Tasmania in favour of the version asserting the fusion of the two peoples through inter-marriage. This is an obvious case of institutional mediation. Within such a framework, do comparatist studies provide a means for unbolting the ideological yoke of national literary studies? That is certainly partly the case, but we can well see that comparative literature is unable to avoid the organisation and hierarchisation of the domain of literary studies, firstly by the choice of the translated works it studies, but also more generally because the foreign works do not themselves escape the social and cultural mediation that operates within a particular society, both at the level of publication and at that of the work’s dissemination, for example.

As for the education system, the contemporary philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has provided a succinct definition:

Teaching is (or has become) a cultural activity, at least to the extent that it is subordinated to a demand coming from a community. I have no contempt for cultural activities. [...] Simply, they are quite different from what I am calling here artistic work (including thought). (Lyotard 1991: 135–136)

For Lyotard, artistic work is the equivalent of aesthetic creation, that activity of the mind which consists notably of welcoming “the open possibility and uncontrolled creativity there is in most languages”. Thought is associated with this activity because “being prepared to receive what thought is not prepared to think is what deserves the name of thinking.” (Lyotard 1991: 73). Thus, Lyotard makes a very clear distinction between what is a cultural activity, which includes teaching, and aesthetic creation itself, as we propose also to do in order to obtain a clearer perception thereof.

## Literary studies and human sciences

We should first start with a comparison with pre-modern societies to try to clarify an important point: that is, what is the specific function of literary studies in relation to the other human sciences. Ethnological studies of traditional societies may provide us with an appropriate point of departure.

It is quite clear that, from the folk-tale to the myth of origins, oral literature has a role in the transmission of community values, whether social, moral or religious. Why couldn't it be the same with literary studies? Indeed, the essential function of History and Geography is the meaningful organisation of time and space, while philosophy devotes itself to a reflection on values and principles. Taking that approach, it is apparent that instruction in literature consists of passing on, in the most agreeable manner one can, not only a science of literary form but more particularly a structuring and integrative axiological heritage. It is at the very least paradoxical then that, at the very time when ethnology and sociology are accentuating the integrative virtues of the oral literatures of traditional societies and on the importance of their preservation, the West has demonstrated such a lack of recognition of the purposes of literary studies with relation to its own social systems by denying, for example, the structuring contribution of literary history on the sociological level, to the point of wanting simply to reduce it, as Genette recommended, to a history of "Literarity".

Thus literature, even where it is not national, is constituted as ideologically oriented cultural memory, in the same way as oral traditions. Instead of refusing this apparent fact, would it not be better to make a reasoned examination of it? Indeed, certain intellectuals and writers have already opened up for us some interesting pathways for investigation, all of which, in the light of established ethnological knowledge associated with an aesthetic analysis, situate art in terms of social practice as the centre of their reflection, which serves only to more solidly underline the both genuine but also historically and geographically limited nature of the construction of the idea of Literature.

As an example of a broad-ranging reflection on the language arts which seeks to transcend ethnocentric boundaries, we shall take up the critique of Paul Zumthor on the analysis of oral poetry. A poet as well as an academic and a critic, Zumthor devoted considerable persistence to formulating a theory which would allow him to account for aesthetic phenomena as varied as (originally oral) medieval French poetry, the oral literature of modern-day Africa and the equally contemporary Western popular song. Zumthor states that "[t]he oralised text [...] is more resistant than the written text of any perception that would dissociate it from its social function and of the place conferred upon it in the living community" (Zumthor 1987: 179). Thus, models and types can be defined according to the social function that they fulfil. Nevertheless, we are far from contending that literary studies should be equated solely with the elucidation of the social functions of literature. The objective of literary studies must be at once more strictly but also more globally a specific social practice: namely, that the aesthetic activity that is founded upon the substrate of language, which is the activity by which a society represents itself, indefinitely renders explicit unto itself its spiritual and moral choices.

Linked to this social function there is also the aesthetic purpose, both in pre-modern cultures as in Western literature. Paul Zumthor draws clear attention to the fact that oral tradition uses a separate form of language, distinct from the normal form, which transforms the text into a monument, not just a simple document. Thus for example, the language used in traditional oral productions is not that of everyday usage. This aspect is rarely pointed out explicitly in ethnological or linguistic studies. Thus there can be numerous examples of archaic forms: "Whatever their historical origins, the vocabulary and the grammar of oral poetry are often perceived as archaic, unless quite simply they mimic archaism!" (Zumthor 1990: 108). This characteristic is confirmed in the Polynesian tradition for example. The older the works, the more treasures they conceal in archaic terms. The distinction between oral tradition and ordinary discourse can sometimes go so far as the use of special ceremonial languages. Samuel-Martin Eno Belinga attests to the existence in African sung oral poetry of "words and formulaic expressions in 'javanese' secret or pseudo-secret languages" (Eno Belinga 1978: 27).

Furthermore, for purposes of memorisation, but also to assist vocalisation or from the desire to create a separate form of language, the oral tradition always brings rhythm to the text, whether through a sung form or more generally through the frequent use of repetition and parallel phrases which are the basis of all poetry (cf. Jakobson, 1967). Whether through chants or monotonal or melodic singing, the oral tradition makes use of all types of rhythmic devices, from simple repetition of sounds, words, grammatical structures and formulaic phrases to verse and song. There is an abundance of anaphora, which creates a sort of litany effect. Eno Belinga notes the significant number of repetitive, onomatopoeic and ideophonic elements in the collected African tradition (Eno Belinga 1978: 105).

The lucid analyses undertaken by Paul Zumthor have, as mentioned, the enormous advantage of at once perceiving aesthetic activity as a highly symbolic social activity and of demonstrating the link between these two dimensions, in particular through the desire for the preservation and transmission of this cultural heritage. Such analyses can be very illuminating, by comparison, for the analysis of Western literature which tends to place the individual writer rather too much at the heart of the system without giving much thought to literature as a system of social purpose.

In order to rethink the objective of literary studies, we will also take up the schema of the *episteme* of the West, elaborated by Michel Foucault in the final chapter of his 1966 work *Les Mots et les choses*, published in English translation under the title of *The Order of Things*. According to his conception of the trihedron of modern knowledge, a distinction can be made between the deductive sciences (mathematics, physics), the empirical sciences (linguistics, economics, biology) and philosophical reflection. But the human sciences, he says, stand apart from these, and for them he provides the following definition: “Representation [...] is [...] the very field upon which the human sciences occur, and to their fullest extent; [...] unlike other sciences, they seek not so much to generalize themselves or make themselves more precise as to be constantly demystifying themselves” (Foucault 2002: 396–397). The object of the human sciences is thus man, that “modern invention” in Foucault’s view, in so far as he (man) is able to set up representations thanks to which he retains the strange capability precisely of representing life to himself.

Out of the three fundamental dimensions of man, a “living, speaking and labouring being” (Foucault 2002: 385) come definitions for the three empirical sciences: biology, economics and linguistics. As for the human sciences, they may be distributed across three “regions” corresponding to the three empirical sciences:

Biology	Psychology region
Economics	Sociology region
Linguistics	Study of literatures and myths

Thus, literary studies in the broad sense make up one of the three fundamental regions of the human sciences to which Michel Foucault, not without a certain casualness, associates “the study of literature and myths” (Foucault 2002: 388). May we not see in that definition the concern to express how close written cultures and oral cultures (myths) are to each other, a closeness consisting essentially in the similarity of their social function? If we compare literary studies with the other human sciences, we can immediately perceive their major interest and their specificity. Whereas the human sciences investigate norms, rules and systems to account for particular representations, the studies of literature can assess the activity of representation in its very exercise, at the “naïve” level of its practice. The objective of literary studies is thus to decipher these modes of relating to the world, which constitute a “poetics and a metapolitics” (Rancière 2011: 21), the very base activity by which one represents the world to oneself. Let’s recall that representation is



the object of the human sciences in general. Given that, how can one not see the essential contribution that literary studies makes to all the human sciences?

We will swiftly consider two examples. The phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur has patiently demonstrated how “*emplotment*”, or organization of narrative, is consubstantial with the writing of history, a human science. And how narrative is organized has perpetually been part of the concerns of literary studies. An issue of the French anthropological journal *L’Homme* (2005) under the general title *Vérités de la Fiction* (Truths of Fiction), as well as proposing a more effectively encompassing definition of fiction, shows that the term is used in a broadly trans-disciplinary manner, according no place to literary studies, which are nevertheless the privileged domain of the analysis of fictional activity! The introductory article to this issue insists on the importance of fictionality for the inter-subjective, hence social, relationship and speaks of a “homology between the anthropological experience, insofar as it implies a form of defamiliarisation, and the literary experience of a similar defamiliarisation” (Flahant & Heinich 2005: 17). In fact it is not only anthropology but also philosophy, sociology, history, psychoanalysis and the field of law which have recourse to fiction, whether as an object (the study of beliefs for example), or as an epistemological questioning process (the relations between fiction/truth and reality), or as an aspect of a scientific construct (fiction as a tool for managing emotions). Poetics, which embodies the reflection on the act of creation brought about through narrative or the construction of a fiction, thus extends broadly beyond the sole study of literature. It is an analysis of a mode of representation of the sense-world which it shares with history and anthropology among other fields of study.

## Subjectivity/collectivity

Literary studies, as a “region” of the human sciences, are not however limited to bringing out the great processes for constructing representation such as narrativity or fictionality. In Jacques Rancière’s view, they in fact study the consubstantial link between individual production (belonging to the psychological dimension) and collective production (of the sociological dimension). This relationship is emphasized by Rancière in his work on *The Politics of Literature* (2011). Aesthetic production from out of the base material of language *is* for him a means of reconfiguring “the sharing of the perceptible” (Rancière 2011: 4, 7), that is to say dismantling the consensus between the meaning of words and the visibility of things and laying bare new modes of affinity between being and saying. It would seem *a priori* that we are touching here upon a boundary between written cultures and oral cultures, since it is often taken as a given that oral productions are extremely ritualised and more or less fixed in a form of anhistoricity. But in fact by accentuating the collective and anonymous aspect of art in traditional societies, the contribution brought by individual creators has often been underestimated, with too much attention being given to canonical forms and in their stability over time.

By reason sometimes of limited knowledge, due simply to the modalities by which the collective past is orally transmitted, ethnologists have tended to see traditional art as an anhistoric art, which is a definite handicap since Western appreciation of art and more particularly its analysis is essentially founded on a history of forms and the way these have been modified by what individual creations have brought to them. Yet it has been emphasised that this apparent absence of history was all the more readily accepted in that it accorded with the underlying ethnocentric mindset of establishing a hierarchy for the evolution of societies, where some were thought incapable of reaching higher forms of organisation and expression: “the nonhistorical reputation of Primitive societies is a construction of Western cultural biases” (Price 2001: 67). Fortunately, the

fact that compilations of works of oral tradition have existed for some considerable time now gives us access to different renditions of works from different periods which demonstrate their astonishing capacity of adaptation to new contexts. Articles included in a recent study edited by Marie-Rose Abomo-Maurin entitled *Littérature orale, genres, fonction et réécriture* (Oral Literature, types, function and rewriting) reveal the existence of a variety of processes by which individual practitioners adopt the forms of collective expression in societies of oral tradition. Thus proverbs, the ritualised form *par excellence*, can take on different meanings depending on the situation in which they are applied and hence one can speak of a “polysemy of the symbol consequent upon its different situational usages” (Abomo-Maurin 2008: 20). The recitation of the epic of the Fang peoples of Gabon, the *Mvët*, each time provides the opportunity of validating the legitimacy of the reciting poet: “the mbômô-mvët (poet) [...] is the existing palpable and living link between the substance of the expression and the situation expressed [...] And the stories woven therein, which are always new and never the same, derive from the poet’s mastery of his people’s mythical genealogies, theogony and cosmogony” (Abomo-Maurin 2008: 66). The initiatory songs of women in Zambia have incorporated reference to new situations, such as the dangers posed by the HIV virus (Abomo-Maurin 2008: 105). We may thus conclude that both oral traditions and written literatures arise out of the same type of creative activity and hence are encompassed by the same discipline of the human sciences, providing always that we lay aside our ethnocentric conception of the nature of literary studies.

## The issues around globalisation

Jacques Rancière contends that literary studies have the capacity to bring into view from within the literary corpus of a period a dimension that he calls a “metapolitics”, that is, in a certain sense the set of founding values by which a social organisation is structured and which are operative in the literature that mirrors that society but which in particular projects from that mirror towards a “time-to-come”. If we apply this demonstrated principle, we should be able to discover today, in the language arts of the age of the Postmodern, a “metapolitics” of globalisation, which has become the major socio-economic phenomenon of the 21st century. Let’s firstly see how Rancière analyses the history of Western literature from this point of view. He distinguishes initially a classical age where the literary system matched the political system of the *Ancien Régime*. He states that the system of classical genres, traced back to Aristotle, with its hierarchy of forms and styles, reproduced “a certain form of intelligibility of human action, a certain kind of affinity between ways of being, ways of doing and ways of thinking” (Rancière 2011: 10). Tragedy and epic poetry for example gave prominence to great men who alone had the capacity to act upon the world. A style that was periodic and oratorical was best able to render the outstanding action of these heroic figures and to attract the admiration of the whole collectivity. Rancière then shows how the major writers of the 19th century were able to anticipate the great change represented by democratisation and the idea of the equality of all citizens that was about to take place. It was the moment of emergence of the human sciences and, as we have seen, of literary studies associated with the idea of the sovereign nation-state. From then on, says Rancière, the meaning of life was no longer to be found in the great deeds of heroes, but in what could be interpreted from amongst the mass of objects and words. The principle was now “to decipher the testimonies that society itself offers for us to read, to disinter those [that] society unwittingly and unintentionally deposits in its dark underground shoals. The noisy stage of the orators is opposed by the journey through the subterranean passages that hold its hidden truth” (Rancière 2011: 20). Through such a transformation, the



activity of creation through language evolved into Literature and became distinctly separate from the political use of language in democracy, as well as in fact determining the programme of the human sciences, which would take up the study of representation (Foucault 2002: 396).

But now, this frame of modernity is often considered obsolete and the major issue to be addressed seems to be that of globalisation. How can we henceforth contemplate the future of literary studies by starting out from the principle that what we name as such is only a historically limited aspect of a more universal activity which is the reflection “on” as well as the transmission and evolution “of” a “verbal” cultural heritage within a given society? It is of course understood that creative and hence innovative activity must remain one of the main axes of literary studies, but it cannot constitute the only aspect, since the comprehension of all modes of heritage transmission is what is essential. Among other contemporary thinkers, the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, in his analysis of the nature of the relationship linking individuals within a society, does not hesitate to declare the nation-state obsolete, seeing in it only the end-point of a historical process that is today outmoded. In his view, in an age of a society of superabundance and of the explicitation of the subjacent, it is time to shift to a jubilatory critique, freed of any past complexes, of the superstructures of the social contract and of the organicism which subtend all theories involving the State. For him, the nation-state is an advance form of what he calls the “holistic hypnosis”:

It is only while “societies” remain in a state of self-hypnosis by passing themselves off as homogeneous entities – for example as people-nations founded upon a genetic or theological substrate – that they consider themselves as mono spheres united since their beginning (or by the power of an exceptional charter). They appear as spaces enchanted by narcissism, enjoying an imaginary immunity and a oneness of being and specialness that extends its hold as if by magic. (Sloterdijk 2005: 50)

The definition of culture associated with this collective hypnosis is of course also thoroughly outmoded, and *a fortiori* the idea of a national literature. On the basis of contemporary observations, Sloterdijk endeavours to lay out the premises for rendering explicit the superstructure that is emerging, though not without difficulty. To do so, he makes use of the metaphors of spheres, bubbles and foam:

Foam, being composed of numerous milieus supposes the mutual isolation of different bubbles, the only way of obtaining a positive discrimination of oneself, a self-satisfaction through exclusivity. For individuals, multiple belongings are a matter of course, with different sub-cultures best reproducing themselves in the thematic mono. “Society”, though it cannot perceive it through any centre of collection of impressions, has a multi-micromanic constitution; it has no receptive organ which would allow it to realize how many crazy systems, how many catacomb cults, how many flight strategies it gives shelter to; it constitutes a semi-blind aggregate of democratic occult practices. (Sloterdijk 2005: 724)

So, are literary studies ready to take up the challenge of a fundamental re-examination as radical as this of the holistic superstructure that for the moment they use as a basis for analysis?

It cannot be excluded that we are on the threshold of a cooperation which will replace the prevailing imperial logic and remove the scales from the eyes of the traditional political collective bodies and feverish peoples. [...] We will then see how the next two hundred years will treat the nation-state and the fiction of the “people”. (Sloterdijk 2005: 769)

A model needs therefore to be found outside of the culturally focused and nationalistic conception of the State which is in no way rooted in the past. In this regard, the “emerging” literatures

which are at the centre of post-colonial studies are today no longer speaking to us of equal rights to symbolic representation, they are speaking of a social body divided up into “communities” which each advance their aspect of difference without thereby renouncing their desire to live together. The study of such expression of difference enables literary studies to analyse a major metapolitical phenomenon, one which challenges the now obsolete framework of the nation-state or again the just as outdated framework of a people or language. Through the analysis of Oriental thought and that of the writing of so-called “peripheral” communities from former colonised countries for the most part – the Maori of New Zealand, the first peoples of Australia, the Kanaks of New Caledonia, the Chinese of Polynesia as well as migrant writers all over the world – post-colonial studies bring out not only the mutual community antagonisms but also the “third space”, the gap in which the socio-political face of globalisation is perceived. According to Sally Price (2001: 129), the contemporary context “continues to erode the distinctions once segregating first- and third- or fourth-artworlds, ‘high’ and ‘low’ genres, producers and critics, and even anthropologists and art historians”:

Although these changes are extremely multi-faceted, they all operate in the direction of breaking down long-established barriers – barriers between geographical focuses, between hierarchized settings, between elite and popular media, and more.

Literary studies cannot therefore ignore this movement questioning the boundaries established between aesthetic modes of expression or between disciplines for which they were the object of study.

## **New technologies and media**

Finally, in our view, there is a need to consider one last point to complete the circuit of the problem: in our contemporary society, is literature the method best adapted to fulfil the axiological function that we have been defining? Is there not a vast gulf today between contemporary cultural practices and the institutional culture? Indeed, though facing stiff competition from the technical cultures as the most appropriate interpretative framework for the world, and by the new media as sources of leisure activity and as ideological vectors, literary culture remains at the centre of the educational system. Should it be left there or should the status and/or range of literary studies be modified?

It is true that literary study demands time, for a literary work supposes a deliberate reading, a gradually maturing judgement, a reflection enriched by consideration of past real events, which has no finite end. But at the same time one is forced to recognise, along with Lyotard, that present-day society is driven by one overwhelming idea, that of saving time. According to Fredric Jameson, the world space of multinational capital is that of a fragmentation, of an incapacity to master the flows of information and of organising and providing meaning. If literature seems to him a completely outmoded medium, he considers it is the same for cinema. “The most likely candidate for cultural hegemony today” is for him video in its “twin manifestations of commercial television and experimental video” (Jameson 1992: 69). Indeed, in Jameson’s view this medium is a “total flow” in which there is no hierarchical ranking of signs and which does not require that any attempt at interpretation be made because it is “a process of ceaseless, apparently random interaction[s]” (Jameson 1992: 86). He nevertheless does not completely discard the idea that new aesthetic forms may appear “in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects [...] which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion” (Jameson 1992: 54).

In these conditions, shouldn't one then rethink literary studies, given that the literary heritage no longer occupies a privileged place in the society? Of course it is not a question for us to suggest that this literary culture should be simply abandoned, which would be tantamount to excising the human in us. In fact Lyotard shows how there exist two modes of thinking and hence two forms of language: the one he calls cognitive language, entirely devoted to rationality, and the other he labels ontological language, that of freedom and the lack of preparation "capable of receiving what can happen in the 'speaking medium', and of being accessible to the event" (Lyotard 1991: 73). This ontological language is that of literature, but also in general that of creativity and hence also that of scientific progress. We feel that it is therefore urgent that there be inserted into education a discipline with a strong cultural and integrative component, but which is more accessible to young people than mere literature is. It was in this direction that the programme of the former French Minister of Education, Luc Ferry, seemed to be heading:

From the start of the 2002–03 academic year universities should be assisted to put in place on an experimental basis [...] courses in general culture adapted to each main disciplinary area [...] it makes no sense that an education in the arts and human sciences can take place in the absence of at least a minimum knowledge of the great scientific advances of the last two centuries. (*Le Monde, selection hebdomadaire*, 5–12 July 2002: 7)

Luc Ferry was therein bringing attention to what the phenomena of creativity have in common and to their equal importance for a rounded education, whatever might be the disciplines concerned. In the same article, the philosopher Michel Serres developed more broadly the same idea. He started from the observation that traditional humanism was becoming gradually more inaccessible and old-fashioned and urged

ministers of education, university presidents and all teachers of good will to agree to devote all or part of the first year of their courses to a common programme which would allow students the world over and of all disciplines to reach a comparable threshold of knowledge and culture. (*ibid.*)

His proposal envisaged the dissemination of a universal humanism to counterbalance or humanise the movement towards economic and financial globalisation. Besides this visionary aspect, the content that Serres envisaged giving to his project is not without interest:

- The great unitary narrative of all sciences (aspects of physics and astrophysics: the formation of the universe from the Big Bang to the cooling of planets; aspects of geophysics, chemistry and biology: from the formation of the Earth to the appearance of life and the evolution of species; aspects of general anthropology: the emergence, spread and prehistory of humankind; aspects of agronomy, medicine and the growth of culture: the relationship of man to the Earth, to life and to humanity itself)
- The mosaic of human cultures (aspects of general linguistics: the geographical spread and history of language families, the languages of communication and their evolution; aspects of religion: polytheisms, monotheisms, pantheisms, atheisms; aspects of political sciences: various modes of government; aspects of economics: how the wealth of the world is shared; chosen masterpieces of the world's wisdom traditions and fine arts: literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture). (*Le Monde, selection hebdomadaire*, 5–12 July 2002: 7)

This is certainly a daunting programme, worthy of the Renaissance enthusiasm of a Rabelais. Or from another point of view, though one might agree with the principle underlying it, one could yet remain sceptical about how such a programme which would perforce reduce everything to a

series of very general grand and hence often not very precise ideas could effectively be implemented. He certainly puts emphasis on the global vision for humanity and its relation to the world that all the sciences contribute towards creating, and then on the diversity of the world's cultural creativity, from religions through to systems of politics and architecture. But isn't this the only solution remaining open to us if cultural studies are to survive in a context of globalisation? "The old moribund approaches to education" Serres goes on, "serve now to produce only functionally trained but culturally illiterate graduates, or conversely the culturally educated who are ignorant of the world" (*ibid.*) The modern-day humanist cannot accept the limits of his or her own culture without questioning.

Under such a scenario what would happen to literary studies? They would naturally be included as part of the great universal review of cultural achievements. But it still must be firmly acknowledged that there will continue to be people endowed with a particular sensitivity to words and language, as there are for those whose sensitivity is aroused by colours, sounds or forms. For such people literature will remain above all an aesthetic pleasure, a privileged experience of creative freedom and of the intoxicating gratuity of the act of writing. For such as these an instruction in the arts of literature and its past realisations can still have a place, bringing together historical and functional studies with the experience of literary creation itself:

Art has never ceased being the most eloquent and least equivocal testimonial to the free power of creativity, to the profound autonomy of the human spirit. Teachers who manage to strongly embed and deepen this awareness of the power of art will thereby be fulfilling a task unlike any other: taking a solid stand on the unshakeable ground of art, they will be shaping what one might follow Hegel in calling a new emergence of the mind. (Patocka 1992: 368)

On condition that it makes a clear distinction between the artistic dimension of literature (its creativity and the means that achieve this) and the necessary transmission of culture (involving reflection on the objectives of cultural activity), humanism's survival is assured. But it seems to us indispensable, whatever forms the transmission of culture takes, that an ethical contract be clearly established between the political world, cultural institutions and the citizen.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

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