

literary critics are increasingly irrelevant to society. As the social authority of the literary has become threatened, literary criticism has begun to appear a parsimonious discipline, with few gifts to bestow except the pleasure of reading. However, it is not yet clear whether cultural studies is a genuine attempt to liberate academic scholarship. It may instead represent simply the longings of a North American professoriat increasingly marginalized under late capitalism.

Meanwhile, literature departments in North America are rife with reports of a backlash against cultural studies in various institutions of higher education, where scholars seen as working in the field are said to have been unduly denied tenure. Such rumors may indeed suggest that cultural studies fundamentally challenges the knowledge regime of neocolonialist late capitalism. On the other hand, they may only demonstrate that literary criticism is defending its institutional privileges against an aspirant seeking to displace it.

It remains to be seen whether cultural studies will achieve its desire to be an antispecialization that makes departments of literature newly relevant to the public or whether it will succumb to the institutional seductions of specialization and become one more well-recognized concentration within a traditionally constituted department of literature. Nevertheless, cultural studies has provided me with the opportunity to pursue interests in film, ethnography, popular music, and advertising, as well as literature, that would have been impossible in traditional literary criticism. Indeed, the concept of the literary (originally, an understanding of human experience according to certain Western, bourgeois, and masculinist ideas of great writing) must itself be revised. At a time when catastrophic changes are occurring across the globe (environmental degradation and economic "liberalization" programs imposed on various countries by free-market fundamentalists are two examples), the literary seems too accommodating of received tradition and too timid in its political ambitions. In the pursuit of a critical humanism still in formation, cultural studies and a revised idea of the literary might yet find a conjoined purpose.

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From a postmodern perspective, Linda Hutcheon writes, culture must be understood as an effect of representation, not as its source (*The Politics of Postmodernism* [New York: Routledge, 1989] 7). This proposition can be tested on "great literature," which, true to the second clause of Hutcheon's statement, has usually been closed to any significant cultural counterflow. For Bourdieu this char-

acteristic goes to the heart of literary distinction and high taste and entails a profound distaste for common culture. From Arnold on, literary-cultural reformers have tried to cushion the social impact of that distinction by raising the literary awareness of the masses. Sooner or later the reformers have discovered the limits of the literary as an effective source of nonelite culture, joining a long line of disenchanted figures that includes such pioneers of cultural studies as Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, who helped to move cultural studies away from its initial literary fixation.

What great literature failed to accomplish on the side of direct cultural formation it has more than compensated for on the side of cultural de-formation, the erasure of that offensive cultural excess which Arnold called "anarchy," Adorno "mass culture," and Baudrillard "America." Benjamin was a lonely dissenter against such elitist strictures; with postmodernism, he has been brought in from the cold.

Postmodernism's signal element is not its late-modernist self-reflexivity but its revaluation of popular culture. A dissenting branch of postmodernism, to which I subscribe, keeps its critical edge by refusing to "learn from Las Vegas" or from the American Popular Cultural Association: it refrains from lauding popular culture in general the more to celebrate the pockets of cultural excess that hold out against both high cultural and mass cultural designs on culture in general. Like the root of Sartre's chestnut tree, a significant part of culture remains obstinately *de trop*. It refuses reduction to the "world as picture" mind-set that characterizes the modern age for Heidegger. Rather it sustains a lived world that defies auratic representation as surely as it does scientific interpretation.

It is tautologically correct to say with Hutcheon that ordinary, prosaic culture is not the source of literary representation in the high-culture sense; but just as surely, "the ordinary" is no simple product of the empowered printed word. Culture is largely defined by its silent or at times carnivalesque refusal to be re-presented. The violence of redescription, as Rorty calls it, is matched by a resistance that enables cultural formation. It might even be said that culture is that resistance. It would thus be tautologically correct but insufficient to say, with Hutcheon, that culture is discursive. More to the point, it is counterdiscursive.

For the most part literature remains a willing tool of the colonizing process against which common culture defines itself. Of course, my argument—that literature is to culture what coloniality is to postcoloniality—requires careful definition and qualification. Great literature is only the empowered representation that produces high culture. There is also a "prosaic literature" that, in the

spirit of Bakhtin's "novelization," draws on common culture to subvert both the high literary and the high cultural and with them the political monology they faithfully serve. This postcolonial subversion collides with much of what passes for postmodernism, doing, for example, precisely what Hutcheon's postmodernism would proscribe: redeeming literature by appropriating culture as a literary source. At the same time, however, this subversion tangibly effectuates postmodernism's all-too-nebulously rhetorical of difference.

My analysis accords with an increasingly common postcolonial complaint against postmodernism: that its distrust of reference and its boundless self-absorption close it off from the concrete reference of emic representation—from local voices. In literature, as in anthropology, the basic colonial process persists under postmodern auspices. To the extent that the colonized assimilate the colonial, they surrender local knowledge and with it their subjectivity. Postmodernism's complicity in a general "death of the subject," which leaves us everywhere and nowhere, is incommensurable with postcolonialism's call for localized resistance.

The colonial erasure of the local, whether modern or postmodern, could go unchallenged for so long because it was assumed that reality exists in great books. From the colonial vantage, the mission of a literary education is to take locals elsewhere, a will to exile that reaches far beyond any geographic positioning of the colonial-postcolonial contest. It is as much a First World as a Fourth World issue. Broadly construed, colonialism operates where local voices are systematically muted. It prevails wherever local subjects are de-realized in the name of a literature that displaces common culture.

To be sure, in recent years culture has made a nominal comeback within literary studies. There are many narratives about how this came about and what it signifies. Unfortunately, most of them revolve around the power plays of interest groups that would privilege their own (albeit much revised) literary-cultural canons. Are all literary voicings of culture self-defeating, then? Does such counterflow inevitably transform a living but deprivileged voice into a privileged but inert literary artifact? So far as most critical and educational practice is concerned, the answer must still be yes. The current drift toward literary decanonization does not go nearly far enough. It simply deprivileges a particular literary tradition. What is needed is the decanonization of literature as such, so as to promote unimpaired dialogic exchange. This would open new avenues for counterdiscourse by making culture a source and not merely an effect of literary representation. Steven Greenblatt assigns to this counterflow the name *cultural poetics*. My Bakhtinian premises incline

me toward *cultural prosaics* (see, e.g., my "Cross-Cultural Prosaics: Renegotiating the Postmodern/Postcolonial Gap in Cultural Studies," *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism* 17.2 [1997]). Whatever the name, traditional literary distinction is losing some of its colonial allure. Culture is finally "writing back."

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It is old news that cultural studies has turned away from the literary: an undergraduate literature curriculum built around historical coverage, the reading of poetry, and the analysis of form has gradually been dismantled. Yet if the relinquishment of a normative notion of the literary once seemed liberatory and overdue, its replacement by an equally normative notion of the cultural has been profoundly discouraging.

Literature was once taught—especially in secondary schools—as if it were independent of history and social forces. This pedagogy became the target of several different kinds of ideology critique. Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, and Renée Balibar excoriated a complacent and compromised bourgeois humanism (linked, in their view, to class domination and the centralization of the state) that made universal claims for literature. The Frankfurt school feared that eighteenth-century attempts to create an autonomous sphere for art and for philosophy had fostered a tradition of political quietism and prepared the way for the inner emigration of the Nazi period. Such French and German critiques, however, still presupposed the centrality, indeed the power, of literary experience. Following Flaubert's *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, Barthes pilloried the self-affirmation of the bourgeoisie through art. Yet it was not literature itself that was to be annihilated: *S/Z* destroyed the realist surface of the text only to discover the pleasures of a much richer text beneath. Theodor Adorno criticized artists' efforts to disengage themselves from the social processes of their time but honored their attempts to find a realm of freedom *in form*. For him, difficult and hermetic literature was implicitly utopian, in its refusal to reflect contemporary social reality as inevitable and in its effort to create an alternative order in art. Indeed, from Marx and Engels onward, the tradition of Marxist aesthetics has always emphasized the historical importance and politically redeeming aspects precisely of bourgeois literature.

Recent attempts to imitate these critiques in the United States, however, have served mainly to confirm a long national tradition of philistinism; the American bourgeoisie, after all, affirms itself by ridiculing art and the aspirations of intellectual life, attitudes now replicated