Why Major in Literature—What Do We Tell Our Students?

A Moratorium on Suspicion?

DAVID F. BELL
is chair of the Department of Romance Studies at Duke University. He has just completed a book on speed in the first half of the nineteenth century in France and has begun a project on anarchy and literature in fin de siècle France.

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ONE OF MY COLLEAGUES STOPPED ME IN THE HALL RECENTLY to explain how happy she was to have reached a moment in her academic career when she no longer had to teach literature. Another colleague buttonholed me at about the same time to tell me he could no longer imagine teaching literature in any context other than cultural studies—that is, in a setting in which the literary text was at most an illustration of an ideological, historical, or theoretical theme, no different from any other cultural manifestation. No wonder undergraduates demonstrate dwindling interest in taking a major in literature. For a host of reasons, they come to the university less interested in studying literature than previous generations of students were, only to encounter on their arrival professors who are more than occasionally apathetic toward or suspicious of literary texts. Student disenchantment can only grow in such circumstances.

A certain disenchantment with literature is real. "High theory" in the 1970s and 1980s supposedly taught us how to manipulate literary texts without being manipulated by them. The tools of theory were soon turned against theory itself, however, leading to the decline of the critical paradigm under which theory was assumed to be able to encompass the literary text effectively. The "end of the age of high theory," the theme of theoretical reflections over the past several years, has not fundamentally changed the suspicion toward literature and toward so-called high culture that was the outcome of the theory years. Particularly egregious during this whole historical process (the rise of high theory and its decline) was the gross simplification of Derridian deconstruction that passed for an understanding of Jacques Derrida's thought in the United States.[1]

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Watered-down Derridianism, resulting in the simplistic notion that every text undoes itself, leaves one with the feeling that the literary text is somehow a lie and a subterfuge. Moreover, even before the demise of high theory, the stain of the Paul de Man scandal and the inability of the later Derrida to engage convincingly with the growing political concerns of American university criticism had provoked a shift toward the perspectives of Michel Foucault, whose thought gives considerable attention to the forces that control the forms that literary discourse can take. Foucault's view of the literary as a field defined through exclusions and prohibitions—in short, as a discursive field of forces like any other discursive field—further stoked the fires of suspicion toward literature. As in the case of Derrida, the subtleties of Foucaldian analysis were often lost in a leveling that reduced Foucault's work to the lowest common denominator, the notion of "disciplinary control."[2]

Accompanying the eclipse of high theory and the subsequent suspicions left in its wake has been the increased importance of the cultural studies approach in literary studies. In their American forms, the various types of analysis collectively referred to as cultural studies have amounted to a broadside salvo on the literary canon that had been part of the assumed intellectual baggage of the educated person. Control of the canon and the redrawing of its borders have been among the main goals of feminist criticism, of African American studies, of queer and gender studies. Cultural studies wants to go one step further and dissolve those borders completely. The canon problem has been a fundamental one, because the issue of value in the judging of literary texts has been a battleground in the confrontation between traditional critics and postmodern ones, who question the political and cultural power for which traditional critics have been the mouthpieces. What group has the right to decide the value of a literary text? Is this decision not always an oppressive move to control what is permitted in discourse? If so, perhaps the best solution is to forgo the question of value and to broaden the spectrum of the literary as much as possible, thus undermining the concepts of high and low—as well as the very notion of a canon.

This cursory summary of the fallout of recent critical perspectives on our view of literary texts makes clear, I think, that university literary critics of the most recent generation or two can easily acquire a negative bias against the traditional object of their study, although surely not all do. If we are to argue persuasively to undergraduates that a major in literature—or any study of literature, for that matter—is a worthwhile pursuit, then we need to explain why literature cannot simply be characterized as a field given over to power and its ruses. Unfortunately, the necessity for this explanation comes at a historical moment of suspicion when such an explanation is perhaps harder to provide than it has been before. I personally think the defense of the worth of literary studies must go in two directions: an argument against the impoverishment of language and an argument in favor of the richness of the literary text as a locus for playing with and testing knowledge.

A decade and a half ago, Neil Postman published an essay entitled *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. In it he argued that American society, founded on the principle of the literacy of its citizens, was witnessing the disappearance of that literacy and the dumbing-down of public discourse through the influence of the media. For all the nostalgia of the argument and for all the questions one might raise concerning Postman's interpretation of statistics concerning literacy, there is a grain of truth to his position. Literary form is that particular place where the limits and the richness of language are explored. To deprive undergraduates of the experience of those features is to leave them at the mercy of the manipulation of language characteristic of advertising and of all other media assaults on the individual's senses.[3] To assert that literary writing is where the fullest capacities of language are exploited

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does not require that one buy into an argument that sacralizes literature (à la Maurice Blanchot, for example). A detailed encounter with literature can work against an impoverished view of language that ill prepares undergraduates for the discernment they need to make reasoned decisions. Further, as Roland Barthes argued in his inaugural lesson at the Collège de France, literature is a particular use of language that allows one to maintain a certain distance, albeit tricky and difficult to navigate, from the two tendencies of any language, assertion and repetition, that automatically transform discourse into a medium of power: "This beneficent trickery, this dodging, this magnificent trap, which allows us to hear language outside power, in the splendor of a permanent language revolution, I personally call this *literature*" (16; my trans.).

The second direction I mentioned above is the notion of literature as a place for playing with knowledge. If there is one thing that can be said about nineteenth-century literature, Claude Duchet recently remarked at a colloquium on nineteenth-century French studies, it is that during the nineteenth century, literature became fully engaged with the world—the social world and the world of exploding knowledge. Notwithstanding the bias in favor of the nineteenth century—I am sure one could argue that variations on such an engagement have occurred in every historical period—Duchet was underscoring literature's function as an intersection where various types of knowledge being produced during a given period are brought together and assayed. Michel Serres takes an even stronger position. Writing about Zola's novelistic series Les Rougon-Macquart, Serres remarks, "I am not saying that the *Rougon-Macquart* series [. . .] constitutes a set of purely scientific results. I am only saying, but this is already enormous, that the theses, the method, the epistemology that I discover in this work are faithful to what is the best, to what we judge to be the best, in the scientific work of the period" (39–40; my trans.). Providing models (automatons, simulacra) and exploring and disseminating crucial information have remained at the heart of the literary enterprise since the beginning. In the twentieth century, one need only think of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, simultaneously a fiction and an extraordinary compendium of the scientific hypotheses of the period when Pynchon wrote it—a hybrid that precisely fits the definition of the novel. To be deprived of literature means to be deprived of a chance to play with and test the paradigms of knowledge of a given period in a manner that is not simply mimetic. At its best, such play can outstrip those paradigms, provoke discoveries, make connections that cannot easily be made in a laboratory or in everyday life.

There is no miracle solution for stimulating undergraduates' interest in literary studies. At the least, however, university literary critics will have to abandon easy exercises in undermining the credibility of the literary text, which means they must overcome suspicion and once again give a modicum of respect to what literary texts have to offer. This does not mean, I repeat, resacralizing the literary text—it is too late for that; the rhythms of history are elsewhere. But the occasional letters I receive from former students who graduated from my university and who write to say that the texts they once read in one of my courses have helped them gain perspective suggest that the terrain for a renewal of interest is perhaps more fertile than one might think.

Notes

[1] See Herman Rapaport for a nuanced description of the American reception of Derrida's thought.

[2] If Foucault's perspectives have survived the demise of high theory, this is because they can be annexed to a more politicized criticism. But eventually one would have to ask, which Foucault has survived? The liveliest Foucault in the contemporary American context seems to be the Foucault of *The History of Sexuality*, but this is arguably the least convincing Foucault of all.

[3] The paradox of "communication" as an undergraduate major is that at its heart is the idea not of open and transparent

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dialogue but, rather, of advertising and thus of manipulation and of hidden agendas.

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Why Major in Literature—What Do We Tell Our Students?

RUSSELL A. BERMAN

is the Walter A. Haas Professor in the Humanities at Stanford University, with appointments in the departments of comparative literature and German studies. He is working on a project on literary autonomy and social history.

What do we tell our students? The question implies a range of assumptions, most obviously the simple hope that such a conversation might even take place. Imagine a student dropping by during office hours or approaching us after class to ask for our thoughts on the choice of a major. Or consider a different scenario: the faculty member struggling to find the right tone in order to strike up a conversation with a student about his or her academic plans. Certainly such discussions take place, certainly teachers and students talk about educational goals, and certainly a teacher's advice can at times be important for a student. Yet all this reassurance cannot disguise the fragility of the situation. For it is equally certain that the question overstates the frequency, significance, and ramifications of these sorts of exchanges. Parental pressure plays a larger role in the real decision making than does a teacher's advice. (Perhaps there is a journal somewhere for parents of college students with a discussion on "Choosing the Right Major: What Do We Tell Our Children?") Many of us have spoken with students who plea their interest in selecting a literature major but find themselves compelled by their parents to choose something allegedly more practical. I for one have rarely met students passionate about a major in business but whose families heartlessly forced them to study literature.

Yet our student-teacher discussions face interference from other quarters, closer to our institutional home. Universities increasingly rely on professional advisers, employed to mentor students, on the assumption that the faculty is not able or willing to provide students with the full advice they need. Faculty members are, after all, hardly prepared to talk students through the requirements for a major (or compare one major with another, refracted through the complications of premed aspirations). In an analysis of the budget constraints faced by higher education today—constraints that affect all our institutions and that are typically felt painfully in the humanities in general—this sort of burgeoning student-services cadre plays a nontrivial role.

For a discussion between student and teacher to take place at all, individual faculty members have to be willing and available, of course, but this is not a matter of individual engagement. There has to be a curriculum in place that brings the student—the undergraduate prior to the selection of the major—into proximity

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