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J. Hillis Miller

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Cultural Studies and Reading

J. HILLIS MILLER

THE rapid rise of cultural studies is a concomitant of the weakening of the nation-state, that is, the rapid transition to a postnational condition. It is also one effect of the new technological regime of telecommunications. Why did the massive shift to cultural studies from language-based theory begin when it did, around 1980? The reorientation was no doubt overdetermined and even contradictory. Many factors contributed to it, such as the Vietnam War, the student movement of the 1960s, and the Civil Rights movement. Those who created cultural studies had been decisively marked by these events. Moreover, literature in the old-fashioned sense of canonical masterworks appears to play a smaller and smaller role in the emerging multicultural global society. It is natural that young scholars should not wish to spend their time on something that seems increasingly marginal.

Cultural studies is intertwined in the immense network of economic, ideological, and political forces within which the university is embedded. Moreover, cultural studies itself is a large, heterogeneous set of practices. It cannot be justly summarized under a single set of conceptual presuppositions. Its relation to the language-oriented theory that preceded it is particularly complex and diverse. One major force, however, in the rise of a cultural studies that tends to marginalize literature has been the growing influence of new communication technologies. Technology has been changing society throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. No one doubts that. But the rate of change has greatly accelerated in recent years. The younger United States scholars who have turned so spontaneously and so universally to cultural studies are members of the first generation of university teachers and critics brought up with television and with new forms of commercialized popular music. Many of them as children and teenagers spent as much time watching television or listening to popular music as they did reading books. I do not say these activities are necessarily bad. They are just different. Reading books can be bad for you too, as Flaubert's Emma Bovary and Conrad's Lord Jim show. The critics of this new generation have been to a considerable degree formed by a new visual and aural culture. *Culture* has a somewhat new meaning now. It names the media part of a global consumerist economy. The new media include of course

some counterhegemonic elements. This new electronic culture is fast replacing the culture of the book. It is not surprising that young scholars should wish to study what has largely made them what they are, in spite of their participation in the culture of the book. Clear evidence of literature's weakening force in the United States is the way many young scholars trained in literary study now feel so great a call to study popular culture that they more or less abandon canonical literature.

For cultural studies, literature is no longer the privileged expression of culture, as it was, say, for Matthew Arnold or for the United States university until recently. Literature is now viewed as just one symptom or product of culture among others, to be studied alongside not only film, video, television, advertising, magazines, and so on but also the myriad habits of everyday life that ethnographers investigate. As Alan Liu observes, literature is "a category that has increasingly lost its distinction on the unbounded plane of cultural 'discourse,' 'textuality,' 'information,' 'phrase regimes,' and 'general literature.'" Cultural studies, as Liu puts it, "make[s] literature seem just one of many equipollent registers of culture and multiculture—no more or less splendid, say, than the everyday practices of dressing, walking, cooking, or quilting" (2).

Though scholars in cultural studies tend to be defensive about the relation of this new field to the social sciences, it seems evident that as cultural studies becomes more and more dominant in the humanities, the humanities will move closer and closer to a merger with the social sciences, especially with anthropology. Anthropologists have learned much from colleagues in the humanities, and similarly, graduate-level training in the protocols of anthropology and sociology would be helpful for future practitioners of cultural studies—for example, training in statistical analysis, in the relation between data and generalization, in the ethics of using human subjects, in

The author is UCI Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine. This paper was presented at the 1996 ADE Summer Seminar West, hosted by the University of Utah at Snowbird, Utah.

learning by hook or by crook the languages necessary for the work undertaken, and so on. A traditional Eurocentric literary education is not much help for many of the projects of cultural studies.

Scholars working in cultural studies will be quick to point out that the social sciences in the United States are complicit in many ways with American imperialism, just as Rey Chow observes that the study of non-Western languages and cultures is already institutionalized in the university as part of that imperialist project.¹ Anthropology has been struggling to confront this problem at least since Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes tropiques*. Cultural studies has much to learn from anthropology's procedures and strategies, including those devised to deal with the discipline's ingrained Eurocentrism. Moreover, that social scientists have done cultural studies in the wrong way does not make cultural studies any less a social science in many of its features. There is no reason to be scandalized by this categorization of cultural studies. The standard division of the disciplines in United States universities is just one arrangement among others. It could be different. In the People's Republic of China, literary studies is part of the mission of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Disciplinary divisions and affiliations in the humanities and social sciences in United States universities are in any case now rapidly changing.

At the same time new communication technologies are transforming the way research and teaching are carried on in the humanities. These transformations have accompanied and to some degree effected the replacement of the Humboldtian university by the new technologized transnational university that serves the global economy. This new kind of university is an important feature of the weakening of the nation-state. Since we are in the midst of these changes, it is difficult to see them clearly. As the epochal cultural change from the book age to the hypertext age has accelerated, we have been ushered ever more rapidly into a threatening living space. As Jacques Derrida and many others have argued, this new electronic space—the space of television, cinema, telephone, videos, fax, e-mail, hypertext, and the Internet—has profoundly altered the economies of the self, the home, the workplace, the university, and the nation-state's politics. These entities were traditionally ordered around the firm boundaries of an inside-outside dichotomy: for example, the walls between the home's privacy and the world outside or the borders between the nation-state and its neighbors. The new technologies invade the home and confound all these inside-outside divisions. On the one hand, no one is so alone as when watching television, talking on the telephone, or sitting before a computer screen reading e-mail or searching an Internet database. On the other hand, the private space of the home has been invaded and permeated by a vast

crowd of verbal, aural, and visual images existing in cyberspace's simulacrum of presence. Those images cross national and ethnic boundaries. They come from all over the world with a spurious immediacy that makes them all seem equally close and equally distant. The global village is not out there but in here, or a clear distinction between inside and outside no longer operates. The new technologies bring the *unheimlich* other into the privacy of the home. They are a frightening threat to traditional ideas of the self as unified and as properly living rooted in one dear particular culture-bound place, participating in a single national culture, firmly protected from any alien otherness. They are threatening also to our assumption that political action is based in a single topographical location, a given nation-state with firm boundaries and ethnic and cultural unity.

One response to this uprooting, dislocation, and blurring of borders, also discussed by Derrida, is the violent return to nationalism, to ethnic purification, and to the fanatical militarized religions that are spawning such horrible bloodshed around the world. Another response is the hysterical return to isolationism among some groups in the United States. Yet another very different response, perhaps, is the rapid switch in university humanities departments from literary study, organized primarily around the separate study of national literatures, to cultural studies. Though it would seem that nothing could be more different from ethnic cleansing in Rwanda or Bosnia than a program in cultural studies, the development of such programs may to some degree be another, very different response to the transformations in daily life new communications technologies bring about. Cultural studies can function as a way to contain and tame the threat of that invasive otherness new technologies bring into our homes and workplaces.

This containing and taming takes a contradictory double form. On the one hand, it tends to reestablish firm boundaries between one nation and another, one ethnic group and another, one gender or sexual orientation and another. It may assume that anyone can be defined through affiliation with a national, gender, or other kind of group, therefore can be understood through understanding the ethos of that group. The tradition of dividing university disciplines along national, linguistic, generic, or ethnic lines remains to a considerable degree intact after the introduction of cultural studies, despite much talk about interdisciplinarity and much recognition of the problems of defining identity through membership in a given group or community. Often the traditional divisions are now simply expanded to include separate program in women's studies, gay and lesbian studies, Native American studies, African American studies, Chicano and Chicana studies, Asian American studies, film studies or visual culture studies, and so on. All these others are given a place in

the university, but they are fenced off in a firm reestablishment of the inside-outside dichotomy that the new technologies threaten. The others are kept safely outside. Interdisciplinarity still presupposes the separate integrity of the disciplines that interact, just as hybridity presupposes the fixed nature of genetic strains that are hybridized. Joint appointments (say in English and African American studies) may cause scholars to lead a hybrid double life, subject to the presuppositions and protocols of two different disciplines. One should not, however, underestimate the long-term transformative effect on national literature departments the presence of such scholars will cause.

On the other hand, the return, wherever it happens, to a mimetic, representational, descriptive methodology tends to turn those threatening others into something that in theory (for this methodology is a theory too) can be easily understood, translated, and appropriated. The universalizing idea of culture in cultural studies may be so all-inclusive as to be virtually empty, may be a place of exchange where the other turns into the same. This process may occur even though all cultures and all persons may be seen as to some degree hybrid, not as univocal or essential. Individual works may be seen as unproblematically representative of the culture they reflect. A few carefully chosen examples can thus stand for a whole culture and offer a means of understanding it and taking it in. This procedure depends on a thematic way of interpretation that sees texts of other cultural artifacts as directly reflecting a historical or social context open to understanding by way of the work, though of course separate study of the context is also necessary. This form of study also sometimes depends on uncritical acceptance of the extremely dubious trope of synecdoche, part for whole, just as does letting deconstruction stand for all of theory. The historical context can then by way of the representative work be easily transposed into the terms of the university discipline assigned to assimilate it. That such translation can occur without essential loss is the key presupposition here. Such forms of archival appropriation have been in place since the origin of the Humboldtian research university. They are part of the foundational heritage of the university whereby everything has its reason and can be brought to light, known, understood, and appropriated. This contradictory double gesture says that the other is really other and can be kept safely outside the traditional literary disciplines and at the same time that the other is not really other and can be made a *heimlich* member of the family.

Such a disabling double gesture is by no means universal in cultural studies. Theory of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s is still recognized as a used approach to cultural studies, even by those who are overtly hostile to it. Examples include the deep explication of culture by Raymond Williams and others in Britain,² as well as the studies

of ideology by Louis Althusser and other Continental Marxists. Rey Chow, an advocate of cultural studies and a practitioner of postcolonial studies, strongly affirms the continuity of poststructuralist theory and cultural studies (112). Wherever the rejection of theory occurs, however, whether explicitly under the aegis of the “revolt against theory” or just as a spontaneous defensive response to a perceived threat, it may disable the project of cultural studies, just as it would disable any other attempts to alter the status quo. It may also prevent cultural studies from reaching the goal of political and institutional change toward the better democracy to come that most people desire.

The acceptance by the university of cultural studies has been relatively rapid and easy, though no doubt it has not seemed that way, for example, to those who have had to fight for years for the institutional acceptance of women’s studies. The firm establishment of cultural studies in the university has nevertheless taken only fifteen years or so, a relatively short time for such a genuinely revolutionary change. It may be that university administrators unconsciously view the introduction of cultural studies as a nonthreatening change that leaves old institutional structures more or less intact. If so, I think they have misjudged cultural studies’ power to transform the university. Nevertheless, the university may even perceive cultural studies as a way of policing minority groups. Once the new disciplines have been set up, at least the authorities will know where to find members of those groups.

The rise of cultural studies has accompanied the technologizing and globalizing turn in the university and, where that turn is an antitheoretical return to mimetism, is a concomitant of it. Why does this antitheoretical turn disable cultural studies? For one thing, it is a regression to just that conservative hegemonic ideology cultural studies would contest. The right and certain components of the left are similar in their basic presuppositions about cultural forms. Both sometimes accept, for example, the notion that cultural artifacts unproblematically reflect their cultural contexts. Attempts to use a particular ideology to displace the proponents of that ideology inevitably fail. Wherever cultural studies deploys precritical notions of the self and its agency, of referentiality, or of cultural artifacts’ transparency or the idea that it is possible to narrativize history unproblematically or to describe cultural artifacts exhaustively by a repertoire of themes, its work will be politically ineffective.

Fortunately much work in cultural studies has great theoretical sophistication and is able through interventionist acts of reading to pass on the dislocating energy of the cultural artifacts it discusses. *Reading* here names a transaction that may involve not just literary or exclusively verbal texts but also works in visual or aural media like film, television, popular music, or advertising. The

extension of the term *reading* in this way may be acceptable as long as it is remembered that reading a film is not the same thing as reading a novel. Reading, moreover, must be distinguished from theory. Though theory may facilitate reading and should ideally have arisen from acts of reading, the two are not the same thing, nor are they by any means always in harmony. Genuine acts of reading are always to some degree *sui generis*, inaugural. They always to some extent disable or disqualify the theory that may have been the motivating presupposition of the reader. It is easy enough to sprinkle a text in cultural studies with cogent, correct, and forceful appeals to theory—for example, references to Foucault, Anderson, Bhabha, Jameson, Fanon, Said, or Irigaray—while performing acts of reading that are precritical, pretheoretical, and exclusively thematic. Simple tests make possible a distinction between the two kinds of reading. A thematic reading summarizes plots, describes characters as if they were real people, and, where the work is in a language other than that of the reader, may cite a translation without referring to the original text. What I am calling a “genuine” reading must always resort to the original language of the work, however awkward and time-consuming this process may be and however much it may go against the powerful ideology of journals and of university and commercial presses. A thematic reading assumes that everything can be translated without loss into English. But recourse to the original language is necessary, because the force of the original work, its occurrence as a cultural event that to some extent exceeded the social context from which it arose, lies in its unique use of its own vernacular or idiom.

I call this unique use the irreducible otherness of the work, an otherness even to the culture that apparently generated it. Use of a translation uproots the work, denatures it, transforms it into a *hortus siccus*, a dried flower ready to be stored in the bottomless archives of a transnational university system that is more and more dominated by English. This argument for return to the original language in acts of reading is, however, only the most visible expression of a need, even in studying works in one’s own language, to reach behind thematic reading to what might be called the materiality of the work. The work’s force as an event bringing cultural value or mean-

ing into existence depends on a certain performative use of language or other signs. Such use always exceeds the referential or mimetic dimension of signs. A materialist reading must pay attention to what is internally heterogeneous, contradictory, odd, anomalous about the work instead of presupposing some monolithic unity that directly reflects a cultural context. Only such a reading can hope to transmit or preserve some of the force the original work had or can still have as an event. The reading itself, recorded in an essay or lecture, may become a new event and thus may help to bring about what Jacques Derrida calls the democracy to come, which is, or ought to be, the goal of cultural studies.

Notes

¹“Already, in myriad forms for an extended period of time, the very disciplinary structures that we seek to challenge have been firmly established in the pedagogical practices related to non-Western languages and literatures. . . . ‘Qualifications’ and ‘expertise’ in so-called other cultures have been used as the means to legitimate entirely conservative institutional practices in hiring, tenuring, promotion, reviewing, and publishing, as well as in teaching” (110–11).

²At least these critics understand culture as it is embodied in the United Kingdom, a society whose social structure is very different from that of the United States. In the United States race, gender, and ethnic particularity are much more important than class in the European sense in determining the hierarchy of power and privilege. That distinction does not mean the United States is not a class society, but class membership is much more difficult to define in the United States than in Europe. Forster’s Leonard Bast, in *Howard’s End*, has little hope of rising out of his class, whereas Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, in *The Great Gatsby*, or Faulkner’s Thomas Sutpen, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, are exemplars of the American myth of upward mobility.

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Explore the culture, language and national identity of eight countries through their books, images, slogans and monuments.Â Online course in Literature. Cultural Studies and Modern Languages: an Introduction. Explore the culture, language and national identity of eight countries through their books, images, slogans and monuments. Cultural Studies and Modern Languages: an Introduction. Overview. Topics. Cultural Studies Reading List. Compiled by Laura Murray from many suggestions. This following suggested reading list is fluid, no doubt askew, and manifestly full of holes. But it has a wealth of valuable material that covers many concepts and authors who are studied in the Cultural Studies core courses. It is a mix of recent work and classics. The Cultural Studies librarian, Sylvia Andrychuk, has also compiled a list of useful resources for Cultural Studies. General Resources. During, Simon, ed. The Cultural Studies Reader, Third Edition (New York: Routledge 2007). â€”â€”. Cultural Studies: A Cri Cultural studies is a field that seeks to understand the meaning in the context of practices and customs within a society. It also explores how messages are conveyed through artistic expression and media. Cultural studies is a convergence of numerous subjects in the realm of the humanities and social sciences. By analyzing meaning and the modes of human expression in the context of culture, cultural studies strives to explain social phenomena, particularly with regard to socioeconomic and political climate. There is a variety of perspectives on how culture is defined. In a broad sense, culture consists of a set of social behaviors and viewpoints that express shared meaning that is communicated through symbolism, language and art.