

tioners. To be sure, cultural studies often serves as a faddish way for neophytes to gain symbolic capital, but this characteristic may in part be dictated by the imperatives of the profession.

It has been argued that the Anglo-American model of cultural studies would erode the foundations of French studies in the United States by weakening the field's French identity (see Sandy Petrey's "French Studies / Cultural Studies: Reciprocal Invigoration or Mutual Destruction?" *French Review* 68 [1995]: 381–92). But why should French departments embody a certain idea of France more than departments in American studies, for instance, should of the United States? Cultural studies questions national and cultural identities and would find mythical the claims that exclude it from French studies. The term *French* in *French studies* or *French department* would thus only indicate the language of the domain under investigation.

There is no lack of cultural studies in France. Pierre Bourdieu's reflexive sociology is a type of French cultural studies, according to Marie-Pierre Le Hir ("Defining French Cultural Studies," *MMLA* 29 [1996]: 76–86), as is Régis Debray's monumental work on "la médiologie." Michel Foucault's work can be read as a theory and practice of cultural studies.

The perception that models for French cultural studies are scarce may persist because endeavors in cultural studies are primarily defined by their objects of analysis and therefore adopt a pragmatic approach, privileging contextualization and drawing on a variety of theoretical practices. Reflecting the zeitgeist, cultural studies tends toward fragmentation, heterogeneity, instability—in a word, *adisciplinarity*. While some see cultural studies as an unstructured and erratic postmodern *n'importe quoi*, it in fact reflects a radical change in research methodology in the humanities and sciences, as researchers increasingly aim at specific objects and transcend traditional disciplines. In *L'invention des sciences modernes*, Isabelle Stengers shows the extent to which classification and disciplinarity have been repressive agents in science ([Paris: Flammarion, 1995] 160–64). The destabilization of disciplines may present a nightmare to institutions. Still, defining a common ground for literary studies and cultural studies will encourage dynamic and plural approaches to cultural productions—literary texts as well as many other discursive practices.

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I went to hear a set of electrified Delta blues in a bar tonight and spoke there with a man who informed me I

was contributing to the decline of Western civilization by teaching Latin American literature. Did I work on minority writers and in cultural studies? In part, I said. He had assumed as much. Not that he disagreed with the slogan of the relentlessly commercial New Orleans House of Blues, which is "Unity in Diversity." But English literature in the great tradition is what should be taught and taught again, he said, because it contains the values we need. Moving away, I was glad indeed I had studied literature, a discipline that gave me the tools to read more than books.

Does cultural studies constitute a turning away from some aspects of "the literary"? It was created to do so. Conceived as a paradigm shift toward history and sociology, cultural studies exposes the often submerged relations of politics and letters. It thus challenges literary studies as constructed in Romanticism and high modernism, where the work is sufficient to itself and sharply distinguishable from other writing, and even as conceived in poststructuralist theory, which is more open but still text-based. That is not to say that cultural studies devalues literature, though it does knock works of high culture produced (or, in the case of transnational "Third World" literature, distributed) in dominant countries off the pedestal on which they are sometimes placed. Cultural studies takes as its point of departure the historicity of the literary as a category.

Cultural studies does not simply add mass and popular culture to the list of possible objects of study. It does not imply replacing the study of literature with, say, semiotic readings of New Orleans bars, nor does it make literary works "secondary" to sociological theories. It enables scholars to denaturalize and question the boundaries and limits of the literary. Cultural studies may desacralize the literary work, but the classics still look good to me even without their auras.

Before I understood the artificiality of disciplinary divisions, I worried about the specificity of literature more than I do now. I remember learning that a literary text was a cultural artifact engaging the imagination, constructed with great attention to form and to language itself, in which there were embedded dense layers of high meaning. I now think this basically Romantic definition, while not always incorrect, stems from a historically specific separation of the aesthetic and the rest of life. I find it more interesting at this point to theorize genres, and to wonder about the nature and uses of literacy, than to define literariness. Pierre Bourdieu says that art and its conditions of production and circulation are not separate realms but interrelated regions in a cultural field, itself positioned within still-broader social processes and structures of power. I am interested in the dynamic relations

between literature and the cultural and political structures in and through which it is written, read, and assigned significance. Such an approach does not absolve us from reading literature and texts. It asks us to read them more completely.

The traditions of Latin American literature do not exactly fit aesthetically oriented definitions of “the literary” or sever the aesthetic function from other spheres. The canon includes letters, diaries, speeches, historical tracts, and written approximations of oral texts.

The question for me is not whether to do cultural studies but which cultural studies to do, and how. Like multiculturalism or the critique of colonial discourse, cultural studies can be done in a number of ways. In a 1996 “virtual speech” on Latin American subaltern studies (archived at <http://www.pitt.edu/~gajjala/virtual-john.html>), John Beverley suggested that cultural studies now tends to describe but not critique cultural processes, thus eliding subaltern cultural agency and helping to create a “transnational postmodernist sublime.” I suspect it is this tendency that makes cultural studies acceptable to otherwise conservative deans, who talk about using cultural studies to “soften up” foreign language curricula so as to attract more majors. The man in the bar worried that as a practitioner of cultural studies I might watch too many Mexican soap operas (I do), but he would have been even more concerned had he realized I also dose myself with Marx. When cultural studies is used to deflect other progressive lenses, or to blunt radical social critique, I’ll be reading the *Quixote*.

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Cultural studies cannot be properly understood apart from an awareness of what informed previous efforts to give literature an identity in an academic world of increasing specialization. Definitions of literature provided by formalism, structuralism, and the New Criticism were designed to consolidate the autonomy of literature against possible dispersion, dilution, and contamination. In each case the autonomy of criticism was secured by a theoretical effort that identified the literary with the form of the work rather than with some broader conception of content, with psychology, or with history, areas that were thought to exceed the boundaries of humanities research.

Recent critical approaches (including hermeneutics, reception theory, reader-response criticism, deconstruction, and poststructuralism) have challenged the role that the literary has played in definitions of literature as a humanistic discipline. The literary text has been inserted in a broader cultural framework that is sometimes assumed

to provide the basis for a new definition of literature as transnational, multiethnic, and historically differentiated. The training of professionals in literary studies should allow them to contextualize documents in ways that are not obvious to psychologists, political scientists, and social historians. The origins of literature in ritual, ceremony, and seasonal festivities can also widen definitions of the object of study. As a result, cultural studies is generally recognized as furnishing a new approach to literature.

However, cultural studies seems to threaten the autonomy of research as normally carried out in literature departments. The challenge to the literary has revived a concern about reductionism, the danger that originally led to the isolation of form as the essence of the literary in twentieth-century criticism. Moreover, the possible opposition between cultural studies and the literary may not preserve the disciplinary autonomy of literary professionals. The large contributions that the social sciences (especially psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology, and ethnology) might make to cultural studies could thus undermine the independence of the new field.

A major problem with earlier definitions that essentialized literature is that they generally failed to emphasize linguistic competence, which can help to refute the more rarefied conceptions of literature as self-referential. While linguistic competence should not be narrowly defined as perfect mastery of a verbal medium, its importance for less commonly studied languages cannot be ignored. I believe that rigorous instruction in the Chinese language, for example, is a prerequisite for much (but not all) work in Chinese studies, my area of expertise. Cultural studies has a future as an academic discipline to the extent that it recognizes the unique contributions that language-based disciplines can make to the examination of literature as a socially symbolic act. Cultural studies should not be threatened by definitions suggesting how the existence of literature is guaranteed by the ongoing vitality of language as a public institution.

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Cultural studies represents less a turning away from the literary, defined as a distinct discourse with particular uses of language and models of reading, than a broadening of the scope of study beyond a static site of privileged cultural experience both to a wider array of texts and to the historical circumstances contributing to specific writing and reading practices. Although many might recognize the literary as a constructed form of cultural experience, even those who take for their object of study the history of that construction need to integrate the interplay