

Postmodernist objects of knowledge?: or, ‘How legitimate is your “How legitimate is this”?’

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Summary

Postmodernist preferences and procedures are offered, in this paper, as constituting the most rigorous oppositional discourse to the current hegemony and, as a nomadic discourse, it is offered as the most resistant to self-totalization and institutionalization. Literary studies is located within the field of bids for cultural power, and some comments are offered on future directions for the domain of literary studies.

Opsomming

Post-modernistiese voorkeure en prosedures word in hierdie referaat gesien as die mees nougesette opposisionele diskoers wat teen die heersende hegemonie gebied kan word, en as 'n nomadiese diskoers word dit aangebied as dié een wat die meeste weerstand bied teen self-totalisering en institusionalisering. Literêre studies word aangetref binne die veld van aansprake op kulturele mag, en 'n paar opmerkings word ook gemaak oor toekomstige rigtings wat die veld van literêre studies sou kon inslaan.

What therefore is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short a sum of human relations which become poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage seems to a nation fixed, canonic and binding; truths are illusions; worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses . . . For between two utterly different spheres, as between subject and object, there is no causality, no accuracy, no expression, but at the utmost an *aesthetical* relation . . .

Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Dawn of Day*

Knowledge has always been desirable, but it is also troublesome. It seems always to shift, dissolve, become overconfident or efface itself (in a kind of epistemological suicide) by questioning itself. In short, men have always wanted knowledge to be both captivantly and comfortingly present, filling the senses, satisfying the appetites, giving one both “a night one will never forget” and “a comfortable, friendly spouse with whom to sit by the fire”. (The phallogocentric metaphors are intentional, for they seem inextricably part of the manly wresting of meaning from chaos.) But bits of knowledge are discontent, wilful, perverse, naughty, and playful. The dream of these bits, these metaphors, is filled with infinite promise; their reality or concretization becomes a prison.

In a previous article (Ryan, 1985), I described various forms of dissatisfaction with prevailing hegemonic practices in literary studies. The degree of

institutionalization of formalist interpretive procedures has stifled rival procedures but also, and perhaps of more significance, has skilfully rendered the act of asking procedural questions inappropriate, even bizarre. The reaction to such a totalized site of discourse seems to take one of four forms.

First, “alternative interpretive procedures” are offered which often inhibit the act of asking fundamental questions concerning the nature and function of literary studies, before such questioning has really begun. Such “alternatives” would include those so-called structural, structuralist, neo-formalist, Marxist phenomenological, feminist, psycho-analytical and deconstructionist tool-kits whose flamboyancy conceals a very conventional, “old-fashioned” set of instituting principles. I must add that my discussion of these “alternatives” is not intended as a devaluation of the theoretical structure, discipline or basic principles from which these accessible/“practical” methods derive. This option preserves, for better or worse, the primary epistemological assumptions – textual autonomy, the complete recoverability of meaning, the institution of ranking systems, and the preservation of formal analytical tools, and so on – whose very closure and repressive tendencies were seen as the evil to be challenged. Such swift repopulation of the site of reading has, as an advantage, the reinvestiture of stable ontologies and epistemologies, which means that the domain is safe and sound; the king has been efficiently plucked out and replaced, but the government departments remain intact. When many people perform this bloodless coup, a state of pluralism is declared. The domain becomes “the domains” and, because those involved in this proliferation of “rival methods” with identical basic features are concerned primarily with keeping chaos at bay (the chaos engendered by questioning ontologies and epistemologies), they are eager to set up a federation of methods, while ignoring the fact that, in literary studies, pluralism is not an answer, but a state of affairs based on uneasy compromise. This first type of response to the suffocation of the domain by the strictures of hegemonic practice, despite its prevalence, institutes an activity so close to the one it opposes, that it seems no more than a temporary, cautious and small renovation.

The second type of response would have us interpret interpretation. The impulse might be typified by, but not usually traceable to, Nietzsche’s reply to positivism in *The Will to Power*:

There are no facts, everything is in flux, incomprehensible, elusive; what is relatively most enduring is – our interpretations. (1968:327).

The projects specified by, for example, Culler’s poetics of reading, or the ESL group centred on S.J. Schmidt’s journal, *Poetics*, call for a trumping of traditional “knowledge” in literary studies, by examining examiners, stepping clear of the domain (instead of hastily repopulating it) in order to submit literary studies to the penetrating gaze of the cultural analyst. While this response is refreshing (in that it calls for an analysis of the 300 analyses of *King Lear* instead of adding to the pile) and apparently transformative (by revealing that the domain is a cultural institution, which is far more concerned with self-preservation, cultural power and totalization than with so-called

objective structures of knowledge), it has two problems which frustrate its success. First, it does not confront the thorny problems of ontology and epistemology – it delays them by concealing both its own position within the field of bids for cultural power and its own formalism. Shifting focus from the designated object means the subject is studied as an object. Examining speakers instead of utterances means studying the speaker as the spoken. Yet the speaker of the investigative utterance is omitted from scrutiny – the painter is always beyond the canvas. Nelson Goodman, for example, typifies this interpretive urge, while neglecting to discuss how the utterances of the “we” are “made, tested and known”:

With false hope of a firm foundation gone, with the world displaced by worlds that are but versions, with substance dissolved into function, and with the given acknowledged as taken, we face the questions how worlds are made, tested, and known. (1978:7).

Secondly, and consequently, such a trumping gesture, a “meta-interpretation”, while it may be of great value in unravelling the history of the institution of literary studies, creates itself to be unravelled in turn by a more superior act of trumping. If interpretation is an historical/cultural phenomenon to be submitted to the scrutiny of social/cultural analysis, then this interpretation of interpretation is equally an historical/cultural, bound and blind, phenomenon. In short, meta-studies delay the confrontation of basic questions – they buy time.

The third response is truly more radical (in terms of its proximity to habitual practice) than the previous two and remains practical (insofar as it conforms to the ideologically privileged definition of practice): here, stable textual ontology and teleological epistemology (or a theory of knowledge which believes it delivers the goods) are abandoned – a rupture between past practice and present reading is evinced. Here I have in mind the various phenomenologies of reading, much of the spate of “deconstructive” readings and most of the reading theories currently fashionable in America. Invariably, however, it is realized that one cannot dislodge stable ontologies and teleological epistemologies “just a little bit”: most of the theorists involved in this bold enterprise fear the endorsement of subjectivity, chaos, the end of all knowledges, which would be entailed in the small step away from past strictures. Those who attempt to relax the search for knowable objects, find the possibility of knowable objects drifting inexorably away . . . unless one anchors the text by means of a long string, thereby preserving determinate textuality. Such kite-flying is cavalier: the kite is handled by the flier and buffeted by the wind, but never does the kite fly free. The creative/imaginative act of plugging holes or indeterminacies in the text is ontologically indistinguishable from stuffing a very *definite* piece of emmenthaler cheese; however subjective and wild one’s unfettered reading is, the constraints of the “reading community” or “universal psychological propensities” act as surrogate ontologies by ensuring reasonably uniform textual encounters. Perhaps the fear of stepping from the overdetermined object to the indeterminable

“object” hampers itself, hamstrings itself, by insisting on the reification of the cluster of oppositions which in turn generate the idea of relaxing the search for knowable objects. It is extraordinary that one can, in the attempt to undo restricting knots, undo a little one and leave a big one: the oppositions subject/object, analysis/reading encounter, order/chaos and so on, act as a constituting master narrative, prescribing and severely delimiting the range and kind of intellectual act which can, *a posteriori*, occur.

The fourth response, which will occupy much of the remainder of this article, tries to circumvent all of the problems perceived in the first three response-types. First, it avoids the hasty redetermination of the site of reading, or the establishment of a new totalization of what should constitute reading. Secondly, it must avoid erecting a logically prior totalization, like “History”, “psycho-analysis” or “meta-criticism”, which simply places the problem of totalization at one remove. Thirdly, it chooses not to preserve the structuring/stricturing series of oppositions which have, for so long, seemed part of the furniture of the house of words. This response has been heralded as “post-structuralism”, “oppositional intellectual behaviour”, a “new archaeology”, although the term “postmodernism” seems, by 1986, to be the most popular, the most encompassing, and the most vague. It entails a vigorous, wholly idealistic assault on the bids for power (in the cultural-intellectual field of discourse) which masquerade as earnest programmes for knowledge, self-evident and commonsensical paradigms, indispensable habits of mind, obvious truths, and time honoured practices, all of which function primarily as impeccable advertisements for themselves, thereby totalizing the field, restricting inquiry, prescribing behaviour and glorifying themselves. Much of the vigour, idealism and direction of this postmodernist response can be traced to Nietzsche, for example, the following passage from *On the Genealogy of Morals*:

... the cause of the origin of a thing and its eventual utility, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart; whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it; all events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master*, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous “meaning” and “purpose” are necessarily obscured or even obliterated ... But purposes and utilities are only *signs* that a will to power has become master of something less powerful and imposed upon it the character of a function; and the entire history of a “thing”, an organ, a custom can in this way be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion. The “evolution” of a thing, a custom, an organ is thus by no means its *progressus* toward a goal, even less a logical *progressus* ... but a succession of more or less profound, more or less mutually independent processes of subduing, plus the resistances they encounter, the attempts at transformation for the purpose of defense and reaction, and the results of successful counteractions. The form is fluid, but the “meaning” is even more so. (*GM* 1969: 77–78).

Oppositional practice must simultaneously be sufficiently belligerent to oppose current hegemonies, and sufficiently self-effacing so as not to create a new hegemony. If liberation movements have a knack for becoming totalitarian epistemologies, it may be possible to embark on a project, in the human sciences and humanities (and especially in the institutions which nurture them), which is never a "promise but an appeal", always a possibility but not an autotelic presence, resisting itself as it resists all else, trying to find new configurations for thinking and talking without reifying and instituting those possibilities.

However, the impulse to create a legitimate discourse is insidious: the "postmodernist project" already shows signs of submitting to the tendency to become transhistorical, essential and authoritative. R. Radhakrishnan makes the following cautionary remark:

Given the juridical reality of such an essence, it appears that Post-Modernism is but another familiar ramification of transcendental Identity. The genius of the tradition seems to have succeeded one more time in accommodating alterity within the vast apparatus of Identity. Such readings of Post-Modernism deny the reality, or even the possibility, of an epistemological break, and hence vindicate history as "essential", "theoretical", "genetic", and "dynastic".

(Radhakrishnan, 1983:33)

To deliver up the act of challenging current legitimating procedures, in literary studies (and in all discourse), by the over-enthusiastic announcement of, or the hasty commencement of, the project, either by being domesticated or by becoming dynastic itself, is a distinct and sad possibility. Postmodernist procedures must constantly problematize themselves, resist ideologization, accommodation, and appropriation, to make their presence felt, to make their presence an awesome delayed ceremony. But already this fourth response to the site of reading becomes veiled, coy beyond the patience of mild-mannered people and, at the very least, must be glimpsed more fully, even if in motion and at a remove.

While the procedure, the practice, and the event of postmodernism may be a designer outfit of chiffon and smoke, the impulse to design such a delicate garment is clear enough. Vincent Descombes makes the following statement:

On what grounds may knowledge usefully be challenged? Only these: that it does not know enough, that it is ignorant in this or that respect. (1980:170).

Institutionalized master narratives/discursive practices are always such an achievement (one is reminded of the excitement surrounding the New Critical and Formalist projects) and such a tragic foreclosure. They take on substance by blocking, overrunning, discrediting the multitude of other formulations, other possibilities, other visions. Many are sacrificed on the occasion of the investiture of the one. It is this realization that hegemonic knowledge operates by *exclusion* and *repression* (in order to serve its own illumination) that has led to a dissatisfaction, not simply with current master narratives, but with the tradition of creating them. Foucault explains:

Truth is not outside of power or itself lacking in power . . . Truth is of this world; it is the product of multiple constraints . . . Each society has its own regime of truth, its general politics of the truth . . . There is a combat for the truth, or at least around the truth, as long as we understand by the truth not those true things which are waiting to be discovered but rather the ensemble of rules according to which we distinguish the true from the fake, and attach special effects of power to “the truth”. (1980:131).

It is the recognition of the political (coercive-reductive) nature of truth which calls for the constitution of a postmodernist response. And Jean-Francois Lyotard declares: “I define postmodernism as incredulity towards metanarratives” (1984: xxiv) and: “Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable” (1984:xv). And Lyotard proceeds to hoist the flag:

Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honour of the name. (1984:82)

The impulse, as I said, is clear enough – it is also energetic and idealistic. But in order to pose questions which are truly well clear of the all-encompassing power of current hegemonic epistemologies, one must grasp the extent of the instituting power of the master narratives. Louis Althusser cautions against such immediate foreclosure:

This introduces us to a fact peculiar to the very existence of a science: it can only pose problems on the terrain and within the horizon of a definite theoretical structure, its problematic, which constitutes its absolute and definite conditions of possibility, and hence the absolute determination of the forms in which all problems must be posed. . . (1970:19)

One powerfully evocative and apparently dangerous way of formulating the radical question is to do so outside of the system of oppositions which creates hierarchies of knowledge/power. The creation and marginalization of a tame opposition within a field of discourse, renders that “other”, a form of institutionalized and institutionalizing dissent (because, by voicing itself, it reinforces the existence of its opposite). The great organizing constructions, the oppositions which regulate master narratives, must be avoided, to guard against the reinvigoration and restabilization of precisely the problematized field. In literary studies, the criticism/theory opposition is upheld by the current orthodoxy in order to subordinate and domesticate the urgent questions which generate the discussions called “theory”. To champion “theory” (against interpretive practice) is to reinforce institutionalized dissent, thus preventing the site of literary studies from being populated by anything but the hegemonic opposition. Those who resist change consolidate their position enormously by perpetually reinventing the criticism/theory opposition. To move beyond the prescribed practices, one needs temporarily to clear the site and not to re-arrange it.

However, once again, I do not wish to be led into heralding a new deal in the form of a clean, clear and progressive domain of literary studies. Having mentioned that the postmodernist enterprise needs to problematize itself is not enough – one has to mention it again, this time in more detail. Lyotard formulates the crucial question at this point: “Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?” (1984: xxiv–xxv). Not only are prior legitimations questioned – the constitution of all procedures of legitimation are questioned, exposed and ruptured. After the grand claims and aims of the modernists, no legitimation process seems up to the task. But this debunking of legitimacy sets itself up as an ahistorical, formalized, essentialized concept – doubt becomes a master narrative itself. The challenging utterance cannot help but take on weight, and command presence. The attempt to step outside traditional practice is thwarted at the time it begins, because it resorts inevitably to categories, definitions, distinctions, hierarchies and a discourse which presents itself “in-the-place-of”. In short, “not like that, but like this”. The alternative to silence seems, unavoidably, an entry into the field of power, the combat of ideologies, and an ingestion into hegemonic discourse. And silence is not really an option, only a theoretical possibility. (Has one ever encountered any theorist shy of words?) Silence becomes a temporary and necessary respite from noise, in order to conceive new sounds or, as Nietzsche suggests, new values after an unavoidable nihilism:

For why has the advent of nihilism become *necessary*? Because the values we have had hitherto thus draw their final consequence; because nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals – because we must experience nihilism before we can find out what value these “values” really had. – We require, sometime, *new values*. (1968:3–4).

If to oppose is to perpetuate the formation and preservation of master-narratives, then the idealistic postmodernist project must fail. Davidson declares:

Reality itself is relative to a scheme: what counts as real in one system may not in another.

Even those thinkers who are certain there is only one conceptual scheme are in the sway of the scheme concept; even monotheists have religion. (1984:183).

If this statement is false, then schemes are not limited, and the statement (as a scheme) is true. If the statement is true, then all schemes are limited, and then this statement is an invention. Yet, *already*, the site of literary studies has changed, is always changing, and the elegant, apparently useless strategies of postmodernist oppositional practice have begun to leave traces of their contradictions, dazzling formulations and often downright common sense at the site of reading. For those who despair, and suggest that the endeavour is doomed, there are those who reply that already it has not lost. The *nonsense* (literally) which I offer as a corollary to Davidson’s utterance can be seen as a parodying of the master-narratives all earnestly in search of the truth. This exchange itself inaugurates a rupture, a breach, an act of unsettling, and a

formulation which is the footprint of oppositional discourse. The idealist soon learns cunning, deceit and stealth.

Let us briefly assume a measure of success for the postmodernist enterprise, and consider what happens next in the sites of the humanities. Radhakrishnan anticipates the moment when the dog, chasing the bus, catches it:

I have already mentioned that Post-Modernism is the blowing open of a new discursive space, and now it is time to ask the question: What sort of phenomena are to occupy this space? What particular discursive practices are permissible here? Surely, the fact that Post-Modernism is an opening up of hitherto blocked space does not mean that this opening is intended non-judgmentally? What are we to make of it if a dead body of knowledge were to make a second home for itself in the space provided by Post-Modernism? Is not this mime as purposeless purposiveness prone to indiscriminate seizure? As form without content, is Post-Modernism a kind of arbitrary practice to be used by one and all arbitrarily, and equivalently? (1983:54).

And: “Are we then to assume that discourses are contained by an epistemic imperative?” (1983:54). The problem is that if postmodernist practice attempts to occupy the site it has cleared, it becomes a dead body, a fledgeling hegemony, a transhistorical essence, and a massive presence. But one need not bury or take a long lease on the site of literary studies – one can create nomadic discursive practices, no grand edifices, but a constant flow of visiting utterances, each recreating, each re-creating the field, and temporarily filling the vacancy, ensuring the problematization of their own identity by constituting a series of discursive events.

Foucault’s proposal for an “analytic of finitude” – the promise of infinity contained in the seemingly restrictive finitude – might satisfy the contradictory criteria demanded by postmodernist practice. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault suggests the following:

Man’s finitude is heralded – and imperiously so – in the positivity of knowledge; we know that man is finite, as we know the anatomy of the brain, the mechanics of production costs, or the system of Indo-European conjugation; or rather, like a watermark running through all these solid, positive, and full forms, we perceive the finitude and limits they impose, we sense, as though on their blank reverse sides, all that they make impossible.

But this primary discovery of finitude is really an unstable one; nothing allows it to contemplate itself; and would it not be possible to suppose that it also promises that very infinity it refuses, according to the system of actuality? (1970:313–314).

If intellectual endeavour must be enclosed in a finitude, an act of stealth and cunning (for it cannot be a legitimate, legitimated act) might accomplish the evocation of a release from finitude. All of the ideas attendant upon the human sciences and humanities – identity, essence, knowledge, meaning, truth, signification and so on – are the deployments of finitude, but this finitude must be presumed to exist in a larger sphere. The rules and constraints of this or that knowledge territorialize a small space, denying the larger one. Knowledge becomes an enclosure, a jealously guarded enactment

of finitude. The postmodernist intellectual might, by continuously rediscovering this finitude, begin to become aware of "the very infinity it refuses". Of course, the possibility of intellectual activity which denies essence, truth, teleology and coherence is one which would be forced to distance itself from all the manoeuvres, gestures, achievements, the whole edifice, of the Western intellectual tradition, but if this tradition *is* one of closure, and if one accepts that a stumbling, even ridiculously crippled postmodernist discourse *is* better than silence, then the failure of postmodernism is, as I have suggested, something of a success too. All institutions, histories and truths will be problematized and reconceived, in an activity which discovers as it breaks, or opens new fields as it undermines others. Moreover, the self-consciousness which is an indispensable rule of thumb for postmodernist activity will make us historians of our present selves but not, one might hope, historians of the past, for the rewriting of history is a dangerous occupation for postmodernism.

All bids for power, whether these be epistemological, political, social, ontological or cultural, pass through two strategic phases. The first is to manufacture an opposition between old and new. (Here, the postmodernist enterprise must caution against codifying itself as the contender of power, presence and authority.) The second phase involves the rewriting of pertinent history.

As the "old narrative" shrivels, and the space becomes vacant, the opposed discourse takes on weight, paradoxically not by filling out itself inside that site, but by creating a past. The self-instituting and self-constituting act is a retrospective act: nothing is so powerless as that which has no past. New totalizations require the inevitability of anterior presence. It follows then, that postmodernism needs to problematize any such impulses towards retrospective self-constitution.

Before turning more specifically to projects which might be undertaken by literary studies, it is important to remember that if postmodernism is to resist ingestion by the orthodoxy or the creation of a new orthodoxy, it needs to be as resistant to itself as to others. One's task is then to demystify the demystifiers, debunk the debunkers, and parody the heroic, lonely aloof figure pitting itself against overwhelming and corrupt power. Paul Bové has produced some fine comments on what he calls "mendacious innocents" or "modern genealogists":

Indeed the genealogist exposes what it is about men's own societal creations which, although essential to self-preservation and self-understanding, they "conceal" from themselves. When such concealment is no longer possible, the genealogist demystifies the "natural" qualities of the omnipresent, unexamined groundings of the fading dynastic organization and, by naming it, furthers its emergence from concealment. In place of the interpretation which declared the "what-ness" off-limits, the genealogist produces a counter-interpretation which, not only discloses this "what-ness" as man-made and treacherous, but also explains its existence and, often, offers an alternative.

Put differently, the genealogist re-reads the surface of cultural activity to find a meaning in it different from that which it seems itself, to offer and approve.

Realignment of the cultural phenomena available publicly discloses the lines of force in a culture organized toward certain ends and proceeding through certain transformations. And genealogical redistribution of surface fragments, not only demystifies the veiling, legitimating ideologies of a system, but produces a new reading which is a more convincing asymptomatic approximation of the truth of the matter. (1981:367).

After a clear and penetrating description of the postmodernist project, Bové suggests that the aim and end of the project is to find a “more convincing approximation of the truth of the matter”. Not only does it appear that the old enemy, truth, reappears in full force, but it seems possible to reveal the project as that which is already (always) inscribed within discourse. There are those intellectuals who would have it that history always has the final word, and that claims of transhistoricism are hysterically funny. Of course, postmodernism tries to avoid being so definable, present, and substantial as to be either transhistorical or an historical “entity”, but at the very least, it has a name and a programme (however self-conscious and self-effacing). Bové wishes

...to question if the intelligence does not itself belong to an easily defined “counter-tradition” whose own diversion of militant tropes doesn’t, in anticipation, code the activities of the self-proclaimed, critical heroes whose seductive claims to privilege, courage, and authority we discover conform to an already-given niche in cultural production. (1981:368).

There is no knowing if postmodernism has already been inscribed and anticipated by historical forces. We do know, however, that those who make this claim must submit their own utterances to historical pre-inscription, and admit that they too, are no closer to “a more convincing asymptomatic approximation of the truth of the matter”.

Perhaps “the truth of the matter” is that one can get too clever without ever being able to be clever enough. Evading inscription, history, and self-representation might, by being “true to oneself”, thereby betray itself. But that is not to say that the postmodernist oppositional thinker is the same as those within the dynastic canon, any more than this paper is another close reading of *King Lear*. Perhaps the overwhelming excitement generated by the project derives from the glimpse of a degree of freedom to contribute to history – Foucault finds the promise of infinity in the very finitude which strives to exclude it. If truth, essence, authority and knowledge relinquish claims to being beyond social/cultural codes and history, and all discourse is always-already inscribed, one need not despair. To rephrase Foucault, one can realize (to a great extent) just how man-made these so-called *a priori* entities are, and being men and women, we too can make them. The postmodernist intellectual moves, from the impossibility of action, to a sense of great participation in the steering of cultural institutions. Professor Godbole in *A Passage to India* is aware that his idealistic desire to embrace Krishna will not be fulfilled, but he repeats the milkmaid’s song because the appeal to Krishna is crucial. The oppositional intellectual need not cast him/herself

completely in the role of Don Quixote – being unable to escape the reifying, authorizing, essentializing and hegemonic tendencies of institutional practice is not the same as being useless. Once again I wish to quote Bové in this regard:

The genealogist is “born” in a revolt against the given; the sharp edge of the liberating scruple which tears the obscuring veil of the hegemonic figures of morality becomes a pointed weapon not only goading the conscientious intellectual along in his process of research and individuation, but also fracturing the dynastic edifice against which the genealogist defines himself. This originary scruple, this “*a priori*” which enable genealogical research and individuation, is also a measure of success. It is a standard to weigh the value of the self achieved by the singleminded pursuit of the goal set for curiosity. (1981:371).

The genealogist, by perpetually seeking the final analysis, belittles human projects *in order to redeem them*, to save them from themselves. Perhaps a little effort, an imperfect act, goes a long way to revealing, understanding and directing the power structures of our culture.

Those who get irritable when forced to listen to so-called literary theorists might, by this stage of my discussion, be asking for a practical plan outlining a revitalized site of literary studies, in the same way that they keep asking how effectively this or that theory/model/discursive practice closely analyses a passage from one of the great works. Such questions have already made so many decisions, concerning meaning, institutionalized practice, value, essence – in fact, they leave almost nothing to be decided; they tend to shut down the operation of questioning, by insisting only on new permutations of what has already been authorized. The larger implications of filling the discursive space designated “literary studies”, are ignored, deferred, silenced. But the closing, shutting mechanism of these questions is often not calculated; there seems often to be a failure of imagination (implied by the act of envisaging new practices) in a discipline which sets so much store by the search for “new heaven, new earth.”

In the case of literary studies, perhaps what is needed (for revitalized, mobile, imaginative reoccupation of its institutional space) is the Nietzschean process of remembering and forgetting, in order to dredge up the layer upon layer of sedimented practice which has become so solid as to be virtually indistinguishable from bedrock, or “the facts of life”. The act of forgetting, while appearing perverse (even prescriptive) need not even be actively pursued, for the large scale unearthing will instill the necessary sense of wonder and fascination. The domain is so over-inscribed that the enormous task of “remembering” would clear the sludge (to continue the above metaphor) even if no new engineering is even considered. Instead of being badgered into “detailed proposals”, by those whose loyalty has been to highly regulated, formalized habits of considerable detail and “efficiency”, one needs to campaign for nomadic inquiry and the suspension of custom:

...critical energies are optimally realized not in systematic or doctrinal modes which tend to solidify the status of criticism as a packaged commodity, but in the

salutary intransigence of oppositional criticism whose function is radically secular, investigative, and relentlessly mobile. (Said, 1984:954).

Edward Said has become a champion of keeping the watercourse relatively clear of all clogging prescriptions, as a necessary balance to the overdetermination of current hegemonic practice. Further on in the same essay, Said articulates his wishes for the future of criticism:

The future of criticism or the critical function is, I believe, to be exercised in the traffic between cultures, discourses and disciplines, rather than in the appropriation, systematization, management, and professionalization of any one domain. This statement of what the future is of course indicates a preference for the essayistic over the systematic and doctrinal, but more important is the certainty that criticism based on the impulse to dominate and hold previously gained positions is, no matter the ingenuity and energy of elaboration, much less likely to be responsive to the future than to variously ornamented extensions of the past and present. (1984:956).

And Said has a point to make relevant to the last issue I will address – that of the role of the institution:

If criticism is principally an intellectual and rational activity, situated in the world, it must obviously find its home somewhere. Is that locale the literary department? To some degree, literary departments play a necessary conservative or curatorial role since they maintain, elucidate and modify canons, although even this formerly neutral function is a highly contested issue. (1984:955).

Do we pass through years of training to become curators while the less literate, to misquote Villiers de l'Isle Adam, “do our living for us”? If not, is it possible for the university department to reconceive itself, to constitute itself as a forum rather than as a fort, besieged by popularists, sociologists, literary theorists – the various “reader’s liberation movements”? In this respect, literature departments face, in miniature, the crisis of credibility which all Western universities must currently face (discussed by, among others, Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*). Edward Said suggests that criticism is “situated in the world”. Exactly what this means, and how completely the recognition should dominate the academy, has been heatedly discussed by many, but the point is that more and more voices utter this phrase, as if current hegemonic practice was guilty of ignoring this fact. Perhaps “the world” will come to claim its cultural shrine of reading, to take it back to the people – perhaps the hegemony has become so silted up that it cannot adjust, even slightly, to the scores of marginalized, repressed critical voices. Batsleer *et al*, for example, wish to develop “practices of reading and writing” in defiance of the intransigence of the academy:

... while the book ... moves beyond curricular literature and the discourses of English studies to consider practices of reading and writing that are largely excluded by the institutions of literary education and criticism, it also raises questions about those exclusions and those institutions which are likely to be central to any attempt to transform the study of English itself. (1985:4)

The programme articulated above is rigorous, penetrating, adventurous and mindful of current cultural politics – precisely the qualities by means of which institutionalized research would retain its identity *and* social/cultural relevance. What is serious is that such voices have become cynical as a result of repeated marginalization, and in turn marginalize the protected inwardness of the institution:

These contradictions and ambiguities, which are far more significant, interesting and painful than any supposed “crisis in English studies”, have emerged with increasing clarity and urgency over the period in which the book has been put together. They have compelled us to hope that it will be taken as a contribution, not, certainly, to literary criticism, nor even to cultural studies in the academic sense, but rather to a still undeveloped but possible and very necessary cultural politics of reading and writing. (Batsleer *et al*, 1985:6).

The postmodernist and Marxist programmes have often been more antagonistic to each other than to the hegemony both oppose. Their respective epistemological matrices, or the narrative practices to which they can be traced, are irreconcilable in some fundamental ways. Moreover, Marxists frequently snicker at postmodernism as indicative of the self-contracted effiteness typical of late monopoly-capitalistic cultural gestures, while postmodernist intellectuals accuse Marxists of trying to collapse all narratives into a single, repressive master-narrative, called History. (I must add that this accusation of Marxist totalization could not even be vaguely relevant in the case of, for example, Stanley Aronowitz. In *The Crisis in Historical Materialism* he calls for the “self-critique of Marxism as a kind of scientific ideology” (1981:161) and states: “The principle of historical materialism suggests that Marx be read in order to be forgotten” (1981:46). This injunction is strikingly similar to the postmodernist avoidance of self-reification.) Yet there is just enough in common between the two voices to form a “single performance” choir – both have performed excavations of current cultural power mechanisms and are appalled by the immobility, complacency, self-righteousness and blindness caused by heavily sedimented discourse. Perhaps such a temporary arrangement would be considered too expedient, too distasteful, compromising both projects, but continued hostilities between the two seems ridiculous, when both voices are really only whispers competing against loudhailers.

Finally, all too often the so-called domain of literary theory and the project of postmodernism suffer as a result of subtle smear campaigns initiated by factions within the orthodoxy – they are “seen” as attempts to wrest the text from criticism, smash the tablets of the law, and institute a frightening and esoteric fascism. Postmodernism, however, like the founding questions of literary theory, can simply be seen as an articulate plea for some fresh air.

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