

ASSESSING THE LITERARY: INTELLECTUAL BOUNDARIES AND JUSTIFICATION IN FRENCH AND AMERICAN LITERARY STUDIES¹

¹ This paper was made possible by funding from the Center for Excellence in French Studies, the Center of International Studies, and the sociology department of Princeton University. I wish to thank Agnes Camus, Brian Colkler, Nathalie Heinich, Claudette Lafaye, Cyril Lemieux, Michael Moody, Abigail Smith Saguy, John Schmalzbauer, Laurent Thèvenot, and Daniel Weber for their critical reactions to the paper at several stages in its composition. Special thanks go to Michèle Lamont, Paul Starr, and Karen Petroski for their detailed criticism of multiple drafts. I would like to thank the twenty literary scholars in France and the United States, who shall remain anonymous, for taking time from their busy schedules to be interviewed, and for answering my questions frankly and with patience. Finally, a number of literature professors and sociologists were kind enough to read and comment upon the penultimate draft of this paper when it arrived unexpectedly on their doorsteps: my thanks to Sarah Corse, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, Jean-Louis Fabiani, Catherine Gallagher, Thomas Pavel, and Ezra Suleiman, and the two respondents who were also interviewees.

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INTRODUCTION

Has American literary criticism “gone French”? Affirmative answers to this question have become commonplace. Many literature professors in America credit French scholars such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva with having revitalized their field after the long postwar reign of New Criticism.² Citations of these thinkers have steadily increased in American journals of literary criticism since the late 1960s,³ and a large number of the leading literary scholars in America have drawn heavily upon them in their own work.⁴ It is difficult to think of a major critical paradigm in American literary studies today—be it deconstruction, psychoanalysis, Marxism, gender and

² Frank Lentricchia, a literature professor at Duke, has compared his generation’s discovery of Derrida to an “awakening” from a “dogmatic slumber” (Lentricchia, 1980: 159). It is worth noting that Lentricchia's opinion on the benefits of French theory has since changed dramatically.

³ Figures compiled by Michèle Lamont and Marsha Witten show a steady increase in articles on French thinkers in American academic journals of literary studies. Between the periods 1970-1977 and 1980-1987, for instance, there was an increase of 52 percent in articles on Foucault (44 vs. 67), an increase of 32 percent in articles on Barthes (94 vs. 124), and an increase of 390 percent in articles on Lacan (21 vs. 82). Figures for articles on Jacques Derrida show a similar trend, with an increase from 60 in 1970-1977 to 147 in 1980-1984 (Lamont 1987). My thanks to Michèle Lamont for making these figures (some unpublished in the form presented here) available to me. For expanded discussion and numbers on the diffusion of French thinkers into a variety of disciplines in the United States, see Lamont and Witten (1988).

⁴ Such scholars would include, for instance, Edward Said, J. Hillis Miller, Gayatri Spivak, Eve Sedgwick, Fredric Jameson, Judith Butler, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Houston Baker, Barbara Johnson, Barbara Herrnstein Smith.

race studies, New Historicism, or post-colonialism—in which the work of French theorists does not figure prominently.

Given the vast influence that many American literary professors attribute to French theory—a vision shared by many of their critics (e.g., Hughes 1989; Paglia 1991; Kimball 1990), who deplore such influence⁵—one might expect to see a great deal of intellectual commonality today between academic literary studies in France and the United States. Yet here a puzzle presents itself: if American literary critics have indeed “gone French,” they seem to have done so in a manner quite different than the French have themselves. Interviews I conducted for this study with twenty literature professors in both countries show significant cross-national differences in their prevailing conceptions of what “literary studies” are and ought to be.⁶ Literature

⁵ Critics of recent trends in American literary scholarship tend to see it as enthralled to trendy French theories. For instance, Robert Hughes (1989) laments American academic literary critics’ infatuation with “the lake of jargon whose waters (bottled for export to the United States) well up between Nanterre and the Sorbonne and to whose marshy verge the bleating flocks of poststructuralists go each night to drink.” Camille Paglia daydreams a scenario where “Aretha Franklin... shouting ‘Think!’ blasts Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault like dishrags against the wall, then leads thousands of freed academic white slaves in a victory parade down the Champs-Élysées” (*The New York Times Book Review*, May 5, 1991). Similar sentiments can be found in Kimball (1990).

⁶ Interviews were split evenly between each country (10 in France, 10 in the United States), and took place in Paris and the New York area in the summer of 1995. Interviewees were chosen via snowball sampling: an initial list was derived from surveying approximately a half-dozen professors familiar with the discipline in either country, and interviewees were then asked to provide further names. The criteria for inclusion given to respondents was that they try to compile a list that both included “prominent” scholars, and that represented the diversity of intellectual perspectives within their discipline. The institutional affiliations of interviewees in France included

professors in the United States, for example, consider a much wider range of material to be appropriate for literary studies than do their French counterparts. The two groups also differ in the types of criteria they perceive as legitimate for determining “good work.” And French and American literature professors exhibit very different amounts of professional consensus over these boundaries and evaluatory criteria, with the French showing much more agreement over the basic goals and definition of literary studies. Finally, the two groups forward opposing narratives of how their discipline has evolved intellectually in the past generation, and of where they think it is headed in the future.

Why, despite the apparent massive influence of the French upon American literary scholars, do literary studies show such marked variance between the two countries? I forward three explanations for these cross-national differences. First, the more diffuse and contentious sense of national cultural identity of the United States and the greater legitimacy there of claims based on ascribed group characteristics has weakened the traditional boundaries of the Anglo-American literary “canon,” and forwarded the use of “representation” as a criterion for scholarship, whereas the

the Universities of Paris III & IV (the Sorbonne), VII, and VIII; the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales; the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme; and the Collège de France. In the United States, they included Columbia University; the City University of New York Graduate Center; New York University; Rutgers University, Princeton University; and Yale University. The decision was made to interview professors of French literature in France, and of English literature in America, rather than professors of the same literature (French or English) in both countries, under the assumption that scholars of the national literature of their respective countries would form more structurally homologous groups than would scholars of a single literature that was foreign in one of the two contexts. All interviews were done under signed agreement that interviewee comments would be anonymous in attribution, so that participants could speak with a maximum of candor.

opposite is the case in France. Second, national differences in the ability of humanist intellectuals to influence public debate drive the presence of “political” criteria in the American literary studies and their relative absence in France. Third, differences in the national consensus over the status of high culture and differences in the “disciplinary ecology” in both countries have influenced the professional strategy of literary studies, with French literary scholars choosing to maintain their traditional intellectual niche, while American literary scholars are increasingly moving into intellectual terrain traditionally the province of the social sciences and philosophy.

Finally, I examine the paradoxical “Frenchness” of contemporary American literary studies—why certain French scholars have become so influential, despite their waning or nonexistent influence in literary studies in France itself. I propose that these French thinkers have provided an “alternative canon” for American literary scholars, allowing them to maintain their professional distinctiveness (and legitimacy) as they enter fields in which their work might otherwise be indistinguishable from social science or philosophy. I conclude, however, that for reasons of both supply and demand the further importation of French theory is unlikely to play a significant role in American literary studies in the future.

LITERARY STUDIES IN THE UNITED STATES

[I]t took more years than anyone could possibly have imagined for the earth to move in the world of American literary and cultural studies. What Jacques Derrida calls “white mythology” has held uncommon sway for centuries in the male hands of those who believe themselves to be completely responsible for both the sun’s light and the legacy of the Enlightenment. Toni Morrison stunningly captures the entailments of this control in *Playing in the Dark*,

where she notes that any “others” in the American literary and cultural enterprise were, until quite recently, considered dark or in the dark, the exclusive property of, and instrument for, white males who were living in the light—or who thought that they were.

It is precisely a new sense of a full, diversifying, and ever-proliferating household on earth that has brought us to the sign “multiculturalism.” The sign has unfolded in the same critical and intellectual space that has witnessed the coming to fullness of such denominations as black studies, women’s studies, Chicano and Chicana studies, gay and lesbian studies, Native American studies, and Asian American studies. Here, we might say—in these denominations—is the earth’s plenty. And there can be no doubt that the old order has changed, yielding paradigmatically to the new. (Baker 1993, 5)

The above quote captures a number of themes that permeate much of American literary scholarship today: the conflation of “literary” and “cultural” study; the belief that traditional literary scholarship has been politically oppressive, especially to women and minority groups; the citation of French theorists to help expose the false Enlightenment rationalism by which that oppression was justified; and the conviction that a cluster of “critical” (or, often, “post-modern”) scholarly approaches based around categories of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation has arisen to replace the older theories and set the situation right. And while the author states these ideas with a degree of force and conviction that is probably greater than that which would be used by the majority of literature professors in America today, the fact that he was the president of the Modern Language Association when he wrote them (and that his comments were published in a journal distributed to every

member of that organization) seems enough to merit concluding that his perspective on literary studies is not entirely out of the mainstream. And indeed, all of the literature professors interviewed for this study in America agreed that there have been major changes in the discipline in the last twenty-five years, and that the academic study of literature has become more imbued with theory, more concerned with politics (especially issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation), and less tightly focused upon a traditional “canon” of “great” literary works. Most also noted that the discipline has witnessed more intellectual conflict in this period, or at least that such conflict has acquired more explicitly political overtones than was the case previously.

Throughout most of the postwar period until the late sixties, American literary studies were dominated by the New Criticism, which provided a number of clear standards for work in the discipline. First, it drew a fairly clear line between “literature” and “non-literature”; literary works were characterized by their richer, more ambiguous language. Second, it emphasized the formalist study of the internal workings of literary texts, without reference to their social context; indeed, New Critical doctrines such as the “heresy of paraphrase” and the “intentional fallacy” (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1954) militated against any attempts to summarize or explain the meaning of literary works via factors external the text, even including authors’ stated intentions about their own work. Aggressively challenged by a host of theoretical movements, such as deconstruction, feminism, African-American studies, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, the New Criticism began to decline in the late 1960s, and had essentially disappeared by the late 1970s. American literary studies have since seen an explosion of new paradigms—New Historicism, post-colonialism, queer theory, and Cultural Studies, to name some of the most prominent—and this new theoretical landscape has resulted in major shifts in the scholarly boundaries of the discipline that had held during the reign of New Criticism.

One of these shifts is that literary studies in America have become more political in their focus. Many of the most prominent paradigms in the discipline are explicitly political, and often base their legitimacy upon the notion that they represent perspectives which have traditionally been excluded from literary studies for political reasons. The intellectual climate appears to be sufficiently permeated by politicization that even those scholars who have no particular wish to be “political” often cannot help but see many of their everyday activities through a political prism (or, as many in the profession might put it, a “hermeneutic of suspicion”⁷). For instance, when asked if he considered his work to be a political activity in any way, an Ivy League professor (who specializes in drama) noted:

I don't think of it that way while I'm doing it... [But] just by the choice of the people whose work I consider most important in contemporary theater I'm engaged in a political action, and when I make up the syllabus for the contemporary drama course those are the people I'm teaching, and from some people's point of view this would look less like a syllabus than, you know like a political correctness canon or something, so, yeah [my work is political].

While this particular professor showed ambivalence about treating his work as political (“I don't think of it that way while I'm doing it”), some other literature professors fully embrace the idea of literary criticism as a politically engaged practice.

⁷ The phrase “hermeneutic of suspicion” derives from philosopher Paul Ricoeur's (1970) work on Freud and Marx, and has come to refer generally in the humanities to any intellectual methodology which, given a truth claim, immediately seeks to problematize it by uncovering the power interests driving such claims.

One interviewed professor (a former tenured literature professor at an Ivy League university) responded to the question “Do you see your work as political?” by stating: “The only reason why I do what I do is for political reasons—I couldn’t see any reason for doing it otherwise.” In the course of a discussion of the criteria for good scholarly work, it further became evident that the professor viewed political concerns as inevitably extending to matters such as evaluating job candidates:

I like work to have a goal. That’s something I would look for in someone’s work—that they have a clear sense of purpose.

Does it matter what kind of purpose they have?

To my mind, it would have to be—it would have to be a political stake, that was relevant.

Would you have a problem with hiring someone whose politics you found repugnant?

Oh yeah—I wouldn’t hire him. No way. I mean, I have to work with these people. [laughs]

To be sure, there are many literature professors in America who disapprove of the highly politicized atmosphere in contemporary literary studies, or who at least feel that its political aspects are being overblown and/or overextended into inappropriate

areas. The majority of professors interviewed, for instance, felt that one could and ought to draw a line between a scholar's politics and the quality of his or her work, and that the former should be excluded as a criteria in hiring. But these professors often expressed the concern that in practice, this separation does not happen, and that instead the two aspects are conflated; for instance, one professor at a noted public research university complained that job candidates often get evaluated on their skill in a kind of political theater, in which they compete to appear ever more "radical," and in which a savvy performance gains one vital recognition as the "smart" candidate:

What counts as a better reading is actually a reading that does what the paradigm is supposed to do even better than the paradigm. So usually people correct Said by showing that he's not "Saidish" enough; he could be even more postcolonial—or Eve Sedgwick could be even more queer... And then you show that you're even more queer than Eve Sedgwick. You never get points by saying that Eve Sedgwick is too queer, Edward Said is too postcolonial... It's just this constant outflanking. It's "how do I take a position just to the left of everybody else?" So you find somebody who's already on the left, and then you find some reason why *part* of their position might possibly lead to fascism [laughs], there's *still* some lingering degree of oppression, and then you get rid of that... It just becomes a kind of dance. It's very predictable.

Besides causing what they perceive as an unwarranted intrusion of political concerns into the evaluation of scholarship, politicization is also seen by some literary scholars as beginning to extract a heavy toll on the discipline in the form of decreased

public legitimacy for the profession, and also in a frequent breakdown of collegial relations, to the point where many departments witness open feuding and bureaucratic breakdown:

The problem has been that it's become much more difficult to defend what people are doing in the academy because it looks rather shallowly adversarial in a way that possibly it didn't before—in the fifties and sixties... It's put everybody in a very uncomfortable position, and it's produced a lot of stridency, I think, and I think the stridency results in increasingly simplistic political paradigms. So I think things are not in a great way right now... Departments just *collapse* because they get so factionalized, and everybody's so suspicious of everyone else's motives—rightly so, probably! [laughs]—and it's made for a bad situation. It hasn't shaken out, in other words, terribly well—it's been about ten or fifteen years since all this has been going on.

Another major shift that has occurred in American literary studies is in the area of subject matter and methodology; the New Critical criterion of close and fairly atheoretical readings of a narrow canon of aesthetically-defined literary texts no longer holds. Scholars from various minority groups have challenged the boundaries of the traditional canon, by examining and problematizing the historical process of its selection,⁸ by promoting the inclusion of certain minority authors into the canon, and,

⁸ Books and articles on the process of canon formation and/or the social influences on the reception of various authors have become a popular scholarly subject among American literary scholars. See, for instance, Tompkins (1985), Spender (1986), Crawford (1992), and Guillory (1993).

increasingly, by demanding separate canons for various minority groups.⁹ Scholars from paradigms such as New Historicism, postcolonialism, and Cultural Studies have often left literature behind entirely and moved into historical and social scientific terrains, to the point where their range of subject matter is virtually anything that can be read as a “text,” or that can be considered “cultural.” Along with this vast broadening in subject matter has come a proliferation of methodologies and paradigms. Literary scholars today borrow freely from other disciplines such as psychology, history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, semiotics, and linguistics, to the point where many scholars feel there is no common denominator for defining a “literary” method.

The result of these changes is that the scholarly terrain and the array of methods perceived as legitimate for literary study is remarkably broad, and goes well beyond any traditional definition of “literature” and “literary studies”; as the editor of the *Publication of the Modern Language Association* recently put it in an editorial column:

[I]sn't *literature* today, for some readers at least, capacious enough to include any text that can be studied from a historical or sociological perspective?
(Stanton, 1994: 359)

⁹ These demands are being made on behalf of more groups than ever, with the initial movements for the acceptance of Afro-American literature and women's literature as legitimate and professionally recognized categories being matched by calls for Hispanic, Asian-American, Native American, and gay literatures as well. Attempts to formulate canons for these groups have been made via the publication of anthologies, and it is also increasingly common to see university literature courses based around these categories.

All of the interviewed scholars noted this expansion of literary studies' intellectual domain. But they split sharply on its desirability. Some lauded the development as a positive development for the field, while others felt that literary scholarship is extending itself into areas in which it has little methodological competence, thus producing bad work. As a member of the latter group put it:

The problem is that not everything is culture. But it's being treated like it is. So that humanities professors—English professors particularly—treat the building across the street as a text. And, you know, it's also the building across the street, but we don't have any way to talk about it in those terms, and the thing about Cultural Studies is that it does that—it grinds everything down to text, and then does semiotic interpretation of it. And I think the usefulness of that is really questionable... It works for literature because it *is* text, but it doesn't really work for everything else very well, and it becomes this very obvious and self-serving way of analysis.

Where is literary studies headed in the United States? For some scholars, the seeming lack of any scholarly boundaries in the discipline is causing it to lose any coherence or definition, and they fear the discipline is in danger of disintegrating. For instance, in a 1993 report to the American Council of Learned Societies on the state of American literary studies, Barbara K. Lewalski—a Professor of literature at Harvard, and the 1993 MLA delegate to the ACLS—noted the proliferation of subject matter and methods as the primary problem facing the profession:

As I see it, the chief intellectual issues facing our discipline arise from one central fact: the enormous expansion of what may be said to constitute literary studies. Postmodern theory and the recent emphasis on cultural studies combine to make all kinds of texts and discourses (verbal and even non-verbal) proper subject matter for us, overwhelming received notions of a core, or canon, or common theoretical ground, or common methodology for our discipline. There is, as well, a new attention to literary texts and traditions hitherto ignored or marginalized... We might add to these factors the permeability of disciplinary boundaries... In the contemporary critical milieu, the distinction between background and foreground, literary and subliterary, is blurred or obliterated...

At the root of the problem is the lack of consensus about what the discipline of literary studies really is: if it is not a shared body of knowledge, not an agreed-on canon of texts, and not a common methodology, then what is it?... These questions afford a genuine basis for anxiety, and they have no ready and easy solution... (1993: 92-94)

While several of the literature professors interviewed dismissed such talk of a crisis in their profession, a majority had concerns about the potential “breakup” of literature as a discipline. Most of these professors were troubled by the possibility of this development, but not all of them. One professor at a major public university was actively pleased by the prospect of literary studies breaking down into some sort of “post-disciplinary” form, as he already saw literature departments (along with most

other humanities departments) as obsolete institutional artifacts with no intellectual reason for existence:

If English departments start kind of proliferating into Cultural Studies, women's studies, gay and lesbian studies, etc., and all this other stuff is interdisciplinary by definition—and even to some extent anti-disciplinary, in the sense that it was founded more to react against what was going on—then who knows what will happen to them... I think that's actually a great development, from my point of view, because I think disciplinary authority is pretty fraudulent... The problem is that you still have this shell left called the “department” or the “discipline”, and everybody still operates frantically within the shell because that's the way you have a career—but nothing intellectually conforms to what the shell is supposed to stand for.

Similarly, the chair of an Ivy League literature department observed that literary studies may well eventually be replaced by “media studies,” in which literature could be overshadowed by studies of film and television; while he noted that this development was not something he himself was pushing for, he stated that he would have no problem with it if it came to pass.

LITERARY STUDIES IN FRANCE

Twenty-five years ago in literary studies many people appeared who wanted to introduce new disciplines into the field—structuralism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, things like that. At the time, there was an extreme intensity about

literary study—when one did literature when I was a student, around 1968, one had the impression that literary studies could be a really very important terrain: that one wasn't doing just literature, that it concerned the entire symbolic order; that it was eminently political, even if one didn't directly do politics; that language was fundamental, that language was the symbolic key to institutions, etc. In a lot of this work—there wasn't a disappearance of literature exactly, but it was nonetheless a bit phased out... So, there was both the sense that these were important stakes, and at the same time a certain dissatisfaction that literature was being a bit obscured, or that it was serving just as a pretext.

We're certainly in a totally different phase now.

This sentiment—that literary studies in France was in a state of political and intellectual ferment in the years surrounding 1968, but that there has since been a shift to a qualitatively new stage in the discipline's history—is from an interview with a prominent literary scholar at a CNRS research institute in Paris. It has been chosen for its conciseness, but could be replaced by many others, for the fact is that every single literary scholar interviewed for this study, when asked “how has literary studies in France changed in the last twenty five years?”, expressed a similar sentiment, and drew a similarly strong boundary between literary studies “then” and “now.”

The first characteristic cited as proof of this difference was inevitably the observation that the heated debates which existed in the discipline in France in the late 1960s and the 1970s between advocates of traditional literary history and those of newer, “modernist” positions (such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, and structuralism)

have diminished to the point where they are generally considered “ancient history.”¹⁰ In contrast to the turbulent situation many American literary scholars attributed to their discipline, French literature professors invariably described literary studies in France as in a period of relative calm. As one professor put it:

The great wars of the epoch—where there had been a kind of war between the modernist positions and those of the old Sorbonne—all that’s gone. It hasn’t completely disappeared, but it’s pretty much gone. You can still find a few professors at Paris IV [i.e., the Sorbonne] who continue the war from twenty-five years ago, and who say things like “Barthes was an impostor” and that “all those types are dangerous,” but it’s become a bit rare, eh? [smiles].

You could say instead that there’s been a phenomenon of assimilation, of absorption... I have the impression that by all evidence there has been a lowering of the intensity of debate over literature in France today... There’s not at all the passion that there was twenty-five years ago.

¹⁰ I use the term “modernist” as it is the term which is used by French scholars themselves. In the United States, however, many of the same intellectual positions (such as those of Foucault, Lacan, Barthes, etc.) are typically referred to as “postmodern,” and the term “modernist” instead is used to refer to older forms of scholarship (or to current scholarship perceived to be operating under antiquated assumptions), typically in a derogatory way. The fact that “postmodernism”—perhaps the most (de)central referent in American literary studies in the last fifteen years or so—is a term with little or no meaning for French literary scholars is itself suggestive of wide cross-national intellectual differences in the discipline.

As the mention of “assimilation” and “absorption” suggests, this period of calm has not been precipitated by the victory of one side or another within the discipline. Unlike in America, where the New Criticism and the older model of literary history have essentially been vanquished, and conflict remains among the victorious paradigms, in France the older and newer methods of scholarship both remain, and seem to be co-existing relatively peacefully. Many professors described the discipline as being in a state of “eclecticism,” in which varied methods often mix in the work of individual scholars to the point where it has become difficult (and pointless) to try to label their scholarship as belonging to one tradition or the other.

But if French literary studies are indeed now “eclectic,” it is an eclecticism that operates within much clearer and narrower boundaries than those found in the United States. In the process of entering the mainstream of French literary studies, modernist scholars appear to have shed most of their original interdisciplinary and political ambitions, and have instead increasingly adopted the traditional criteria of the discipline.

This trend can be most clearly seen in the range of subject matter covered by French literary scholars today. Whereas pioneering modernists like Barthes (1957) once implicitly challenged the notion of a literary “canon” as the appropriate boundary of scholarship by producing works on subjects as various as travel guides, television wrestling shows, and laundry detergent advertising, attempts to recast French literary studies into something analogous to the Cultural Studies model seen in the United States today appear to have been fairly weak and short-lived. Interviewed professors described the move into the analysis of non-literary objects like film and mass culture as a brief trend in the early 1970s, which acquired little inertia and quickly fizzled out, at least in university departments. There appears to be little or no push for such

studies today, and few literary scholars in France today deviate, at least in their professional work, from the study of traditional literature.¹¹

Beyond choices of subject matter, an increasing consensus also appears to be emerging in French literary studies about the appropriate relation between theory and literature, and this too is a change from initial modernist positions. Just as current standards discourage literary scholars from drifting into social science in their choice of topics, so do they increasingly discourage styles of work which adopt an overly social-scientific tone and discuss literary works only to validate social, psychological, or other theories. The threat that literature is being “obscured” by theory thus seems to have waned. Few purely theoretical works are being written by French literary scholars today, and most professors now appear to believe that attempts to fit literary works into overarching social or psychological theories are a thing of the past; as a CNRS researcher explained:

Literature used to be a pretext for bringing in an exterior discourse—Marxist literary studies, for example. I think now that’s finished; their points have been made. It’s true that there are still psychoanalytic studies, but I think that it’s understood now that it’s been turned around, and that it can be interesting for literature to interrogate psychoanalysis, but not the other way around. So

¹¹ Two of the scholars I interviewed did do work that is non-canonical in focus (one on journalism in the 19th century, and the other on a range of symbolic phenomena in the middle ages), but both were connected with interdisciplinary CNRS research institutes. Both labeled themselves as “impure” literary scholars, however, and noted that they have little contact with the mainstream of their discipline.

all that kind of research is I think a bit out of fashion, or is no longer productive.

In contrast to a transdisciplinary or post-disciplinary identification, many literary scholars feel that despite the methodological eclecticism of literary studies in France today, the discipline is not merely the branch of *les sciences humaines* that deals with literature as its object; in contrast, several scholars drew the distinction that while other disciplines might draw upon literature as “evidence” in social or historical analysis, the mark of the literature scholar is to use social and historical analysis (among other methods) to “enrich the meaning” of the literary text.

Finally, the highly political overtones that accompanied modernist literary scholarship at its inception appear to have largely disappeared in France today. Whereas one’s intellectual alignment in the 1960s and 1970s usually predicted one’s politics, and many modernists challenged the legitimacy of the older scholarship by accusing it of reflecting conservative and/or oppressive political values, today the equation of paradigms with politics has broken down. The salience of political issues generally seems to have subsided in literary studies; while most of the professors interviewed were willing to grant that literary scholarship inevitably contains some political assumptions and overtones (two professors categorically denied even this, and insisted that their work had nothing at all to do with politics), they typically did not feel that the literary profession was in any meaningful sense an arena for political debate or engagement. Only two of the interviewees embraced a description of their work as a “political activity,” and if another professor is to be believed, the proportion of such politicized scholars in the profession is declining: when asked if he felt that many literature professors see their research and teaching as political activities, he replied:

I don't know. Of course, there are a certain number of instructors—who tend to be a bit older than me [the interviewee was in his mid-forties]—who still have the idea that it's very political. I don't have the impression of encountering that among younger scholars. In any case, it's not big. It exists at the level of the individual, of course, but I don't think that today it's something with much resonance.

Another indication of the subsiding of political concerns in French literary studies today is that political concerns seem to have diminished dramatically as a factor in the job market. While a number of professors noted that literature departments had until recently tended to align themselves as a whole towards either radical or traditional scholarship, and had only hired like-minded professors, they all noted a general sea-change in the profession away from hiring practices based on such litmus tests, and towards more meritocratic criteria; as one professor put it:

It seems to me that conflicts [over hiring] are based more on the quality of work. That's to say—to put it really very roughly—one used to say “he's on our side,” or “he's not on our side,” and today one would say instead “his work is good” or “his work isn't good.” It's “good” or “not good.”

Similarly, a professor at a department at one of the newer Parisian universities (i.e., created in the late 1960s or early 1970s) told me that while he felt that the initial deliberate establishment of his department as a home for “radical” scholarship was “necessary at the time,” he now feels that the separation of perspectives is the worst

thing for the discipline intellectually, and that departments should no longer impose intellectual or political litmus tests upon candidates for jobs.

Where are literary studies in France headed in the future? Most of the professors interviewed declined to speculate, but many noted that the current trend seems to be towards work of a more traditional style. Several scholars mentioned that much of the current scholarship in the field resembles the “old literary history” with only slight modifications, and that a large number of the new books in French literature today consist of fairly atheoretical scholarly works, such as definitive scholarly editions of individual writers’ works. As one professor with modernist leanings put it:

There’s a tremendous amount of work which has a more traditional allure. There’s a return to more in-depth works, more critical editions, more scholarly editions, more than there are works of polemics or essayism. I think that’s the tendency. I’m not a good example, but this is [pulls off his shelf and displays a volume from a recently published definitive scholarly edition of a minor 18th Century author]. This isn’t at all what would have been done twenty years ago.

This should not be taken to mean that “modernist” scholarship is on the wane, although it does seem to lack the vitality of the traditionalist revival, and although certain “modernist” paradigms—most notably Marxism—do seem to be disappearing. But it does seem to indicate that there are few signs at present that literary studies in France will head soon towards anything approaching the direction of the discipline in America. If anything, they appear to be moving in the opposite way.

EXPLAINING THE VARIANCE

Why have French and American literary studies developed in such different directions in recent years? Without wishing to discount the effects of individual agency or other important contingent factors, there appear to be a number of sociological variables, both at the national and academic levels of social organization, which may account for much of the observed variance between the French and American cases. I will focus here upon three sets of factors whose cross-national differences seem particularly salient in this regard: 1) the differing amount of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in each country, and the differing ways in which these kinds of diversity are institutionally recognized and mediated; 2) the differing social position in each country of humanist intellectuals; and 3) the different “disciplinary ecology” in which literary studies is positioned in each country.

Multiculturalism

From its initial transformation in the late 1960s to the present, American literary studies has shown more concern over issues related to ethnic, racial, or other minority or “marginalized” groups than has been the case in the discipline in France. This concern has been manifested both in the conflicts over the traditional canon for literary studies, and in the appearance of scholarly paradigms based upon inserting categories like gender, race, and sexual preference into the analysis of texts. In contrast, French literary studies has witnessed neither of these movements. Why has this difference existed, and what have been its consequences for literary studies in the two countries?

One reason for the difference may be simply that the United States is a more ethnically and racially diverse society than France. Given this greater diversity—and the fact that certain groups, most notably African-Americans, have not assimilated along the ideals of the “melting pot”—and given the fact that this diversity is

increasingly represented in an academic system that was previously fairly culturally homogeneous along WASP (and largely masculine) lines, it is perhaps unsurprising that literary scholarship in America is more attentive to issues of diversity.

While this simple reflection model (more diversity leads to more attention to diversity) makes a certain amount of intuitive sense, and may account for some of the variance between literary studies in France and America, it also presents certain problems. For while France is certainly less culturally diverse than the United States, it is by no means lacking in groups which might plausibly have challenged the French canon in a manner similar to the challenges in the United States. Why, for instance, has the French literary canon not seen significant challenges from women, or from French citizens of African descent whose Francophone literary traditions are scarcely visible in French literature departments?¹² Women are certainly not a smaller percentage of the population in France than in the United States, and while Francophone blacks are a smaller group proportionally than African-Americans, they are not a smaller percentage of the population than are some of the other groups in America (Native Americans or Asian Americans, for instance) which have successfully mobilized around charges of their group's exclusion from literary study.

Accounting for these issues requires moving beyond a simple reflection model to an examination of the differing ways in which social categories like ethnicity, race, and gender are treated in France and the United States in various contexts of claim-making and justification. As Paul Starr (1992) has noted, all bureaucratic institutions

¹² While individual feminist literature scholars are present in France, none of the French scholars interviewed noted any feminist challenge to the canon analogous to that in the United States. None of the scholars in the sample worked on Francophone literature, and the one scholar who mentioned Francophone literature in an interview did so only to note its absence; he stated that Italian literary scholars have actually done more work in the area than French scholars themselves.

must choose from the potentially infinite array of possible social classifications a limited set which will be treated as legitimate for use in institutional classification and decision-making; in the ideal-typical democratic-liberal state, for instance, the use of many ascribed and/or group characteristics (such as religion, race or gender) in the evaluation, rewarding, and sanctioning of individuals is legally forbidden (one cannot employ such a category to discriminate for or against someone in an employment decision, for instance). But as Starr also notes, liberal democracies often deviate from this model in specific situations; in the United States, for instance, while the legal system forbids discrimination against individuals on the basis of such “suspect classifications,” it has permitted the use of these same classifications in certain programs, such as affirmative action, which seek to remedy previous discrimination based on those categories. There thus exists what Starr calls a “classificatory tension,” in which the use of these suspect categories is simultaneously forbidden and permitted, depending on context and purpose, and in which many predominantly “liberal” American institutions veer at times into a “corporatist” model of governance whose principle is the mediation between officially recognized groups rather than the liberal principle of mediation between “suspect classification”-free individuals.

The presence of this sort of classificatory tension is evident in the American university system, where “suspect classifications” have been embodied not only in the presence of affirmative action hiring and admissions for various minorities, but also in the creation of separate programs, institutes and/or departments centered around minority concerns. First established for Afro-American and Women’s studies, these programs have proliferated as more groups have organized and come forward as marginalized identities demanding representation within a university system which they feel has ignored or suppressed them and their concerns. As we have seen, such movements also exist within literary studies, in the form of claims by these same groups that they merit separate canons, courses, and/or theoretical perspectives.

While French society certainly has its share of corporatist tendencies (such as in the sphere of industrial and labor relations), French universities are much freer of this sort of corporatist mediation than are their American counterparts. One reason for this seems to be that the use of “suspect classifications” in France is largely confined to work and class-based categories (or what Laurent Thévenot calls “industrial” orders of worth: see Desorisères & Thévenot, 1988 and Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991). “Suspect” classifications based on ethnic, gender, and racial categories are much more uniformly forbidden in institutional decision-making than in the U.S. Also, the very open admission policies of French universities and the relative lack of an institutional “pecking order” among them means that there has been little concern over whether disadvantaged groups are being excluded from admissions or being shunted off into lesser schools.¹³ There are no affirmative action-style policies in place for disadvantaged groups in French higher education, and French universities also lack their American counterparts’ long and continuing history of preferential treatment for alumni offspring and athletes. In this relatively meritocratic and universalistic environment, American-style ethnic, gender, race, or other “group studies” movements are not perceived as legitimate: when French literature professors were asked why such movements do not exist in France, for example, the most frequent response was

¹³ The great exception to the general lack of hierarchy among higher educational institutions in France is of course the small number of elite *Grandes Écoles*, and there has been some recent concern about the demographic makeup of the students at these institutions, whose graduates comprise a very disproportionate percentage of France’s elite. At a recent talk at Princeton, for instance, a professor from the *École Normale Supérieure* presented statistics showing that the composition of the student body has increasingly been dominated by the upper classes. So far, however, admission to the *Grandes Écoles* remains entirely based upon competitive examinations, and the schools are seen by many as the epitome of French educational meritocracy.

that they are "impensable" (unthinkable) within the context of French "universalism" and "Republicanism."

The fact that scholarly groupings based upon ethnic, racial, and other group status do exist in American literature departments and do not in French ones explains some of the differences observed between them along the dimensions of subject matter, politicization, and intellectual conflict. In the area of subject matter, the challenges such groups have made to the traditional canon in America have obviously broadened the range of subject material for the discipline, at the very least by adding more literary works by minority authors. It may have also contributed to the move in American literary studies towards the study of mass culture and other "non-literary" (in the classical sense) texts; since many marginalized groups have historically participated less in the production of "high literature" than in other cultural forms, many literary scholars (e.g., Baker, 1992) from these groups have focused at least part of their efforts on other cultural products of their groups, such as slave narratives or rap music. Finally, since these scholars are often interested in how their group has been marginalized or oppressed in society in general, and not just in the sphere of literature, they have often pushed into Cultural Studies terrain, textually analyzing non-written social phenomena like movies and television or public debates to reveal racist, patriarchal, or homophobic images and discourses.

It is also likely that the presence of these scholarly groupings has contributed to the more politicized and contentious atmosphere in American literary studies. Most basically, these scholarly movements have usually relied upon charges of discrimination as the foundation for their legitimacy, and typically are predicated upon actively combating what is seen as the continuation of such discrimination in society and/or the profession. Even when talk of discrimination is replaced by the notion of "representing multicultural diversity," certain corporatist dynamics which often lead to politicization remain inescapable. For "multiculturalism" by definition (or if

perhaps not by all possible definitions, then certainly by the definitions most often used in practice) involves a form of corporatist mediation, as it implies a number of different cultures or groups which merit representation. Not only does this framework invite conflict over how much representation (i.e., resources, space in the curriculum, etc.) each group will receive, but it also inevitably involves the contentious issue of which groups merit recognition in the first place. Realistically, only a limited number of groupings can be granted official institutional recognition, and this fact has created the necessity for mobilization around group identities that are broad enough to achieve the critical mass sufficient for recognition; Afro-American and women's studies clearly long ago reached this critical mass and are well represented institutionally, while movements around other identities, such as Latino studies, Gay studies, Native American studies, and Asian-American studies, are still struggling (with varying degrees of success) for similar levels of institutional recognition. These broad identity labels often include considerable diversity within them (such as differences between American and Caribbean blacks), which can give rise to internal conflicts, and this problem is especially acute in cases where groups fall under several labels at once, yet feel insufficiently represented within any of them; feminist studies, for instance, has witnessed a great deal of internal division and conflict over whether it has marginalized the perspectives and interests of women of color or lesbians.

Finally, but certainly not least in significance, besides these conflictual dynamics internal to multiculturalism, the corporatist form that multiculturalism has taken in American academia is itself a very controversial issue (both within academia and the public at large), with many scholars (and a very large number of politicians and public critics) strongly disapproving of what they see as the "balkanization" of academia (Schlesinger, 1992). Some of these scholars and critics are themselves members of the marginalized groups, and their dissent from the multicultural consensus (often on the ground that the identity politics and corporatism typical of

multiculturalism produce a damaging "victim mentality" among minorities, and/or only serve to further underscore group differences, thus impeding integration) has been the cause of some of the most heated polemics and political recriminations in literary studies in recent years.¹⁴

The Position of Humanist Intellectuals

While the national differences in how issues of race, gender, and other marginalized categories are handled clearly account for much of the difference between French and American literary studies in recent years, there are other significant national differences which seem likely to have also been factors. Among these are the differing legitimacy and position of humanist intellectuals (particularly those of a leftist or "progressive" stripe) in each country, and the differing way that intellectual life relates to academic work.¹⁵

French humanist intellectuals have long been noted for their exceptionally prominent place in their nation's public and political discourse. While the amount of this influence has declined since the days when Sartre and other intellectuals championed the opposition to France's war in Algeria, and led protest marches in 1968, French intellectuals and their ideas remain quite visible in the public sphere, especially within the press but also on certain television shows like the popular

¹⁴ The loud objections many minority literary scholars have directed towards dissidents like Shelby Steele, Camille Paglia, and Katie Roiphe have been matched in polemical force perhaps only by those directed at Republican appointees to the National Endowment to the Humanities such as William Bennett and Lynne Cheney.

¹⁵ The term "intellectuals" is notoriously vague, and I should make clear here that I am using "humanist intellectuals" to refer to artists, writers, philosophers, and critics, etc., who wish to intervene in public debates, and not to political figures, policy experts, or professional journalists.

Bouillon de Culture (formerly *Apostrophes*). In contrast to their French counterparts, American humanist intellectuals—particularly those on the Left—have traditionally had a much less prominent and legitimate position in American public life. The notion that artists, writers, and humanist academics have by grace of their intellectual positions the right to have influence on public issues is much less widely accepted by Americans than by the French, and many observers have commented on the general suspicion of the American public towards intellectuals (e.g., Hofstadter, 1943; Ross 1989). And while certain conservative humanist intellectuals have succeeded in achieving a fair amount of public attention in recent years (often thanks in large part to their connections with certain major newspapers, a number of well-funded conservative institutes, and the Republican party), intellectuals on the Left and/or from minority groups commonly feel that they have been shut out of the media, out of the narrow spectrum of the two party system, and thus out of any significant presence in public life.¹⁶

The peripheral position of progressive humanist American intellectuals may account for a good deal of the politicization of American literature departments. Given their perceived lack of access to the major organs of public debate, many of these intellectuals have decided to utilize the academy as a sort of “headquarters of

¹⁶ A list of humanist intellectuals in America today who are both publicly prominent and conservative could include, for instance, William Bennett, George Will, William F. Buckley, and Irving Kristol, to name a few. For documentation of the rise of public conservative intellectuals, and its connection with the broader rise to power of conservatism in America in recent decades, see Blumenthal (1988). It should be noted that the sense of media isolation among intellectuals from minority groups in America may be diminishing with the increasing rise to public prominence of a group of black intellectuals such as Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Bell Hooks, among others (Anderson 1994).

last resort” for radical political change and expression. During the course of one interview, for instance, a professor described his vision of the mission of his department in precisely such terms:

What we’re trying to do here is to create a program where people who think of themselves as intellectual activists can train themselves. It’s a very distinct category—it’s people who come to the academy to do the kind of work that they can’t do outside of the academy—but the academy is not necessarily the only location for that work... It has a lot do to with the lack of journalistic organs that are available in the independent public sphere. Since officially the Left does not exist in America, at least in terms of mainstream media definitions, there are very few Left intellectuals, academic or otherwise, who really have access... The structure of the academy gives you openings to speak in certain areas, it gives you access to certain forms of media that you wouldn’t have otherwise—and if you don’t speak, surely someone else will, whose politics you may not agree with. So, I say “seize the day” under those circumstances.

While the number of professors who view their academic positions with this degree of political calculation is almost undoubtedly a minority within American literature departments (and academia generally), they have been numerous enough to spawn a backlash from conservative (and some liberal) critics in the media and politicians, who have seized upon the presence of these "tenured radicals" (and often on related phenomena like multiculturalism) as proof that American higher education

is in the thrall of "political correctness." These charges of "PC" (as it has become commonly referred to) received enormous amounts of coverage in the national press in the early 1990s,¹⁷ have been the subject of many books (e.g., Kimball, 1990; D'Souza, 1991), and remain a staple in many conservative publications. Responding to these attacks, politically engaged literary scholars have charged that their subject matter is inherently and unavoidably political, and that their conservative critics are hypocrites who want not to depoliticize academia, but rather to align it with conservative politics and values (Graff, 1992).

The overall effect of these public conflicts has undoubtedly been to highlight the political dimension of literary studies in America, and to create an atmosphere where many scholars feel caught between polarized camps of conservatives and radicals. As one professor lamented, literary studies has "become fodder for the culture wars":

The culture wars have clearly replaced anti-communism as a sort of national political hot button thing... So that's created this kind of siege mentality, which then produces even more aggressive scholarship and posturing. I just think it's a very unpleasant situation for people when they get caught in the middle of it.

¹⁷ The phrase "political correctness" first appeared in the press in a *New York Times* article by Richard Bernstein (1990). At its height the controversy over PC received a cover study in *Newsweek* (1990), a major feature article in *Time* (Henry, 1991), stories in *USA Today* (e.g., Grabmeier, 1992) and similarly high-profile coverage in most other major journalistic publications.

Since it is not very easy to take a neutral position in these disputes, it is not surprising that, as we have seen, many literary scholars who would probably not describe their work as "political" in different circumstances feel compelled to do so in the current atmosphere of literary studies: political prisms have become difficult to avoid.

French literary studies (and French academia generally) has avoided anything resembling the "political correctness" debate in America. In large part this may be because there are no significant groups who have both the incentive and the means to start such a debate. In the absence of multicultural movements, there is no struggle over minority group representation in the academic profession. Those literary scholars who wish to take public intellectual stands on political issues tend to do so outside the profession in the general public intellectual sphere; an academic career is thus typically for engagé intellectuals more of a stepping stone and resource base for their public activities rather than their principal field of engagement.¹⁸

Also, none of the political parties in France seems to be very interested in making an issue of the political orientation of university professors. Unlike in America, where attacks on "political correctness" and multiculturalism often seem to fit into a broader conservative populist rhetoric against "liberal elites," who are accused of fomenting "the welfare state," cultural decline, and unpopular affirmative action programs, none of these issues has much resonance in mainstream French politics, and the one political party which has made a major issue of protecting a French "way of life"—Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front—has seen the threat to

¹⁸ Priscilla Parkhurst Clark notes that public intellectuals in France today tend to use university appointments as "a springboard to general intellectual life and to a broad, heterogenous public" (Clark, 1987: 197).

French culture as emanating mainly from immigration, and not from any vision of countercultural elites in academia or the media preying upon traditional values.¹⁹

The Professional Ecology

One final set of factors that may account for some of the differences between French and American literary studies—particularly their different conceptions of appropriate subject matter—concerns the different possibilities that the “disciplinary ecology” in each country has offered for the expansion of literary studies’ intellectual terrain, and the incentives that the discipline in each country has had for such expansion.

One of the more fruitful ways of looking at professions, as Andrew Abbott’s work (1988) has documented, is by seeing them as existing within a larger professional “system” or “ecology,” within which both nascent and existing professions must compete with each other for recognized and exclusive expertise over different “niches” of specialized services. Professions are thus seen as engaged in a process of “turf wars,” in which—much as in Paul Starr’s discussion of corporatism—conflict often centers as much upon the definition and delimitation of the various “niches” as upon which profession will have dominion over each of them. The result of these definitional struggles is often a situation where a single broad service area (care of the mentally ill, for instance) is traversed by a number of different professional niches (psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, counselors),

¹⁹ Of course, if French academia were witnessing affirmative action programs for scholars of Algerian and African descent, and/or if attacks were being made on the French canon in the name of a Francophone or Franco-Arab multiculturalism, this situation might be quite different—which perhaps underscores the role these types of phenomena may have had in the United States in making literary studies the subject of political controversy.

sometimes in an orderly and stratified manner, and sometimes in a more hodgepodge, overlapping, and/or conflictual way.

In the academic context, the various professional disciplines have historically competed with one another for dominion over intellectual terrain, and the same sort of overlapping jurisdiction over broad categories exists (economic phenomena, to take one example, are the terrain of an entire discipline—economics—but are also studied in other disciplines in fields such as political economy, economic sociology, economic history, anthropology, public policy programs, and occasionally psychology, each of which study different aspects of economic phenomena and/or utilize different theoretical paradigms and methodologies, and/or simply overlap). The same sort of rise, fall and contestation of specific niches is also present, with the occasional new discipline emerging (computer science, for instance), certain once quite central disciplines seeing their niches wane in importance (Classics), and some disciplines making moves into others' terrain, either because their traditional niche is on the decline (for instance, anthropology's increasing move towards the ethnographic study of "modern" societies—traditionally sociology's preserve—because of the dwindling number of already often overstudied "premodern" societies), or out of imperialistic ambitions (such as in the efforts of Rational Choice theorists to "economize" the study of many social and political phenomena outside of economics' traditional terrain).

Using this perspective to look at literary studies, it seems that in many ways the heightened attention to "theory" and the recent expansion of subject matter in American literary studies are the result of professional dynamics similar to those in these last two examples of anthropology and rational choice theory. Motivated either by concerns about literary studies' waning professional fortunes, and/or by a desire to spread the insights of literary analysis to the terrains of other disciplines, American literary scholars have in recent years shown a pronounced tendency to move into subject areas that overlap with the professional domains of other disciplines.

Literature departments in America witnessed a pronounced decline in undergraduate enrollments in the 1970s,²⁰ and much of the move towards more interdisciplinary and theoretical work in literary studies seems to have been influenced by literature professors' concern to reverse this decline. For instance, in a influential 1981 book on literary theory, Jonathan Culler (a Professor of literature at Cornell, and one of the more widely read disseminators and interpreters of French post-structuralist theory), advocated more attention to mass culture and interdisciplinary theory in literature departments precisely for the reason that such a method would attract more students:

In most universities the traditional English courses organized according to periods have suffered a decline in enrollments... The problem is structural, involving the marginal situation of literature within the students' cultures... Confronted with students for whom literature is simply one aspect of their culture, and an aspect with which they are relatively unfamiliar, teachers need to be able to discuss literature in relation to more familiar cultural products and in its relations to other ways of writing about the human experience, such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and history (Culler, 1981: 212-3).

²⁰ The number of bachelor's degrees awarded in English literature in the United States declined from 64,342 in the 1970-71 academic year to 32,254 in 1980-81—a drop of 50%. This number has gradually recovered strength since the mid-to-late 1980s, with 56,133 degrees reported in 1992-3, the latest year for which statistics are available at the time of this writing (National Center of Education Statistics, 1995: Table 243).

Furthermore, Culler also advocated that English departments begin to pick up intellectual niches that were being left behind or neglected by other disciplines, particularly the “humanistic” tradition: towards the end of his book he offered

[w]hat may seem a peculiar suggestion—to have English departments go “outside the field” to teach what other departments neglect... This is especially important, it seems to me, in universities where philosophy departments fail to teach traditional philosophy and psychology departments reject psychoanalysis, producing a situation in which the central texts of the humanist tradition—Plato, Descartes, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud—are neglected, unless they are taught in literature courses. (1981: 221)

Finally, Culler put forward the idea that literary studies could use literary theory to shore up its professional legitimacy vis à vis other academic disciplines. In a manner similar to the way in which economic paradigms like Rational Choice theory have recently gained professional ground by redefining many social and political issues as “economic,” literary studies could deconstruct the theories and methods of many other disciplines to show how they relied upon “literary” images and conventions, thus raising the relative professional status of literature departments:

[W]e can think about literature in relation to other types of discourses by focusing on a theoretical topic, such as narrative or theory of tropes, that will enable us to see the importance and pervasiveness of structures that we

traditionally regard as “literary” and thus to justify the importance that we think literary study ought to have. (1981: 217)

In the years since Culler voiced these suggestions, American literary studies has moved along many of the directions he proposed.²¹ Scholarship studying literature from interdisciplinary perspectives has proliferated, as has work relating literature to other cultural forms. The approach of analyzing social science discourse to reveal its implicit “narratives” and “rhetorics” has caught on quite widely, and has precipitated major discussions and autocritiques in a number of disciplines; while this has not wholly been the result of the efforts of literary theorists, their work often figures prominently in these discussions (e.g., Brown, 1987; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Hunter, 1990; McClosky, 1985). Literary theory, particularly through deconstruction, has kept a window open to continental philosophy and the humanist tradition, and while some have complained that this has led to situation where undergraduate English majors tend to “discuss the logocentrism of the philosophical tradition without having read a single classic of philosophy” (Lamont, 1987: 593), it does seem to have made English departments attractive to many students.²²

²¹ It should be made clear that I am not trying to claim that these ideas originated with Culler, or to place any specific measure on the effects of his advocacy; rather I cite him to show that concerns such as his were evident in American literary studies at least as far back as the early 1980s.

²² The noted American philosopher Richard Rorty has suggested that literary theory in the United States today fills an important role for intellectually-minded students that philosophy used to fill in America, and still does in France and other European countries:

I think that in... America philosophy has already been displaced by literary criticism in its principal cultural function—as a source for youth’s self-description of its own difference

The most dramatic attempt at securing a new “niche” for literary studies, however—and the one which appears to have both the most momentum at present, and the most potential ramifications for the future of the discipline and the disciplinary ecology in general—is the contemporary push to redefine the professional subject matter of literature departments from “literature” to “culture” (or “discourse,” or “text”). As we have seen, this is the program of many American literary scholars today. Their effort to secure “culture” as the province for literary study seeks in essence to legitimate the movement of many literary scholars onto intellectual terrains traditionally the province of history and the social sciences.

Some of these scholars see this project in a way analogous to literary studies’ appropriation of Continental philosophy and the Humanist tradition; they believe that the social sciences and history have neglected the study of cultural phenomena to the point of abdication, and that literature departments can profit by picking up the abandoned niche; as Russell Berman (a professor of literature at Stanford) recently put it in Profession:

Despite some recent developments, the study of culture is still marginal in history departments, and culture is barely a factor at all in the quantitative social sciences. So the interdisciplinarity that devolves from the replacement of literature (narrowly defined) by culture (broadly defined) has the advantage of revitalizing the language and literature model by using an innovative

from the past... This is roughly because of the Kantian and anti-historicist tenor of Anglo-Saxon philosophy. The cultural function of teachers of philosophy in countries where Hegel was not forgotten is quite different and closer to the position of literary critics in America. (Rorty, 1980: 168)

pedagogy that examines a culture through a range of objects, including but not restricted to canonic literature.(Berman, 1995: 91)

For many of these scholars, however, “culture” is defined more broadly, and is not just a question of subject matter but also one of politics and methodology. They perceive their model of cultural studies as opposing interpretive, textual, and/or “postmodern” methods to what they see as the positivist and technocratic orientation of the quantitative social sciences.²³ From these scholars’ perspective, a “critical” and culturally-focused literary studies has as its legitimate terrain the entire range of social phenomena, and is often seen as existing in a contested relation to the mainstream social sciences, which are viewed as reflecting a number of intellectually and politically regressive and outmoded “modernist” assumptions about objective knowledge, value-neutrality, and/or human nature. Many of the more Cultural-studies-inclined professors interviewed, for instance, expressed a generalized skepticism about quantitative work and positivistic rhetoric in the social science

²³ In the case of certain literary scholars associated with “Science Studies,” this suspicion about positivist methodology also extends to the natural sciences, and has produced much controversy, such as in the recent “Sokal Affair,” in which New York University physicist Alan Sokal submitted to *Social Text* (a prominent Cultural Studies journal) a paper which contained many erroneous statements about physics but was written in a “postmodern” style. The paper was published, and Sokal's subsequent revelation that it was a hoax attracted a great deal of media attention. See Alan Sokal (1996a and b), Scott (1996), Berkowitz (1996), and Begley and Rogers (1996).

disciplines,²⁴ and one explicitly described his work as entering onto social science terrain in order to combat such tendencies:

Most of what I do I see as being more in social science terrain rather than the humanities nowadays.

What's the difference?

Once you move into social science terrain, the local battles are a little different. You tend to be at loggerheads with quantitative paradigms. And you can see from department to department how there's a war going on, very clearly.

Do you see yourself as warring against quantitative paradigms?

Oh, yeah, I would be part of that. I'm part of that crusade, to save what we can [laughs]. In a way it's the frontline between humanistic values and natural science values.

²⁴ A representative quote: "I'm generally skeptical of positivistic claims, outside of the hard sciences... I think that human stuff doesn't quantify terribly well, and I further have doubts about the people who do it (laughs), in terms of their infallibility. I'm skeptical of the general face that quantitative work, positivistic work, presents in the social sciences."

For a variety of reasons, then—to react to a threatening dropoff in enrollments and prestige, to seize perceived opportunities to seize intellectual turf that is seen as “up for grabs,” and to further methodological and political agendas—American literary scholars have sought to expand their discipline’s professional intellectual niche.

In contrast, French literary studies has witnessed little of this kind of activity, and remains focused fairly narrowly upon the traditional terrain of canonical literature. Part of the reason for this may be that such efforts would be difficult and seen as out of place for literary studies within the French disciplinary ecology. With regard to the appropriation of other disciplines’ abandoned professional terrain, there are few niches—at least of the sort which American literary studies have seized upon—for literary studies to pick up within the French disciplinary ecology. Psychology departments in France still teach Freud and Lacan, and French philosophers retain interest in both the history of philosophy and the Continental philosophical tradition. Many of the philosophically-oriented social theorists often imported and appropriated by American literature departments (such as Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, and Gilles Deleuze) are also the products (and the province) of French philosophy departments.

Attempts by literary scholars to appropriate the sphere of cultural phenomena from the social sciences, or to mount a humanistic challenge against them, would also seem implausible in the French context. While (often American-influenced) quantitative work and paradigms do exist in the French social sciences, they are fairly marginal. The mainstream of French social science has a long tradition of being “critical,” interpretive, and attentive to culture; indeed, many of the thinkers often cited by Cultural Studies scholars in the United States (Pierre Bourdieu, for instance) are French social scientists. Generally, there seems to be more common ground and much less of a sense of intellectual separateness between the social sciences and the

humanities in France than there is in the United States; French professors in both the humanities and the social sciences report less sense of intellectual foreignness or “otherness” across the social science/humanities divide than do their American counterparts, and many reject the distinction entirely in favor of a composite conception of the “les sciences humaines” (the human sciences).²⁵ Given the situation in French social science, then, any attempt by French literary scholars to turn their discipline into a sort of refuge for a “shadow,” humanist social science would seem superfluous; the social sciences in France already are largely humanist.

But by themselves, these greater obstacles to the discipline’s expansion do not seem sufficient to fully explain why French literary studies has remained so canonical in focus. Some subject niches—popular fiction, for instance, and perhaps some other parts of mass culture—could certainly be within the professional domain of literature departments in France if literature professors wished to incorporate them. But by and large, they have shown little interest in making such an appropriation, and are content to remain focused on canonical literature. Why the lack of interest?

Partly, this seems to do with some of the national differences in literary studies already described earlier. The lack of any strong multicultural movement among

²⁵ In related research I have also interviewed 20 political scientists in France and the United States.

When asked about scholarship across their side of the social science/humanities divide, American political scientists and literary scholars were much more likely to report feelings such as a lack of intellectual familiarity or a sense of strong intellectual difference, and more often expressed the sense that they lacked the competence to evaluate such work as good or bad (frequently with explanations such as “I don’t understand what the rules are in those disciplines”). French scholars, by contrast, were much less likely to report such feelings of difference, and tended to be quite confident in their ability to evaluate all but the most technical or specialized work across the breadth of “les science humaines.”

French literary scholars, for instance, takes away a group that in the American context has had a whole set of incentives to push the borders of traditional subject matter, and the absence in France of American-style displaced political intellectuals would seem to have a similar negative effect.

It also seems likely that French literary scholars have had less reason to feel insecure about the prestige or institutional security of canonical literary study than have their American counterparts, and so have had less incentive to try to move into other areas of scholarship. Institutionally, literature departments in France have had little reason to fear being “downsized.” Funding for academic departments is seldom tied to changes in undergraduate enrollments (which in any case seem to have been steadily rising for literature departments)²⁶ and funding for universities generally in France comes directly from a central government which is much less likely than American state and national governments to view funding for literary scholarship as an expendable luxury item in yearly budgets. In an era in which Francophone culture is often seen as under siege from “Hollywood” and other Anglophone influences, there is considerable and broad public support in French society for measures to protect and preserve the national culture. Besides the well-known instances of the French government’s protection of the French film industry against American competition, and the Academie Française’s efforts to resist the Anglicization of the French language, this cultural nationalism is manifested generally in the presence of state support for projects and institutions related to “patrimoine” (patrimony, or national heritage). The preservation and dissemination of classic French literature in the nation’s universities fits directly into this goal of preserving patrimoine, and while literature departments are hardly lavishly funded, none of the scholars interviewed felt

²⁶ Eric Fassin, personal correspondence.

that there was any danger of their support being significantly cut. As one of the CNRS literary scholars put it:

Our society, despite its hypermodernism, is obsessed with patrimony. The word that is the most saleable today is the word “patrimony.” If one wants to obtain money for a project for no matter what, one doesn’t speak the language of “breakthroughs”, et cetera; one must only say the word “patrimony,” and the money rains down. This is a society which is at the moment completely patrimonial, and it’s evident that there’s nothing more patrimonial than literature as a cultural treasure. It has an obvious patrimonial aspect.

Beyond assured state support, it appears that canonical literature remains a cultural status item of more general and widespread importance in France than in the United States. Attempts to transpose Pierre Bourdieu’s (1987) model of how “cultural capital” plays a key role in social stratification and reproduction from its initial context of French society to American society seem to have demonstrated that cultural capital has a less significant role in American society than in France; Americans are less likely to value being “cultured” than are the French.²⁷ Furthermore, the very definition of cultural capital is more problematic in the United States; while the French seem to have a fairly homogeneous understanding of what sort of knowledge and culture make one a “cultured” person, Americans seem to share much less common ground on this issue, and the value of having a familiarity with the

²⁷ For an empirical and theoretical examination of how Bourdieu’s model fares when applied to the United States context, see Lamont (1992).

national canon of “high literature” is much less self-evident for many Americans than it is for a solid majority of the French. This greater social significance and appreciation of canonical literature in France may constitute a final reason why French literary studies have kept their canonical focus; with their object of study retaining a strong and generalized social prestige, French literary scholars may feel no need to move into other subject areas in order to maintain their discipline’s “relevance” or intellectual profile.

CONCLUSION : THE PARADOX OF FRENCH INFLUENCE?

In conclusion, let us return to the puzzle posed at the beginning of this essay: if French theorists have been so influential upon American literary scholars, then why are literary studies so different in the two countries? Since most of this paper has already been devoted to explaining these differences, it is perhaps best at this point to reverse the terms of this apparent paradox: why have American literary scholars devoted so much energy to importing French scholarship, given that literary studies in the two countries are so “out of step” intellectually?

The paradoxical aspects of this importation largely disappear when one examines the specific French thinkers that American literary theorists have imported, for these thinkers are themselves largely “out of step” with contemporary French literary criticism. First and foremost, virtually all of these French thinkers are (or were) members of the more radical preceding generation of French intellectuals, against which the current generation of French literary scholars draw sharp intellectual boundaries. Furthermore, many, such as Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, and Althusser, were (or, in Derrida’s case, are) not literary scholars, but rather hailed from other disciplines. Some, such as Barthes, were literary scholars, but never held regular academic appointments. Of the pantheon of French theorists imported to the United States in recent years, only Julia Kristeva holds a regular university appointment in a

literature department in France. Of course, the fact that most of these thinkers have not held literature chairs does not mean that they have not been influential in French literary studies: many of them have been, particularly Barthes and Foucault. But their influence seems to have coincided largely with the atmosphere of radical politics that permeated France in the years following 1968, and with the relative waning of anti-statist and anti-capitalist sentiments in France since that time, their intellectual influence in French literary studies has declined.

By contrast, the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that form the common intellectual denominator of most of the French theories imported to the United States have proven more resiliently resonant with an American audience of literary scholars who remain more concerned with issues of power and domination than do their French counterparts.²⁸ While the focus of their concerns is obviously somewhat different, with more attention paid by Americans to issues of gender, race, and sexual preference, the French theorists who have become the most popular among American literary scholars are those whose theoretical apparatuses have proven sufficiently flexible to fit these issues. Michel Foucault’s dissections of the intertwining of “discourse” and power, Derrida’s deconstruction of hierarchical concepts of “difference,” and Lacan’s notion of the “Other” are all capable of being transposed onto issues of race, gender, and sexuality, and have been by American literary scholars.

One would not, however, want to attribute the importation and influence of French theory solely to its elective affinity to the contemporary sociopolitical concerns

²⁸ Michèle Lamont and Marsha Witten, noting the often significant intellectual differences between the theorists imported to United States humanities departments, conclude that they “converge substantively only to the extent that [most] of them study the process by which culture... contributes to the reproduction of power relations.” (Lamont and Witten 1988: 19).

of American literary theorists. In a number of articles Michèle Lamont (1987; Lamont and Witten, 1988) has offered some other explanations for the popularity of Jacques Derrida and other French thinkers in American literary studies: their initial championing by professors at certain leading universities; the fact that “French theory” has been perceived as sophisticated, and has thus been used as a form of “cultural capital” within the academic literary field; and the fact that deconstruction’s (and other French theories’) applicability to a wide variety of literary products has offered literature department a way of creating a degree of intellectual community across the divisions of periodization.

This study suggests another cause related to Lamont's point about theoretical unification. Beyond internally unifying literary studies across periodizations, the importation of French theories has also strengthened American literary studies in its struggles with external disciplines over intellectual terrain. In particular, the importation of French theory has given literature scholars a “canon” of theories and theorists that is in effect social-scientific, yet which differs from the set of canonical theories and texts in the American social sciences themselves. It has thus aided those American literary scholars who seek to turn the discipline into a competing variant of the social science disciplines, helping to maintain the distinctiveness of their work from mainstream social science and thereby legitimating the disciplines’ coexistence in traditionally social-scientific terrain.

To the extent that a set of French theorists have played such a key role in the founding of contemporary American literary and cultural studies, their influence has been undeniable. But is this influence likely to continue? I would suggest that this is unlikely, for reasons of both supply and demand. On the supply side, there seem to be few “undiscovered” French theorists from the generation of Derrida and Foucault who have not already been imported by American literary theorists, and as we have seen, the contemporary generation of French literary scholars is not producing similar work.

On the demand side, I would posit that American literary scholars no longer need an external theoretical canon on which to base their work. There are now enough “homegrown” canonical theorists and texts in American literary studies to form a basis for new scholarship, and a dissertation in literature in America today can just as easily build upon the work of American theorists such as Said, Sedgwick, or Butler as it can on Derrida or Lacan. Indeed, to the extent that American theorists have taken French theory in directions different than the French themselves, further importation of French theory might prove unwelcome and jarring. I would posit that the situation of American literary studies today is in some ways like that of sociology just after the rise of Parsonian structural functionalism: in that situation, too, a set of European theorists was used as the basis and legitimation for a new and sharply different style of scholarship, but with a tenor and an emphasis that made the field soon diverge from developments on the Continent, after which the direct influence of European scholars on their American counterparts dropped off sharply.

This study has confined itself to the examination of literary studies, and while this discipline has been among those most influenced by French theory, performing a satisfying analysis of the importation of French theories to American academia in general would require a broader focus than is provided here. The less successful (but still quite influential) attempts to bring French theories into disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, history, and political science would need to be accounted for, and this is beyond the scope of what can be accomplished here. It is hoped, however, that by providing an analysis of the differing state of literary studies in France and the United States, this paper has gone some distance towards examining the social factors affecting academic disciplines in France and the United States, and shed some light upon their often complicated international relations.

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