

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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