The Literature of Foreign Language Programs: The Road to Cultural Studies Is Not Paved with Literary History … Tick Tock … Tick Tock

Les Essif

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THE comprehensive exam. Taken one lately? Evaluated one lately? Happy with the results of this most hallowed rite of passage to our profession? If you, like me, have been rather disappointed with the comps experience, I believe this is largely due to the emphasis our profession continues to place on a linear track of literary history in the composition of these exams. Given the accumulating mass of canonic texts that constitute the reality of our field—the bubbling cauldron of fiction as well as its theories, critical methodologies, pedagogies, cultural contexts, and histories—neither we nor our students have sufficient time (tick . . . tock) to organize literature through the old century-based guidelines. Consequently, the most pressing problem with literature in our programs is the unrelenting mandate that we study all the recognized works from each and every (linearly defined) historical period, because they represent different chapters of the human or humanities story. Yet our profession is predicated on the fact that there is more than one way to reveal a story and more than one way to understand it.

Of course, today most of us feel we have already departed from a strict adherence to the literary history standard. But, chers collègues, let's face it, we're in denial. It still holds us in its grasp and virtually defines our professional profile. To break its stranglehold, we must accept unreservedly that history can be understood in other, nonlinear ways; that it naturally is built into the density of the present; and that a comprehensive, thorough knowledge of history is not a prerequisite for all sound scholarship and teaching.

I believe it is no coincidence that history is still generally conceived of and referred to in the (comprehensive) singular, while the concept of cultural studies was forged in what I call the holistic plural. At this critical juncture in the evolution of our profession, we are faced in the most simplistic terms with a sense of history competing for our attention against a sense of culture. Simply put, our breakdown of history into a comprehensive collection of periods seems increasingly mechanistic and positivistic. Its building-block scheme compromises our understanding of historical evolution by implying on the one hand a belief in some overreaching ordinal logic and on the other that movement into one period requires a departure from another. Culture and the cultural studies movement, on the contrary, suggest a focus on foreign culture as an organic, holistic whole. The cultural studies movement cannot be held to the same quantifiable standard of literary history (quantifiable invoking the threat of limited time). It is not so much what it represents as what it shuns: not only an unreflective, ahistoric, formalistic view of literature, as Russell Berman has argued (see Berman), but, perhaps as important, a falsely monolithic, belletristic perception of the written record of historical periods and the canon that this perception has produced. Thus in this essay I take the liberty of considering the current move toward cultural studies in these simple terms: a reaction to a purist conception of literary scholarship and literary history, which is a move equally from a comprehensive approach to our field of foreign studies and toward a more holistic one.

Again, many of us feel that we have already moved into the cultural studies mode. But do we truly realize that, given time constraints (tick . . . tock!), the only proper way to do this is in lieu of the traditional track of history and not in addition to it?

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Let me argue then that, often indirectly or secondarily, many key proponents of cultural studies curricula have been protesting as much the focus of our profession on the literary history standard as the emphasis on literature itself. Berman’s advocacy of a cultural studies approach to foreign language curricula is well known. Calling on foreign language departments to emphasize a broad study of the culture that has produced the text, Berman asserts the need for a “cohesive yet broad knowledge of, for example, France, Germany, or Italy” against “a linear track of the literary histories [of these countries]” (68). His use of the terms cohesive and broad subvert the notion of comprehensiveness by avoiding the objective of completeness.

For his part, Cary Nelson declares the importance of the contemporary over the historical: “Fields like history and literature that often teach pure period courses need to make detailed and specific analogies to present conditions. [. . .] The Taylorized curriculum needs to be thoroughly undermined with the aim of gaining critical purchase on contemporary life” (66). Taylorism refers to a scientific, mechanical method of factory management and work efficiency, and Nelson sees the risk involved in the very concept of “pure period courses” to be one of privileging the study of a mechanistic, historical building-block type of curriculum over an emphasis on the infinitely more tangible and organic—if less immediately comprehensible—present. He most surely is not advocating that insight to the present is gained primarily by a thorough, comprehensive knowledge of the past. In fact, like most cultural studies scholars, he does not have a conventional regard for the concept of history, which he feels is not immutable. Arguing against an overzealous defense of the literary canon (and its sacred history), he speaks of a “history of privilege or marginalization,” a history that has a “potentially transitory character.” Thus, a major component of the meaning of any literary text, other than the historical context in which it was written and other than the constitution of its literariness (its textual or literary functions), is in the present culture of the reader: we should ask ourselves “what [we] are reading and why [we] are reading it” and “should interrogate the social meaning of the curriculum [we] adopt” (104).

Still another cultural studies scholar, Nelly Furman, argues for the culture of the literary against the history of literature. From the field of French studies, she points out that, when the study of literature entered the French university system in the “positivistic” nineteenth century, literature “was essentially conceived as an extension of history [. . .] its focus on l’homme et l’œuvre.” It was only in the 1960s that the study of textuality challenged this approach (72). Subsequently, the positivism of the nineteenth century eventually gave way to “la nouvelle histoire with its focus on social and cultural history” (74). She points to the recent shift in the ways that literary historians document and present literary history: a shift from a positivistic focus on chronology to a more cultural, experiential, thematic focus as exemplified by Pierre Nora’s *Lieux de mémoire* (1984–93) and Denis Hollier’s *New History of French Literature* (1989). Nora’s historical research emphasizes “shared memories, as opposed to a unified history.” Furthermore, “[i]n Hollier’s book French literature is not presented ‘as a simple inventory of authors or titles, but rather as a historical and cultural field viewed from a wide array of contemporary critical perspectives’” (Furman 76). From Furman’s uncomprehensive, holistic point of view, both these works demonstrate that “the boundaries between history and literature are now more permeable than ever [. . .]. [I]n our new world order, cultures and communities are set to replace national histories and interests” (77). She concludes that Nora and Hollier teach us to think of culture as a network of sites, as one would find on the Web. These sites are outside any preordered path, outside any theoria, outside the diachronic linearity of time and are reachable in a variety of ways, haphazardly or by association or by any other routing mechanism. Some of these sites could turn into courses that address literary issues, cultural events, or social phenomena across time and place. (78)1

Let’s retain in particular this alternative to a linear track of history: the emphasis on the “routing mechanism” that takes us from the very relevant present on a motivated, selective voyage through history. For these holistic scholar-teachers (Berman, Nelson, Furman), comprehensive, when related to history, is no longer meaningful to our profession. As proponents of inquiry-based learning, they believe that a sense of chronology can be obtained without a positivistic focus on privileged identities of historical developments. For instance, we must not assume that a study of the poetry of the guillotine requires at base a thorough knowledge and fluency in the history of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries of France. The particular angle of the study—the “routing mechanism” we employ—might or might not require this background.

Instead of holding up the whole of literary history as the standard point of reference to what we do and instead of assuming there is an essential, fixed body of texts that constitute the whole—the objective toward which we work—many of us would do better to begin with a site of meaning (a contemporary interest in the past, e.g., capital punishment and the imagery of decapitation) and work outward, backward, and forward, making connections to a dynamic yet ultimately indeterminate culture-in-process.4 And this, without feeling the need to make all the connections to reach a meaningful whole. Taking literary history into account from a holistic perspective, the cultural studies standard would emphasize not how the cultural phenomenon—be it popular culture versus high culture, ethnicity, labor, crime and punishment, realism, the art and business of literary production, social class, or multiculturalism—has moved through history but how history moves through the phenomenon in the present.

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1. Furman 77
2. Berman, Nelson, Furman
3. Taylorism
4. Berman, Nelson, Furman
Nora puts it, “What matters most is not what the past imposes on us but what we bring to it” (qtd. in Blume xvii).

The academic program in which I work reflects the struggle between literary history (historical comprehensiveness) and cultural studies. My department is uniquely positioned to confront the demographic crisis in foreign language studies, especially in our graduate programs. In the late 1980s we began to offer a doctorate not in the language and literature of one national culture (French or Spanish or German) but in modern foreign languages, a program that requires that the student focus on a primary foreign language and literature while acquiring an advanced and broad knowledge of a second foreign language and literature. Thus our modern foreign language doctoral students with a first concentration in French and a second concentration in Spanish take graduate-level classes in Spanish, and they are expected to take conventional prelims in French as well as a written exam in Spanish and Latin American literary history. In principle, this program prepares the candidates for the numerous smaller undergraduate foreign language programs that seek faculty members to teach one primary language at all undergraduate levels, often including at least one literature survey and one culture course per year, in addition to sharing responsibilities for teaching another foreign language through the intermediate language levels.

This appears to be a sound program, one that fills a need in our profession and one that avoids adding to the glut of purely research-oriented PhDs. Yet since its inception it hasn’t worked according to design, evidently because too many of us literary faculty members continue to think in terms of self-replication. Given the force of inertia in our profession, we almost all identify our expertise in one particular century, and we persist in the mind-set that all historical periods must be represented in the major languages in order for our program to qualify as a true doctoral research program. A powerful coalition of literary scholars cannot tear itself away from a traditional approach to graduate work, an approach in which the candidate takes a comprehensive prelim—comprehensive meaning all historical periods are covered. This exam will qualify the candidate to select the literature of one particular period on which to write a dissertation that, let’s confess it, is almost never comparative in the real sense of the word and that rarely crosses period boundaries. Thus despite the demands presented by the second concentration, until our recent curriculum revision in the French section of our department, the program has called for the student to demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of all periods of French canonic literature, from the Middle Ages to the present.

In the French section, whose curricula are relatively autonomous within the modern languages program, we began the debate on implementing curricular changes that a number of us believed would move us away from the historical period model. We based the need for change on several assumptions: first, that the profession was calling for an integrated curriculum, one in which language, literature, and culture were not assigned priority or ranked; second, that our modern languages program had an added advantage since, even if a comprehensive knowledge of all literary periods was a proper curricular goal, as a program requiring a strong second concentration we could justify falling short of the objective; and third, in our case, we also had the inclusion card. We could get the faculty members specialized in cinema, theater, and linguistics fully involved in the graduate program and the upper-level undergraduate program only if we abandoned the historical period emphasis of our current curriculum.

Some heated debate ensued about safeguarding the prominence of the historical period superstructure. After struggling over which designation we could use to replace the long list of courses covering all historical periods (by genre or by other scholarly discipline or interest?), we settled for area studies, which we felt was sufficiently broad to conform more exactly and flexibly to the expertise of our teaching faculty. In the end, however, our minds are so century-filed, and our fear of falling off the edge of the flat ocean of history so great, that we still are left with a core group of courses identified by century. The most radical curricular changes amount to a combination of historical periods (sixteenth with seventeenth and eighteenth with nineteenth), the addition of graduate courses in genre (theater and cinema) and linguistics, and the expansion of one course in the twentieth century to two.

The most significant outcome of this curricular makeover relates to the spirit of these changes, which do reflect a shift from the comprehensive to the holistic. Most of us have begun truly to understand that the (documented) historical context of the literary cultural event is one site of meaning among many and that its use as a curricular standard is totally impractical and unrealistic for our particular mission. We realize that, though extremely important and vastly useful, canonic literature is only one particular piece of the puzzle of cultural foreignness. We are learning that emphasizing and demonstrating critical skills, methods, and attitudes toward text have greater instructional importance than teaching knowledge of a wide range of texts. I think we also have recognized the need to ground our study of culture in the present and allow a deep, critical awareness of the present to motivate our scrutiny of the past, instead of attempting to explain the present purely as a consequence of artifacts, events, and ideas of the past, a past that we will never recover fully or objectively.

Thus, to recall Furman, that indefinable field that is cultural studies seeks new approaches or “routing mechanisms” to study those pieces of the puzzle that we could call sites of meaning. “Outside the [. . ] linearity of time,” these sites evidently have a special relation with the contemporary. Opponents of cultural studies argue that, since we were trained as literary specialists, we cannot practice
any extraliterary discipline with any legitimate competency. From the holistic point of view of many cultural studies people, however, there is no extraliterary, as there is no extracultural. They don’t believe they were really trained in literature. Literature is the knowledge, the vehicle; critical analysis is the profession.

So let’s reconsider the advice of the celebrated, eccentric theorist of theater Antonin Artaud to the effect that “[m]asterpieces of the past are good for the past: they are not good for us” (74). To be sure, Artaud refuted contemporary society’s ability to interpret textual accounts (fiction and nonfiction) of the past, while basing his entire approach to theatrical art on a form of undocumented history: the primitive, visceral, metaphysical record that underlies the collective subconscious of all persons. Instead of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, however, we merely need to rethink our habits of hygiene. Instead of fixing on a building-block store of knowledge of classical works and classical centuries, we should insist on critical insight that does not necessarily presume a complete familiarity with the recorded documents, including the literary canon, of a given century. Let me say it up front and more directly than others: Though it is imperative that our graduate students in foreign languages acquire a good basic understanding of historical chronology, today most of them would benefit as much from a strong training in cinema studies or in contemporary French and francophone or Hispanic culture as from a thorough study of Molière or Lope de Vega or even seventeenth-century France or Spain, for that matter. These distinguished dramatists are most important because their works help us develop broad insight into something of a universal culture and human nature as well as a deep understanding of the national subculture to which they belonged (especially the intellectual elite and the bourgeoisie). Their works represent masterpiece structures of the cultural puzzle, pieces smaller than the entire corpus of the seventeenth century and even smaller than the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries combined. The organic, holistic nature of culture is overwhelming (Artaud most surely believed this), and class time saved by not covering each and every century, piece by piece, can be better allocated to examining other pieces of the puzzle and to examining as well as practicing the art of puzzle making, the practice of identifying “routing mechanisms.” (Isn’t this the direction in which some key structuralists and poststructuralists pointed us in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s?) After all, we could never hope to complete the puzzle anyway. Today, students do need to learn about literary periods, but this study should carry no more weight than literary genre and literary topics and no more than other nonliterary (yet literarily-related) cultural phenomena. Thus I suggest we move toward programs that require one period-based survey course for undergraduates and another for graduate students. I see no reason why our profession should have more medievalist, seventeenth-century, and twentieth-century specialists than it has poetry, cinema, popular culture, technology, and ethnicity specialists. If so-called period specialists can cross genre borders within a century, they should feel equally comfortable to cross century borders within a particular genre or topic. Despite this plea for deemphasizing the literary canon, it will still get its due—however we decide to determine its canonic qualities.

So where do we go once we have abandoned the historical period standard and have adopted a versatile model related to the broader and more holistic field of cultural studies, one in which canonic and noncanonic literature could play a key role? There is certainly no shortage of examples of new “routing mechanisms” to flesh out French and francophone culture. In my section, the eighteenth-century specialist teaches a course that examines the transposition of eighteenth-century novels to the cinema of the twentieth century. Our cinema specialist teaches a course that examines the study of francophone film directors with that of their French counterparts on the Continent. Two of our twentieth-century specialists form the core of an interdisciplinary program they call Normandy Scholars. Involving faculty members from history, political science, and sociology, this program studies the phenomena and the “culture” of World War II, its precipitating events and its enduring aftermath. Students are selected for this elaborately organized program that includes an intensive full-semester curriculum of studies and concludes with a three-week study tour of Normandy.

Probably the best example I could give belongs to the subfield with which I am most familiar: theater and performance studies. My personal growth in this specialty is relevant here. My scholarly interest evolved from theater as a literary genre to the broader, holistic perspective of a performative approach to theater—that is, an approach that explicitly recognizes attributes of theater that are as cultural as they are nonliterary. The opposition between history and culture parallels the antagonism between drama-as-literature and drama-as-performance. Until recently, the obsession with purist conceptions of literature and of literary history diverted attention from the dynamic cultural dimension of dramatic art: the presentational aspects within, below, and beyond the text. Literature and history are only a part of theater, as they are only a part of culture. By taking into account text and representation, performance documents, staging conventions and staging decisions, theatrical venues, and contemporary performances of classical texts, the study of French and francophone theater aligns more neatly with French and francophone cultural studies.

My rebirth in theater studies was consummated by the training I received at the Institute of Theatre Studies within the University of Paris system. The form and content of this program are quite unlike any literature or theater department at American universities. The institute’s mission is not simply to study theater or to practice theater but to study theater as a cultural practice.
Over the past fifteen years, several offshoot theater studies programs have grown out of the institute within the system of the University of Paris. Besides the more traditional, literature-based courses, all these programs offer a diverse cultural curricula. Many of the course descriptions themselves evidence cultural studies–type “routing mechanisms” in which literary history provides a backdrop for the more relevant cultural dimensions of what theater as a performance art has meant and still means to diverse social communities and of how it continues to redefine itself as a cultural genre. Many courses suggest a clear historico-cultural bent, such as The Theater and the City, which studies theories of political theater, the relations between the theater and citizens, the situation of theater within the activities of the citizenry, and the historical evolution of these relations and this situation. Other courses, or “routing mechanisms,” announce distinct connections with the other arts or with other cultural phenomena: Theater and Painting, Theater and Photography, Social Sciences and the Theater. Still others are firmly rooted in the contemporary cultural life of theatrical production: The Production and the Dissemination of Theater: Case Studies examines the administrative, juridical, artistic, and financial aspects of specific theatrical enterprises as well as the diffusion of cultural politics; Educational Uses of the Dramatic Text surveys the types of texts that are studied in the classroom and the pedagogies employed to examine them. These inquiry-based courses are designed as focused research projects in which the teacher inevitably learns with the students. The classes demonstrate the confidence of scholars to extend their analytical expertise to areas that very evidently overstep the borders of the stage and the covers of a book.

Partly as a consequence of my background in this type of program, my own French section’s new curricular configuration will permit me to explore cultural studies–type linkages to the theater that I teach. I have proposed, for example, a course titled Performing French/Francophone Culture, High and Low. Students and instructor examine dramatic texts and performances of texts that have been judged of interest to the French university culture, and they compare them with those that have been considered quite popular but of insufficient intellectual or artistic value to be worthy of analysis in the classroom. The course would include realist and nonrealist types of works. Beyond applying dominant methodologies in analyzing these texts, we would study documentation surrounding their performance and multileveled reception. Other critical questions we could explore: What is the play’s potential for performance in twenty-first-century France? Which French Continental plays are being performed by francophone directors and which are being adapted by francophone dramatists (such as Aimé Césaire’s The Tempest and Alfred Jarry’s Ubu Roi)? Why? Conversely, which Francophone plays are being performed by French directors and which are being adapted by French dramatists? Why?

Like the courses of the Parisian theater programs, the topics of my course do not presuppose a focus on literary history or the traditional teacher-student relationship in which the teacher instructs and the student learns. On the contrary, these inquiry-based courses are designed as coherent, focused research projects in which the teacher learns collaboratively with the students: an added cultural dimension, I would argue. Furthermore, students and teacher remain constantly aware of the broader cultural framework into which the phenomenon of theater fits. Of course, the teacher-scholar must have the confidence to test his or her expertise in some less familiar waters. But the rewards are worthwhile for teacher as well as student. The one can enhance and the other acquire broad knowledge of the foreignness of French culture and the specificity of French history (literary and otherwise) through a focused, coherent study of a particular cultural phenomenon—in this case, theater. Given the holistic nature of these courses, can we comfortably call them “theater” courses?

I see a day when we no longer recruit faculty members primarily by century and when we begin to design programs with unique identities. Depending on the instructors’ interests, students could specialize in language and pedagogy, history-civilization, theory and criticism, philosophy, visual arts, ethnic studies, gender studies, theater and performance, or even information technologies well before their graduation date or their comprehensive exams. Each program and each course within the program could contain amounts and types of literature to a varying degree. Free from the burden to cover all periods of literary history (tick tock . . . tick tock . . . !), undergraduate and graduate programs in French studies could develop strengths in any one of the subfields or even any combination of them. Furthermore, these strengths could easily cross disciplinary boundaries among the other foreign language programs as well as those of other departments on campus. After all, don’t disciplines, fields, and historical periods have some very significant cultural common denominators?

Notes

1 In a report on the session “The Status of Literary History” at the 1999 MLA Conference on the Future of Doctoral Education, James Thompson affirms that literary history still forms the organization of most graduate curricula and that we still train most students in a period in order that they aspire to jobs in research institutions (1261). (The conference participants evidently persist in linking the literary history standard to research and serious scholarship.) This report refutes the warning of the MLA’s Committee on Professional Employment (January 1998) that in the light of the overproduction of PhDs in modern languages, “the primary goal of graduate education should not be to replicate graduate faculty” and that departments “will have to reimagine the size and shape of the graduate programs they offer and the directions in which those programs ought to proceed.”
evolve, given the range of educational needs our profession will have to meet in the twenty-first century” (Nelson and Watt 111).

Webster’s Third New International Dictionary defines comprehensive as “covering a matter under consideration completely or nearly completely,” and it associates this with the term inclusive. Holistic, however, is defined as “emphasizing the organic or functional relation between parts and wholes (a holistic rather than an atomistic approach to the study of culture).”

Stephen Greenblatt notes that in view of the tendency toward the globalization of our field, Hollier’s New History, to its credit, “gets at some of the spirit of slipperiness and rupture and calls into question any organic account of the nation and even of smaller units within the nation” (60). (Note that Greenblatt employs disparagingly the term organic in reference to the concept of nation.)

For an explanation of literary texts as culture-in-process (their re-creation through their reception), see Essif.

Under the pressures of the “leaning-tower-of-history” method of program development, most students have trouble writing a coherent critical essay on a topic that crosses historical period boundaries. Locked within these boundaries, they tend to sense that their primary task is to identify a work with its period. Consequently, the essays they write are descriptive and seldom critical, analytical, or comparative. The so-called great works of art from great centuries often are reduced to Disney-like storytelling.

Karen Levy, Chris Holmlund, and Constanccio Nakama deserve credit for their efforts in the often painstaking revision process.

This responds to Janet Swaffar’s chiding that “[foreign language departments must teach processes, not products. To do so, they must adopt a language curriculum that identifies core topics from history, culture, and literature—a limited number of literary works and a variety of texts that inform that literature; they must teach learning strategies with which to approach reading a text as a cultural artifact and reading as a historical practice” (37).

See, for example, Sandy Petrey, who believes that the most we literary scholars can hope for is to “apply the insights [the other fields, such as anthropology, history, and sociology] have developed to our primary activity of analyzing literature” (15). Charles Strivale sees it another way. In a recent article outlining a new book project, tentatively titled “Disenchanting Les Bons Temps: Constructing Identity and Authenticity in the Cajun Dance Arena,” he explains his “disciplinary turn in French toward ‘cultural studies’” (153). Stemming from a very personal experience with francophone culture, this turn (“moving the personal into the scholarly” [151–52]) enables him “to envisage ‘cultural studies’ as a means of straddling a zone ‘in-between’ the ‘local’ (personal) and the ‘global’ (scholarly/theoretical)” (167). Since literature and the other arts offer us a unique glimpse at the deepest structures of human consciousness, there’s something to be said for bringing a critico-literary background to a sociological, psychological, economic, or even medical problem.

In fact, one could probably argue that our field has become highly contradictory: on the one hand, many of us include more and more culture in our literature courses; on the other hand, the literary history standard remains the principal point of reference for our comprehensive exams and the recruitment of our faculty.

For more on collaborative teaching-learning, see Kramsch and Essif. See also Peter Uwe Hohendahl, who envisions “a type of program in which students realize that the learning process is fluid and open-ended, that we teachers are just as much involved in learning as the students, because we are finding ourselves in a situation where familiar boundaries are constantly redrawn, methods reconsidered, and theories problematized.” The body of texts for a course in this type of program “would form a constellation rather than a traditional sequence” (1235; my emphasis).

Works Cited


However, the knowledge of the foreign language alone is not enough to effectively communicate with representatives of other cultures. As we know, one of the most significant countries whose language they study, so teachers mostly use the texts in order to wide and fill up the students knowledge. The knowledge purchased during the linguacultural study of texts, have an invaluable value for expansion of individual cognitive thoughts of young generation, enriching of their cultural fund that significantly increases their creative mastery. First of all it’s the use of sociopolitical and literary texts in an original, the use of literary films, songs and the use of additional information from the internet.