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Preface

The present paper by Professor J. Hillis Miller was given as a lecture at the conference "Literary History and Comparative Literary Studies", May 7, 1998, at Aarhus University. In the lecture Hillis Miller presents and discusses the effects of globalization on literary studies and on the praxis of close reading.

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(KMS)

Effects of Globalization on Literary Study

Everyone hears on all sides these days about globalization and its effects.¹ My topic is the effect of globalization on literary study. As Masao Miyoshi and others have pointed out, globalization is an uneven process. Millions of people all over the world are as yet relatively untouched by some of the globalizing forces I shall identify, for example by not having access to a computer. Even so, hardly anyone has remained wholly detached from globalizing influences. Radios and VCRs are almost ubiquitous, for example on remote Pacific islands. Native Americans of northern Canada now use outboard motors and snowmobiles, not paddles and dogsleds. Most have radios. Airplanes come and go in extremely remote areas of northern Canada.

Three features of this immensely accelerated process of globalization today may be identified. The first is relatively "low tech." We have become so used to it as to take it for granted as part of the normal aspect of things. Nevertheless, it is of crucial importance, even in literary study. I refer to new means of rapid travel and shipping. If I had not been able to fly to Denmark in a few hours, if I had had to take a slow boat and give weeks to the journey, it is unlikely I would have come here. Many academics, even those in the humanities, have become used to flying all over the world to do research, to attend conferences, and to lecture. This means that rather than belonging to local or even national scholarly communities, many academics belong as much or more to transnational groups of scholars with common interests as they do to departments or research groups within their own universities. An unprecedented movement of scholars and researchers in all fields, including the humanities, defines our present situation. This is one thing that is meant by globalization.

A second feature is the globalization of economies. The companies and corporations that research universities increasingly serve and are paid by (as opposed to traditional service to the state, and funding by it), tend more and more to be transnational in scope. A transnational corporation may have offices in many different countries, be owned by investors from all over the world, manufacture goods in several countries, wherever the labor is cheapest, and sell them all over the world. Such corporations do not owe primary loyalty to a single country or government. Orange County, California, where I live and work now, is full of such corporations, and they are having an increasing influence on the University of California at Irvine, which is located in Orange

County. The proliferation of transnational corporations means a major transformation in the nature and role of the contemporary research university. Rather than owing primary allegiance to state funding agencies, such as, in the United States, the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, or the National Endowment for the Humanities, university researchers are now often working for transnational pharmaceutical companies, computer companies, or other high technology enterprises. This change is even happening in the humanities. My university has a new professorship of Korean studies funded by the Samsung Corporation. It would be hard to exaggerate the change in the United States university being brought about by the shift in funding from government agencies to transnational corporations.

The proliferation of transnational corporations is one major feature of the decline of the nation state, about which we hear so much. Bill Gates, the head of Microsoft, may have more actual power to determine what happens, on a global scale, than Bill Clinton, even though the latter is the President of the United States. New transnational trade organizations, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement or the European Union or APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), characterize this new transnational globalization of economies. The fierce resistance to this form of globalization, in my country in the form of trade sanctions and counterproductive new immigration restrictions, not to speak of the unconstitutional provisions of the Communications Decency Act, indicates the anxiety produced by the new permeability and fragility of national boundaries. Nevertheless, that increasing vanishing of frontiers is an irresistible feature of our current situation.

The end of the Cold War brought a severe recession to California in the early 1990s, as defense industries were radically cut reduced state support for the nine campus University of California: from over two billion dollars down to one billion six hundred million, a twenty per cent reduction. The reduction was publicly justified by state revenue losses. The real reason was probably that with the Cold War over United States society no longer needs the university for the old reasons, that is, for military research and to be better than the Soviet Union in everything, including the humanities. Our National Endowment for the Humanities, the budget for which has now been substantially reduced, was originally founded with the specific intention to be better than the Soviets in that area too. We were told on all sides in the early 1990s that state support for the University of California would never again rise to the generous levels of the 1980s. Severe cutbacks in staff and programs were made. About two thousand professors were enticed into early retirement by the offer of a generous "golden handshake." Now, just five or six years later, state funding is back to the old

level. It took those in charge of the university only about five years to figure out a new mission for it. This change is strikingly clear in recent statements by Pete Wilson, Governor of California, and Richard C. Atkinson, University of California president. In presenting his proposals for the California 1996-7 budget, Wilson said, "California universities and colleges have long been revered as the finest institutions in the world. Like the pioneers, entrepreneurs, and innovators who made California a land where any dream is possible, our institutions of higher learning are carrying on that tradition by preparing our students to compete and win in the global marketplace." Atkinson echoed Wilson almost word for word: "I applaud the governor's recognition of the important role higher education plays in preparing a skilled workforce for competition in the global marketplace and the important role UC plays in a healthy California economy."² What, one might ask, will be the role of literary study in this new technological and instrumental university? This new economically-oriented research university is radically different from the old Humboldtian research university, modelled on the University of Berlin. The latter was founded in the early nineteenth century. The Humboldtian research university was devoted to a combination of *Bildung*, or training in national values, and *Wissenschaft*, or the search for knowledge in all fields for its own sake, the attempt to find out the truth about everything.³

The third form of globalization is perhaps the most far-reaching in its transformative effects. I mean the rapid development of new communications technologies. These have been changing the texture of daily life by putting the close in touch with the far ever since the invention of the telegraph and telephone in the nineteenth century. The new developments have accelerated these changes geometrically. Everyone knows what those are: first cinema, then radio, then television, then records, tapes, VCR's, CD-Roms, computers, facsimile machines, and now e-mail, the Internet, and the World Wide Web. These are bringing about, as many analysts have argued, a major paradigm shift in human life on the globe, a shift from the age of the book to the electronic age.⁴ These new devices put anyone who has them in more or less instantaneous communication with other people anywhere in the world, thereby contributing with a vengeance to globalization in all its aspects. The World Wide Web is the most radical and transformative innovation. It puts anyone with a connection to it in possession of an enormous incoherent multimedia database. Music, advertising, "chatrooms" of all kinds where people can exchange views online, weather information, the latest photographs from the Hubble Space Telescope, stock market quotations, computer games, endlessly proliferating web sites on every conceivable topic jostle side by side

by with an increasing number of books on line and digitized artworks. These come from all over the world to my computer screen, where they are equally near (and far). A Vermeer website, for example, allows me to download facsimiles of any or all of Vermeer's paintings and to use them, if I like, as screen-savers. Another website, in Danish, contains a wonderful assembly of wallpaintings from medieval Danish churches. I discovered the other day a Henry James website that has a constantly increasing number of James's works on line, including *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*. Programs with strange names, called "Worms," "Spiders," and "WWW Search Engines," such as "Yahoo," "Lycos," and "WebCrawler," have been developed to help the "browser" find things in this immense and exponentially proliferating disorder. The people who have created and who use the World Wide Web are, many of them at least, an irreverent and witty lot. They are inhabited by a new sense of democracy and freedom. They are immensely creative in ways that are truly inaugural. They are gifted in creating new and constantly shifting forms of assembly in cyberspace.

I want to stress three important effects, among many others, of these concomitant forms of globalization. One is the way they work to bring about a decline in the integrity and power of the nation state, the dominant form of political and social organization since the eighteenth century. The second effect of globalization I want to stress is the way it is leading to many new forms of constructive and potentially powerful social organization, new kinds of communities. These include research and university communities. An example is the sense of lively and often contentious solidarity among those who interact with one or another website or chatgroup, those, for example, devoted to a theorist like Derrida, or to canonical writers like Shakespeare, Henry James, or Proust, or to special interest groups like feminists or those in minority studies.

The new forms of transnational organization by way of the Web are going beyond that, however, to new forms of political groupings. A recent essay by Jon Katz in *Wired*, one of the most important journals about these changes, describes and celebrates what is going on, in the United States at least, as not only "the slow death of the current political system" but also "the rise of postpolitics and the birth of the Digital Nation." Surfing the Net during the recent presidential election, Katz claims that he "saw the primordial stirrings of a new kind of nation—the Digital nation—and the formation of a new postpolitical philosophy. This nascent ideology," he continues, "fuzzy and difficult to define, suggests a blend of some of the best values rescued from the tired old dogmas – the humanism of liberalism, the economic opportunity of conservatism, plus a strong sense of personal responsibility and a passion for

freedom." Whether this new postpolitical community will come to anything remains to be seen. I think Katz is right, however, to say that a new form of dynamic change or even a disquieting fluidity characterizes interaction on the Web. "Ideas," says Katz, "almost never remain static on the Web. They are launched like children into the world, where they are altered by the many different environments they pass through, almost never coming home in the same form in which they left." Katz is hopeful that these postpolitical communities can lead to a better world, if those belonging to them choose to use their power in the right way. "The ascending young citizens of the Digital nation can, if they wish," he says, "construct a more civil society, a new politics based on rationalism, shared information, the pursuit of truth, and new kinds of community."⁵ We shall see about that. It might go the other way. It all depends on many unpredictable factors. Certainly tremendous efforts of various sorts are now being made in the United States both to control or censor the Web and, with conspicuous success, to commercialize it.

The third effect of globalization I want to discuss is even more problematic and also closer to accounting for the radical changes in literary study and humanistic study generally that are currently occurring, at least in the United States. Walter Benjamin long ago argued that new technologies, new modes of production and consumption, all the changes made by nineteenth-century industrialization, had already created a radically new human sensibility and therefore a new way of living in the world. "As the entire way of being changes for human collectives over large historical periods so also change their modes of sensual perception (*die Art und Weise ihrer Sinneswahrnehmung*)."⁶ All the changes brought about by industrialization, the rise of great cities, and the development of new communications technologies like photography and cinema produced, according to Benjamin, a new way of being human, the nervous, solitary Baudelairean man of the crowd, hungry for immediate experience while at the same time obsessed with the sense of a faraway unattainable horizon that undermines every immediacy. Benjamin's most often cited essay on this topic is "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility)."⁷ One would do well to be sceptical about such claims for a mutation in sensory experience. These claims are associated, in Benjamin's formulations, with the rise of new collectivities. We still have the same five senses that our ancestors had. Evolutionary mutations usually take thousands and thousands of years, not a mere two centuries. Nevertheless, the human sensory, emotional, and cognitive apparatus is unusually flexible among those possessed by different life forms. It may be that a man or woman today sitting

before a computer screen or watching a film on a VCR or watching television has a radically different sense of being in the world from that once possessed by the inhabitant of an eighteenth-century village. Reading works of literature from the past is one way to find out about that. This is one strong defense of reading literature. The evidence, I must say, is ambiguous. Shakespeare's people, or even Chaucer's, seem in many ways more like us than radically different, in spite of the fact that they had no television. Nevertheless, the differences are important too. They need to be studied carefully in order to be identified accurately.

Jacques Derrida, in an eloquent passage in a recent seminar, stresses the strange combination of solitude and a new kind of being with others of the person using a computer to reach the World Wide Web, as well as the breakdown of traditional boundaries between inside and outside brought about by new communication technologies. As this epochal cultural displacement from the book age to the hypertext age has accelerated we have, in Derrida's view, been ushered ever more rapidly into a threatening living space. This new electronic space, the space of television, cinema, telephone, videos, fax, e-mail, hypertext, and Internet, has profoundly altered the economies of the self, the home, the workplace, the university, and the nation-state's politics. These were traditionally ordered around the firm boundaries of an inside-outside dichotomy, whether those boundaries were the walls between the home's privacy and all the world outside or the borders between the nation-state and its neighbors. The new technologies invade the home and confound all these inside/outside divisions. On the one hand, no one is so alone as when watching television, talking on the telephone, or sitting before a computer screen reading e-mail or searching an Internet database. On the other hand, that private space has been invaded and permeated by a vast simultaneous crowd of verbal, aural, and visual images existing in cyberspace's simulacrum of presence. Those images cross national and ethnic boundaries. They come from all over the world with a spurious immediacy that makes them all seem equally close and equally distant. The global village is not out there, but in here, or a clear distinction between inside and out no longer operates. The new technologies bring the *unheimlich* "other" into the privacy of the home. They are a frightening threat to traditional ideas of the self as unified as and properly living rooted in one dear particular culture-bound place, participating in a single national culture, firmly protected from any alien otherness. They are threatening also to our assumption that political action is based in a single topographical location, a given nation-state with its firm boundaries, its ethnic and cultural unity.

The decline of the nation state, the development of new electronic communities, communities in cyberspace, and the possible generation of a new human sensibility leading to a mutation of perceptual experience making new cyberspace persons – these are three effects of globalization. What is happening to literary study as a result of these changes? Can we still study literature today? Ought we or must we study it? Why? What purpose does literary study serve in the new globalized world? I want to make four points that will sketch out an answer to these questions or at least circle around them.

The first thing to say is that, however we might wish it were not the case, the sad fact is that literature in the old-fashioned sense is playing a smaller and smaller role worldwide in the new globalized cultures. This fact is particularly distressing to me, since I have already spent fifty years in the study of literature and plan to go on studying it. It is painful to have a lifelong vocation for something that has diminishing importance. Nevertheless, the facts must be faced. If someone is watching television, or a movie on VCR, or surfing on the Internet, he or she cannot at the same time be reading Shakespeare or Emily Dickinson, though some schoolchildren and even some university students claim to be able to do both at once. All the statistics show that more and more people are spending more and more time watching television and cinema. Now there has been a rapid shift even from those to the computer screen. The cultural function once served, for example in nineteenth-century England, by novels is now being served by movies, by popular music, and by computer games. There may be nothing intrinsically wrong with this, unless you happen to have, as I do, a big investment in the old printed book culture. Though many works of literature are available on line, ready to be downloaded into anyone's computer, I believe relatively few people are using that wonderful new resource. Certainly the new "digital young" Jon Katz describes are not using the Internet to get access to Shakespeare. One strong point made by Katz about the citizens or "netizens" of the new Digital Nation is their commitment to popular culture and their disdain for those who still live outside it and want to lecture them about the shallowness of popular music, cinema, etc. "The digital young," says Katz, ". . . share a passion for popular culture – perhaps their most common shared value, and the one most misperceived and mishandled by politicians and journalists. On Monday mornings when they saunter into work, they are much more likely to be talking about the movies they saw over the weekend than about Washington's issue of the week (or, I might add, about what a wonderful poem Milton's *Paradise Lost* is). Music, movies, magazines, some television shows, and some books are elementally important to them – not merely forms of entertainment but means

of identity" (op. cit., 184). Poems and novels used to be means of identity. Now it is the latest rap group. "As much as anything else," Katz continues, "the reflexive contempt for popular culture shared by so many elders of journalism and politics has alienated this group, causing its members to view the world in two basic categories: those who get it, and those who don't. For much of their lives these young people have been branded as ignorant, their culture malignant. The political leaders and pundits (one might add: the educators) who malign them haven't begun to grasp how destructive these perpetual assaults have been, how huge a cultural gap they've created" (ibid.). The colophon page of *Wired* not only lists the "Zines (that is, magazines) of Choice," but also "Music that helped get this magazine out." The April 1997 issue of the latter lists, among others, Matthew Sweet, *100% Fun*; Arvo Pärt, *De Profundis Clamavi, Psalm 130*; Melvins, *Interstellar Overdrive*; Steven Jesse Bernstein, *Prison*; *Miami Vice*; Mari Boine, *Radiant Warmth*. What does this have to do with globalization? This popular culture is disseminated all over the world as films, tapes, CDs, radio broadcasts, and now through the Internet as the latter becomes more and more a multimedia operation. This media culture has immense power to drown out the quiet voice of the fading book culture and also to drown out the specificities of local cultures everywhere, just as everyone everywhere now is coming to wear blue jeans and to carry a transistor radio or a portable tape or CD player.

A second effect of globalization on literary study is the transformation being wrought in it by the new electronic devices. Though few members of the new "Digital Nation" may make use of the computer and the World Wide Web for literary studies, the work of those who do continue such studies is being markedly changed by the new devices. Composition on the computer differs greatly from composition in longhand or on the typewriter. The possibilities for easy revision make a text in literary study seem never quite finished or able to be finished. It can so easily be expanded, rearranged, cut, given further footnote annotation, and so on. Moreover, it is already possible to produce hypertext versions of works in literary study, essays that contain pictures, film clips, audio clips, and buttons that when clicked on will transport the reader to other texts, graphics, video, or sounds. The peculiarity of such essays is that they can only be read on the computer. A proliferation of online journals is transforming the conditions of publication and dissemination in literary studies. I have already spoken of the way rapid transportation can make an individual scholar part of a transnational research group, not just a professor working locally in his or her own university. New communications media make those new communities even more active. Moreover, amazing research resources are

being made available online, for example the exponentially increasing number of digitized literary texts, or such resources as the Rossetti archive being assembled at the University of Virginia. They will allow anyone who can reach the web access to all of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's paintings, drawings, and writings in all their versions, with a large collection of ancillary scholarly materials. Another example is the ARTFL French database, available through a University of Chicago Website: <http://humanities.uchicago.edu/ARTFL/ARTFL.html>. This database allows its user to search an enormous collection of major philosophical and literary works in French, from Montaigne and Descartes to Proust. All the places where Diderot, for example, uses certain words in close proximity may be called in a minute to the researcher's computer screen. What you do with such data is up to you, but these resources give the researcher an improvised memory far more powerful than the inert rows of books on the library shelf.

I have written elsewhere of the way all these changes fundamentally alter the way literary works of the past exist for the student or critic.⁸ In the example I used, Anthony Trollope's *Ayala's Angel* in its digitized online form, brought down out of cyberspace in plain ASCII form from the Oxford Text Archive (<http://black.ox.ac.uk/TEI/ota.html>), is detached from all the historical context that used to be brought with the material form of the printed book. Now *Ayala's Angel* floats freely in cyberspace juxtaposed in a strange new simultaneity to all that unimaginable complexity of other incongruous things on the World Wide Web. This alteration in our sense of history is one of the most important effects on literary study of the new communications technologies.

The third effect of globalization on literary study is a concomitant of that decline of the nation state I mentioned earlier. Literary study used to be organized chiefly as the separate study of national literatures, for example, in my case, the study of English, that is, primarily British, literature, with a subordinant component of United States literature. Now such study is seen as a feature of imperialism. Each country, the United States for example, is seen as multicultural and multilingual, therefore falsified by the study of a single nation's literature, particularly when, as was the case with the institutionalization of English literature as a primary humanistic discipline in the United States, that literature was the literature of a foreign country, a country, moreover, that we had defeated over two hundred years ago in a war of independence. The older separate study of national literatures is coming to be displaced by new forms of multilingual comparative literature or by the study, for example, of world-wide literature in English. The latter will place Canadian,

Australian, New Zealand, African, and Asian Anglophone literatures side by side with British literature. The same thing is happening in with worldwide Francophone literature. Shakespeare will and should continue to be studied but in a radically new context and historical perspective. Nevertheless, the study of English language and literature in English should be the focus of this transformed discipline, with British literature still and always a major component. British literature has had a decisive influence even on those writers who want to contest its hegemony, for example on United States literature. You cannot understand the latter without knowing the former.

The fourth effect of globalization, in the United States at least, has been the rapid rise of so-called cultural studies. It was in reaction to the supposed dead end of formalist criticism in deconstruction, so the story goes, that in the mid-1980s, or even earlier, there was a swing back to extrinsic criticism, to a new desire to politicize and rehistoricize the study of literature, to make such study socially useful, to make it an instrument of the liberation and intellectual enfranchisement of women, minorities, and the once-colonized in a post-colonial, post-theoretical epoch. "Culture," "history," "context," and "media"; "gender," "class," and "race"; "the self" and "moral agency"; "multilingualism," "multiculturalism," and "globalization" have now become in different mixes watchwords of the new historicism, of neo-pragmatism, of cultural studies, of popular culture study, of film and media studies, of women's studies and gender studies, of gay studies, of studies of various "minority discourses," and of studies in "postcolonialism."⁹ The list is by no means homogeneous. What we call "cultural studies" today is a heterogeneous and somewhat amorphous space of diverse institutional practices. These practices can hardly be said to have a common methodology, goal, or institutional site. Every location in this space is fiercely contested, a good sign that something important is at stake. In spite of their diversity, however, all these new projects have an interest in the historical and social contexts of cultural artifacts. They tend to presume the context is explanatory or determining. The author is back in. His or her death was prematurely announced. The subject, subjectivity, the self is back in, along with personal agency, identity politics, responsibility, dialogue, intersubjectivity, and community. A new or renewed interest has developed in biography and autobiography, in popular literature, in film, television, advertising, in visual culture as opposed to linguistic culture, and in the nature and role of "minority discourses" within the hegemonic discourse.

For cultural studies, literature is no longer the privileged expression of culture, as it was, say, for Matthew Arnold, or for the United States university until recently. Literature is just one symptom or product of culture among

others, to be studied side by side not only with film, video, television, advertising, magazines, and so on, but also with the myriad habits of everyday life that ethnographers investigate in non-Western cultures or in our own culture. As Alan Liu observes, "literature" is "a category that has increasingly lost its distinction on the unbounded plane of cultural 'discourse,' 'textuality,' 'information,' 'phrase regimes,' and 'general literature.'" Cultural studies, as Liu puts it, "make literature seem just one of many equipollent registers of culture and multicultural--no more or less splendid, say, than the everyday practices of dressing, walking, cooking, or quilting."¹⁰

Though people in this new field tend to be defensive about the relation of cultural studies to the social sciences, it seems evident that as cultural studies become more and more dominant in the humanities, the humanities will approach closer and closer to a merger with the social sciences, especially with anthropology and sociology. Just as anthropologists have learned much from colleagues in the humanities, so training at the graduate level in protocols of anthropology and sociology would be helpful for those going into cultural studies, for example training in statistical analysis, in the relation between data and generalization, in the university's obligations when human subjects are used, in the need to learn by hook or by crook the languages necessary for the work undertaken, and so on. A traditional Eurocentric literary education is not much help for many of the projects of cultural studies.

The displacement of language-based theory by cultural studies is evident everywhere in humanities departments of Western universities. One place where it can be clearly seen is in the "Bernheimer Report" of the American Comparative Literature Association, "Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century" (1993).¹¹ This report proposes that a new discipline of comparative literature should replace both 1) the old-fashioned, Eurocentric, pre-1975 form of comparative literature that set canonical works from European and American national literatures side by side to "compare" them, and also 2) the theory-based and reading-based comparative literature of the 1970s and 1980s. For these should be substituted a form of cultural studies that will compare cultures by juxtaposing many kinds of artifacts and forms of behavior--works verbal, visual, and aural, as well as dress, habits of walking, and so on. Comparative literature will now study film, popular literature, popular music, advertising, et al., alongside examples of what has traditionally been thought of as "literature." The Bernheimer Report has accepted so completely the current project of cultural studies that it might be taken as an excellent description of that project, with a slight emphasis on the comparative aspect. Comparison, however, is always a part of cultural studies, even outside comparative

literature departments. Here is what the report says about "the space of comparison today":

"The space of comparison today involves comparisons between artistic productions usually studied by different disciplines; between various cultural constructions of those disciplines; between Western cultural traditions, both high and popular, and those of non-Western cultures; between the pre- and postcontact cultural productions of colonized peoples; between gender constructions defined as feminine and those defined as masculine, or between sexual orientations defined as straight and those defined as gay; between racial and ethnic modes of signifying; between hermeneutic articulations of meaning and materialist analyses of its modes of production and circulation; and much more. These ways of contextualizing literature in the expanded fields of discourse, culture, ideology, race, and gender are so different from the old models of literary study according to authors, nations, periods, and genres that the term "literature" may no longer adequately describe our object of study."¹²

"The term 'literature' may no longer adequately describe our object of study"! You can say that again. This explosion of the discipline of comparative literature, leaving it commissioned to study just about everything human, therefore nothing definite, parallels the similar explosion of English departments. By including everything listed here ("and much more"), the new comparative literature will marginalize literature, to say the least. It will compare everything that can be labelled "culture," in a self-enclosed circling, just as Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, was, in Carlyle's quaint spelling, a professor of *Allerley-Wissenschaft* at the University of Weissnichtwo.¹³

What is disappearing in the new comparative literature, as in many other forms of cultural studies, is the emphasis on reading that was so important a feature in theory of the 1970s and 1980s. In place of an exigent theoretical attention to reading is put an assumption of the "translatability," without significant loss, of cultural meanings from one language to another, one medium to another, one discipline to another. A strenuous rejection of translation was a keystone of the older comparative literature. This was the case even though the rejection of translation was to a considerable degree bogus. Comparative literature as a discipline has tended to express the linguistic imperialism of one or another single language: American English, for example, in the United States, or French in the case of the comparative literature of René Étiemble in Paris. The comparatist knows many languages, but can translate

them all into the dominant language he or she uses. This is the case, for example, with René Wellek's "monumental" history of modern criticism.¹⁴ The implicit claim is, "Trust me. I know all these languages and can translate texts from all into English for you. You can forget that they were originally written in German, Russian, Polish, Czech, or whatever. I have given the originals in a subordinate place in case you want to look them up, but problems of untranslatability have largely been circumvented by my own mastery of all these languages. I am the relay station within which all these other languages are turned into English."

For the new cultural studies form of "comparative literature," however, translation has a new meaning. It has to do not so much with finding equivalents in one language for expressions in another but rather with the carrying over of an entire other culture or discipline into one's own. About turning the other into the same I shall say more later. Here is what the Bernheimer report says about translation:

"While the necessity and unique benefits of a deep knowledge of foreign languages must continue to be stressed, the old hostilities toward translation should be mitigated. In fact, translation can well be seen as a paradigm for larger problems of understanding and interpretation across different discursive traditions. Comparative Literature, it could be said, aims to explain both what is lost and what is gained in translations between the distinct value systems of different cultures, media, disciplines, and institutions. Moreover, the comparatist should accept the responsibility of locating the particular place and time at which he or she studies these practices. Where do I speak from, and from what tradition(s), or countertraditions? How do I translate Europe or South America or Africa into a North American cultural reality, or, indeed, North America into another cultural context?" (44)

Just by being who and where we are, the Bernheimer report assumes, we translate all the time. Remembering vigilantly my own "subject position" will more or less handle whatever lingering problems of translation may remain.

Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism, the volume that contains the Bernheimer report and a series of essays in response to it, registers the agony, in the sense of death throes, of the traditional discipline of comparative literature as it melts into being just another form of cultural studies. I doubt if this process can or should be stopped. It constitutes a necessary moment of evolution in the United States university. It testifies to world-wide changes that prohibit a return to older forms of literary study. The

old Eurocentric comparative literature, like the traditional separate study of European national literatures, will continue for a time, overlapping with the new work in cultural studies and with the various regional studies disciplines into which cultural studies may and ought to evolve, but its death-knell is ringing. The Bernheimer report is an obituary only slightly premature. Nostalgia for the old privileged place of literature is expressed in some of the essays in the volume containing the Bernheimer report, those, for example, by Peter Brooks, Michael Riffaterre, and Jonathan Culler – all older white males, like me. Nostalgia, however, will in this case butter no parsnips.

In this new situation of literary studies, a situation, moreover, that is remarkably fluid and changing with dizzying rapidity, what defense can be made for literary study? I make in conclusion three claims for its indispensable value. First, whatever the situation may now be of a diminishing role for literature in the new global cultures, during the age of the book literature was a major way a culture expressed itself and constituted itself. Those who do not understand the past are condemned to repeat it. An absolutely indispensable means of understanding our pasts is the study of their literatures, not just a study of language as such. This even has a commercial or economic value. We citizens of California will not achieve that competitiveness in global economy for which Governor Wilson calls unless we learn not just the languages of our own country and of those countries with which we trade and compete but also their literatures. The study of literature gives an unparalleled ability to feel what it might have been like to live in Chaucer's time, in Shakespeare's time, or in Emily Dickinson's time, or what it might be like to live now within one or another East Asian culture, or within one of the minority cultures within one's own culture, that is, among others, Native American, Chicano, Asian American, or African American cultures in the United States.

Second reason for studying literature: for better or worse, language is and will remain one of our chief means of communication in solidarity or in dissensus. Literary study will remain an indispensable means of understanding the rhetorical, figurative, and storytelling possibilities of language as these language uses have shaped our lives.

Third and perhaps most important reason: the close study of literature, I mean the actual words on all those pages, is an indispensable means of access to a confrontation with what I call the strangeness or irreducible otherness of others, not only those belonging to different cultures but even those within one's own cultures. As opposed to the homogenizing implications of cultural studies, that tend to assume all cultures are variants of the same universal human culture, I propose the hypothesis that each work may be "other" to all

the rationalizing apparatus we have marshalled to make it the same, whether biographical, historical, or cultural, or technological. This is as true for the great works in the Western tradition, from Plato and Sophocles to Faulkner as it is for those more obviously exotic or alien works, such as writings in English by native Americans in the United States or by Maori in New Zealand or by recently enfranchised black citizens of South Africa, or such as francophone novels by North African Muslims. Putting Plato or Sophocles or Faulkner in the context of these, as the new curricula increasingly will do, is a way of showing how strange, how "other," these too are. This encounter with otherness will only occur through what used to be called "close reading," supported by most vigilant theoretical reflection. Many assert today that rhetorical reading is old-fashioned, reactionary, and no longer necessary or desirable. In the face of such assertions, I conclude with a stubborn, recalcitrant, and defiant plea for close reading in the original languages. Such reading is still essential to university study, even in the new globalized situation.

Notes:

¹This paper is a somewhat altered version of a lecture originally given at the Chinese University of Hong Kong as the Wit Lun Lecture. It will be published there, and is used here by permission.

²Press releases of January 3, 1996.

³See Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966) for a discussion of this and of other aspects of the changes I am describing. A few sentences and paragraphs of this essay are drawn in somewhat changed form from *Black Holes*, copyright Stanford University Press. That forthcoming book analyzes at greater length some of the issue discussed in this essay.

⁴Among books on this change are Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Knopf, 1995); Mark Poster, *The Second Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984); *ibid.*, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

⁵Jon Katz, "Birth of a Digital Nation," *Wired* (April 1997), 49, 50, 191. The essay is also available online at www.wired.com/5.04/netizen/. A more recent essay by Jon Katz modifies somewhat, on the basis of a Merrill Lynch Forum and *Wired* poll, some of his generalizations about the "digital young." See Katz, "The Digital Citizen," *Wired*, 5: 12 (December 1997), 68-82, 274-5. "[W]here I had described [the digital citizen] as deeply estranged from mainstream politics," says Katz, "the poll revealed that they are actually highly participatory and view our existing political system positively, even patriotically" (71).

⁶Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974-89), 1: 478.

⁷In Walter Benjamin, *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1955), 148-84; *ibid.*, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217-51.

⁸See "What Is the Future of the Print Record," *Profession 95* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1995). 33-5.

⁹A specific example is the addition in the 1995 edition of *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentriccia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995) of new entries for "Imperialism/Nationalism"; "Desire"; "Ethics"; "Diversity"; "Popular Culture"; and "Class." In the first edition of 1990 these were not yet "critical terms for literary study." Now they are important enough to warrant doing the book over. The tendency to guide thinking by appeal to a list of slogan words or "buzz words" is characteristic of these new developments. An example is the list of "terms for a new paradigm" Antony Easthope gives in *Literary into Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 129: "institution; sign system; ideology; gender; subject position; the other." Easthope goes on to say of this list of abstractions that "others could be easily added to them if required" (130). They do not form a closed system. They are just a list of what cultural studies happen to be interested in. Easthope, like others in cultural studies, is anxious not to close the door on the inclusion of further topics. "Culture" in

"cultural studies" becomes a term progressively emptied of meaning by coming more and more to include everything in human life. Another good example of this is the last paragraph of a letter to *The New York Times* of August 5, 1994, from Conrad Atkinson, a Professor of Art at the University of California at Davis. Defending the proposed Disney theme park five miles from the site of a major Civil War battle at Manassas, Virginia, on the ground that opposing it is the same kind of snobbism that attacked rock music and Elvis Presley, as well as on the ground that visual experience can be as sophisticated and subtle as experience of verbal meanings (with which I agree), Atkinson says: "Remember: You never know where culture is gonna come from; you never know what culture is gonna look like; you never know when or where you're gonna need culture; you never know what culture is gonna do, and you never know what culture is for" (*The New York Times*, Tuesday, August 16, 1994, A14). In this quite extraordinary statement, culture becomes a magic invisible elixir, an omnipotent cure-all, or, to put this another way, culture becomes a synonym in its ubiquity, power, and invisibility for ideology. Culture is everywhere, and it is by definition unknowable. Cultural studies must then be study of an object not open to study, since everything under the sun may possibly be culture. You can never know what it is, what it does, and what it is for. Or perhaps Atkinson means that you can never know beforehand what is going to turn out to be culture, so you should suspect everything of being culture and therefore study it. Anything in the world might be culture and therefore is worth study by cultural studies. This refusal by cultural studies to limit the definition of culture returns in the Bernheimer Report on "Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century," discussed below.

¹⁰Alan Liu, *The Future Literary: Literary History and Postmodern Culture*, unpublished MS, 2.

¹¹In *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

¹²*Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. cit., 42

¹³In Carlyle's translation: Professor of Things in General at the University of Don't Know Where.

¹⁴See René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950*, 8 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955-1992).