

# Parameters, positions, perspectives: on the future of literary studies

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## Prelude

That the study of literature has a promising future or, indeed that it has a future at all, is not something that everyone seems to assume. Hence the recent appearance of at least two publications with the interrogative title “Does Literary Studies have a Future?”. In practice, to be sure, such question marks often prove to be simply a prelude to some reaffirmation of the fact that literary studies is very important indeed for various reasons and that therefore it deserves to be pursued in the future. Thus Bruce Fleming, the author of “What is the Value of Literary Studies?”, to quote another recent title, answers his own question with a pious and inevitably self-serving account of how studying literature contributes to the quality of public discussions.<sup>1</sup> In many cases, then, the interrogative mode turns out to be more like a rhetorical ploy. Nevertheless, the current popularity of the question mark as the starting point of discussions on the future of literary studies does seem indicative of a certain lack of confidence as compared to some thirty years ago: at that time literary scholars were full of plans for the future, busy founding journals like *New Literary History* and *Poetics Today* and, in the Netherlands, founding chairs of Comparative Literature. At that time literary studies looked less like a discipline with an uncertain future needing to justify itself than like a model and source of inspiration for other disciplines who were in the process of going through the famous ‘linguistic turn.’<sup>2</sup>

A quarter of a century along the line, the future of literary studies *is* less certain and at first sight looks less rosy. For only an academic ostrich would deny but that literary studies has lost some of the impetus, authority, and visibility it enjoyed as a discipline in the seventies and eighties.<sup>3</sup> This reduction in prominence is partly a matter of shortcomings among literary scholars themselves who have not always been successful at making explicit their goals and procedures to others or in moving with the times. But it is also a result of major developments outside the discipline itself that have simply changed the academic and cultural framework in which literary studies is carried out. Partly as a result of the earlier success of literary studies in pointing out the role of symbolic processes in all forms of expression, the study of culture has itself been broadened. This has meant among other things the introduction of new courses of study such as *Algemene*

Cultuurwetenschappen, and it has meant that traditional programmes at Dutch Universities are often no longer identified by the term 'X-language and literature' (as in 'Franse taal en letterkunde') but by 'X-language and culture' (as in "Franse taal en cultuur"). But if at first sight the embrace of 'culture' in the nomenclature may seem threatening to 'literature,' in fact it is symptomatic of the opening up of exciting new avenues of research in literary studies and the possibility of new types of cooperation with those working in other disciplines. With this broadening of the field, of course, there inevitably also comes the challenge to renegotiate the place of literary studies as a distinct specialism within the broader field of the Humanities.

*Pace* a number of recent doomsayers, then, we have not entered into some sort of terminal crisis. Uncertainties, interdisciplinary exchanges, and partner-switching are a chronic part of literary studies (for some, the successes of the seventies and eighties also meant a crisis in traditional ways of looking at things). And in being chronically in a state of crisis and renegotiation, literary studies is perhaps no different from other disciplines in the Humanities (*Why History?*, *History in Crisis?*, *Deconstructing History*, are also recent titles<sup>4</sup>). It is arguable that it is precisely because the Humanities have no pre-given instrumental role that their value is constantly a matter of discussion in the light of changing circumstances. This is not just a matter of opportunism or fashion-consciousness, but the source of intellectual innovation. At least it can be such, as long as change is not mere promiscuity and as long as past gains are consolidated and not merely traded in for the promise of something different.

A note of clarification: in assessing recent trends in the pages which follow, I write from the perspective of literary studies as such (*literatuurwetenschap*) rather than from the perspective of any single philology. I do so from the conviction that it is necessary to conceive of literary studies as a distinct specialism within the Humanities: it is that scholarly endeavour which is directed towards a general understanding of the nature and role of the literary medium in human societies. Seen in these terms, the discipline includes both the historical study of the literary medium in particular societies and the attempt within the framework of the specialist variant called 'comparative literature' (*algemene literatuurwetenschap*) to coordinate the findings of the individual philologies so as to formulate more generally valid theories.<sup>5</sup> Although emphases necessarily vary, all literary research (whether or not it is focussed on a single language area and/or on a particular period) is ideally informed by theoretical reflection and aims to contribute, however indirectly, to our general theoretical understanding of literary phenomena. In turn, theoretical reflection is constantly to be tried and tested in relation

to specific instances of the literary. These are obvious methodological principles perhaps, but they bear repeating in face of the tendency of those discussing the development of literary studies to divorce 'theory' from research into historically and nationally specific forms of literature.

### Parameters

In assessing the current prospects for literary studies, we need to look at the parameters within which literary research takes place, paying attention to (1) changes within the culture at large, and (2) infra-structural developments specifically affecting the organization of research in the Netherlands.

#### (1) *Cultural changes*

Traditionally, the discipline of literary studies has based its *raison d'être* on the importance of literature itself. Crudely put: given the symbolic importance of literature in general (and certain writers in particular), it follows that whatever is said about literature or about those writers must be important too. There is a certain measure of truth in this argument (which is basically the one put forward by Bruce Fleming in the article referred to above) if only because examining culturally important phenomena must somehow contribute to our attempts to understand the workings of culture. But it is rather weak as a basis for an academic discipline since it supposes a passive, and hence theoretically questionable, relation between object and study. Moreover, the argument becomes especially weak in face of the changing role and status of literature within the culture at large.

In a recent survey, Antoine Compagnon has argued with respect to France that there has been a sharp reduction in the variety of works being published and reprinted and in the number of books being read. He predicts the demise of 'literature' as a common frame of reference and as *the* forum for the elaboration of common values. Figures for the Netherlands also suggest that reading for pleasure has declined in the last fifty years in face of competition from other leisure activities and from the television.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the precise situations in the various countries may be (and the figures partly depend on what counts as 'reading' or as 'literature') one thing is clear: even if literary works continue to be read in great numbers (and the phenomenal success of the Harry Potter books seems to suggest that they are) and even if the last decade has seen the international fashion for women's reading groups, literature has now to share its cultural space, if not yet its symbolic prestige, with alternative forms of entertainment in other media (film, television, computer). The result is that although there is still a Nobel prize for literature and not for film, literature no longer occupies the preeminent role

it still occupied in the nineteenth century when literary studies first took institutionalized form. Moreover, it has become apparent that modern literary culture is itself inextricably bound up with the visual culture and with the new technological possibilities offered by the internet.

That other media also play a role in the culture at large is not in itself new, but the scale and power of the new media are such that they have spawned the need for systematic study within the academy. Inevitably the emergence of the new field of media studies provides more traditional disciplines (literary studies, art history) with fresh institutional competition when it comes to attracting students and new academic talent.

Literary scholars may not with impunity turn their backs on these cultural changes since to ignore them would be to risk future marginality and parochialism. This means that literary scholars, whether they like it or not, are forced to reconsider seriously the frontiers of their field and their place within the Humanities at large. Symptomatic in this regard is the fact that recent issues of *New Literary History* and recent meetings of the MLA (Modern Languages Association) have tended to include the analysis of film as a natural extension of their research into verbal artefacts on the grounds presumably that the poetics of film is comparable to that of more traditional literary forms and fulfils comparable functions.

Accepting the fact that literature needs to be studied alongside other media and in relation to them, and that verbal and visual forms of expression are often interlinked, represents a positive development which opens the way to interesting new fields of research. But enthusiasm for other forms of expression may also have a downside if it turns out to be a recipe for abandoning the study of literature altogether in favour of an exclusive focus on contemporary, popular visual culture under the aegis of Anglo-American style 'Cultural Studies.' The danger of neglecting the literary medium is all the greater since some people seem to confuse the desire to be 'relevant' with the necessity of restricting one's field of study to the contemporary, media-dominated scene.

But recognizing the changing cultural parameters in which literary scholars operate does not have to mean that we are necessarily condemned to abandon literature in favour of the visual media, however important it is that these be studied too. For it does not follow from the changing status of literature at the present time that literature in general or the literature of other periods has become irrelevant. To begin with, textual forms of expression still remain culturally significant and, as such, deserve to be studied. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, the literature of the past provides an enormous body of evidence

for understanding long-term cultural processes and hence for understanding the specificity of what is taking place now. Indeed, studying the past and specifically the literary past (as the greatest reservoir of cultural memory) has arguably become all the more important in the light of rapid cultural change.

## 2. infrastructural changes

The setting up of 'research schools' (*onderzoekscholen*) in the Netherlands in the last decade has had a positive influence on research in the Humanities by providing a forum for intellectual debate and a framework within which graduate students can be given additional specialist training. Given the brevity of graduate training here which inevitably restricts the development of graduate seminars at PhD level (4 years is the official duration of PhD study), the current situation is still a long way from the extensive training offered in North American graduate schools (where 5-6 years is the norm). But the research schools certainly represent an improvement with regard to the isolated position of junior researchers a decade ago, and have provided new possibilities for intellectual exchange within the inevitably 'small world' of Dutch scholarship.

Literary research takes place within the framework of the OSL, the Huizinga Instituut voor Cultuurgeschiedenis, the Onderzoekschool voor Vrouwenstudies, the Onderzoekschool for Mediëvistiek; Oikos. Local faculties also provide various institutional frameworks for literary studies, often within some interdisciplinary grouping of researchers (the Onderzoeksinstituut voor Geschiedenis en Cultuur in Utrecht, the 'onderzoekswaartepunten' at the Vrije Universiteit, the Rudolf Agricola Instituut in Groningen, the Instituut voor Cultuurgeschiedenis and the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis [ASCA] at the Universiteit van Amsterdam, and so on). As the names of the national research schools indicate, only the OSL (Onderzoekschool voor Literatuurwetenschap) is primarily concerned with literary issues (even then, the name is to a certain extent deceptive since, reflecting some of the changes mentioned above, it also involves in a limited way researchers whose focus is on the new media and the performing arts). Within the other research schools, the study of literature is usually part of a more general programme focussed on a thematic issue, on the culture of a particular period or, as in the case of the Huizinga Instituut, focussed more generally on cultural history in the period 1500-1800.

There is no doubt that these interdisciplinary frameworks are enriching for literary research since, as was suggested above, it has become clear that the most productive framework for literary studies is the culture-at-large rather than some narrowly defined, 'autonomous' field of literature which has been extracted

from its cultural context. But all carving up of research fields is ultimately rather arbitrary and in practice, as is well known, affiliation with one school rather than another seems often to have been decided en bloc for particular faculties rather than left to the affinities of individual researchers (thus no researchers from the universities of Amsterdam and Groningen are members of OSL). In any event, the way in which the cultural field has been divided up among the research schools has meant the creation of all sorts of new divisions along temporal, thematic, and methodological lines which are not immediately apparent from the names of the schools or institutes in question. Thus the OSL concentrates on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (with an emphasis on the latter); literary research in the Huizinga institute takes care of the earlier periods as far back as the Middle Ages where, like members of an intellectual relay team, other research schools take over. These sorts of divisions make sense in light of the legitimate desire to concentrate in a more holistic, interdisciplinary, and international way on certain periods than was possible within the traditional framework of national philologies. But the end result is a certain fragmentation of the field of literary studies as such with an absence of dialogue between those concerned with specific issues (for example, gender, postcolonial cultures) and those working on literary phenomena in different periods. What this in effect means is that within the Netherlands specialists in the literature of the earlier periods have increasingly lost contact with specialists of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. This can only be considered a loss for both parties in the long term. Similarly, there has been a tendency for theoretical reflection to end up being divorced from much of the practice of literary history and restricted to reflections on contemporary culture. Clearly, more intensive cooperation between the research schools is called for if literary scholars are to develop the same level of corporate visibility and organisational strength as linguists.

Arguably, by now the only common forum for literary research in the Netherlands is the VAL (Vereniging voor Algemene Literatuurwetenschap), though given the proliferation of research frameworks in the last decades, this organisation has generally been condemned to a marginal existence. Nor is there a common professional journal for all those working in literary studies: in 1995 *Forum der Letteren* went out of existence in face of the increasing discomfort of the linguistic-literature combination which had seemed so obvious in the 1960s when the journal was started; it was succeeded by *TvL: Tijdschrift voor literatuurwetenschap* which, despite its very promising beginnings in 1996, went out of existence in 1998 having failed to be commercially viable (it was in turn replaced by a *Jaarboek voor literatuurwetenschap*, the first number of which appeared in 2001).

To a certain extent, of course, this fragmentation within the discipline is not specific to the Netherlands, but the result of the specialisation and the inevitable regroupings of disciplinary forces which regularly occur in the Academy as the natural byproducts of scholarly innovation. In the particular case of literary studies, the fragmentation can be seen as a result of 'exogamous' preferences on the part of literary scholars who in recent years have perhaps been busier exploring new relations with other disciplines (cultural history, sociology, psychology, art history) in interdisciplinary frameworks such as 'women's studies,' 'European studies,' 'Renaissance studies,' than in forms of cooperation with their 'own kind.' Exciting as all of this may be, it is not without its dangers for the viability of literary studies as such in the long term – and, one may add, for the interdisciplinary enterprise itself. After all, inter-disciplinarity is ideally a multilateral affair and depends on the vitality of the individual disciplines, which ensures that scholars can bring a specific expertise and focus to collective discussions.<sup>7</sup> The tendency for literary studies to lose its disciplinary profile is not merely worrying, therefore, because it puts traditional loyalties under pressure (after all, disciplines are historical formations which may change and dissolve for good reasons). The problem is one of content: the general study of culture risks losing a distinct type of expertise relating to poetics in general and the production and reception of verbal artefacts in particular.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the emphasis on programmatic research in the current funding policies of NWO has provided new challenges for literary scholars. Like many of their fellows in the Humanities, literary scholars have traditionally been soloists and conceived their research in terms of rather exclusive personal projects. They are now being forced to change their approach to research and some shifts in strategy have occurred. But going by the limited number of successful applications for funding, adapting to the new research climate is proving difficult. Whether it is more difficult for literary scholars than for anyone else is a moot point (linguists seem to have managed the transition quite well). But for better or worse, the challenge for literary scholars remains, as do the institutional implications of failing to meet it.

### Positions

Before sketching a disciplinary profile anno 2001, something needs to be said regarding theoretical developments in the past decades. Under the influence of structuralism, the theory which blossomed in the 1960s was above all related to poetics (hence the titles of such journals as *Poétique*, *Poetics*, *Poetics Today*). In practice, then, the principal concern was with the structure of texts and the na-

ture of communication, the principal partner was linguistics (hence the cooperation which formed the basis of *Forum der Letteren*), and the dominant theoretical framework that of semiotics (concerned as De Saussure had put it, with the 'life of signs in society'). 'Reception aesthetics,' even as it represented a new departure direction reader-research, can be seen with hindsight as a child of its time in that it too was still largely text-oriented and hence a form of poetics.

Since the 1960s, many of the insights of structuralist poetics have become integrated into the various national philologies. The study of narrative in particular still borrows heavily from structuralist narratology even as the underlying aims of structuralism, and what now appears as its interpretative naivety, have been challenged. It was precisely these insights into poetics and the critique of representation accompanying them which proved to be of interest and value in other disciplines such as historiography and anthropology.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, they can be said to have facilitated the extension of the field of 'culture' as an object of study, by drawing attention to the symbolic processes involved in a whole range of forms of representation. As such structuralist poetics and semiotics contributed to the blossoming of cultural history within the discipline of history and to the emergence of Cultural Studies as a new field of research focussed on contemporary, popular culture.<sup>9</sup>

Since the early eighties and especially within the increasingly preponderant Anglo-American tradition, post-structuralist philosophy in one form or another (or postmodernism as it is sometimes called) with its emphasis on heterogeneity and marginality and its radicalization of the semiological critique of representation has been immensely influential across the Humanities. Within the field of literary studies, it has also fed into a number of new departures based on the deconstructive 'reading' of texts from a particular thematic perspective: new historicism, postcolonialism, gender studies and queer theory (to this list might also be added 'cultural analysis' as practised in ASCA, though this is distinguished less by its particular thematics than its application of post-structuralist semiotics to the 'reading' of the visual arts).

The rapidity with which the often politically correct themes have succeeded each other, together with the tendency of some interpreters not to see beyond the interpretive framework which they repeatedly and predictably project onto the material they are dealing with, has revealed a disturbing tendency among literary scholars to converge on the intellectual flavours of the month rather than to work on long term projects. This 'follow-the-theoretical-consensus' behaviour has done little to enhance the reputation of literary scholars among the academic community at large, not to mention the general public who find little enlighten-



ment in the obscure, concept-laden and often self-referential language used by epigones.<sup>10</sup> These sort of excesses, however, should not blind us to the fact that post-structuralist philosophy has made an indelible mark on all those working in the field of literary studies (as in other fields of the Humanities) and that many of its basic principles and its critique of all forms of essentialism have now been taken on board by people working in different traditions. Within literary studies in particular, it has been extremely important in forcing literary scholars to rethink the practice of interpretation, the identity of texts, the 'authority' of writers, and the historicity of culture.

Public discussions in the Netherlands on the merits and demerits of post-structuralist 'Theory' as a model for literary studies have been much less charged than in Britain and the United States where socially committed 'close reading' has traditionally been dominant. Discussions among literary scholars in this country have also been marked by the dissenting presence of 'empirical literary studies' (ELS) a minor, if growing international movement with a strong basis in Germany, some of whose adherents are active in the OSL. Looking towards the social sciences for models, empirical literary studies is characterized on the one hand by its preference for quantitative and experimental methods and, on the other hand, by its interest in the psychological processes which take place in literary reading and the sociological factors which influence reading behaviour.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the very importance attached in ELS to questions of method (in some ways, a salutary new note in literary studies) has in effect meant restricting the field of study to those limited types of questions which can be addressed using statistics and experiments. Thus while ELS has led among other things to insights into literary socialization and the place of reading within the range of other leisure and cultural activities, the cost is necessarily a neglect of other sorts of issues (relating to textual analysis and poetics, for example, or to the evolution of literature) which cannot be treated with methods from the social sciences.<sup>12</sup>

In many ways, empirical literary studies is the mirror-image of deconstruction and post-structuralist cultural analysis: where the latter emphasizes the subjective or 'situated' dimension of all understanding, the former emphasizes the importance of developing intersubjective methods and collective research programmes; where the former performs readings of texts, the latter is shy of any form of textual interpretation. The very sharpness of this contrast between the two research traditions in the 1980's and 90s unfortunately led to a false dichotomy in Dutch polemics between empiricism (identified with quantitative methods) and interpretation (identified with deconstruction and the freedom enjoyed by interpreters) which has seriously hindered productive cooperation between those following different approaches.

Against the background of the methodological innovations and polemics mentioned above, a significant ‘historical turn’ in literary studies has become apparent. This interest in the historical dimensions of literature has produced some of the most substantial and innovative work of recent years. By the ‘historical dimension of literature’ is understood here the perceived necessity of studying literary phenomena in relation to the historical context in which they occur either as fresh products or as objects of appropriation at a later point in time (literary texts are among other things characterised by their capacity *as* texts to be re-used ‘out of context’ at later moments). This interest in the historical or contextualised dimensions of literature can in part be seen as a reaction to the universalist ahistoricism of structuralism and to the hodiecentrism of much deconstruction, and it represents the convergence of the postmodernist concern with ‘situatedness’ and diversity, and the old style historicist pursuit of literary history (a pursuit of biographical and textual information, it should be noted, which has been going on all the time in the margins of the theoretical developments sketched above). This renewed interest in the historical contexts of literature includes the movement known as New Historicism (in which literary texts are considered within particular periods as transformations of other social discourses).<sup>13</sup> But it is also a much broader phenomenon which extends to the study of the role of literature in colonial and postcolonial societies, an extremely important field of research in recent decades.<sup>14</sup> It also extends to new forms of literary history focussed, not just on texts as such, but also on the way those texts are produced, circulated, read, and valued; in short, on the workings of the literary medium in particular societies (the field of book history and publishing among others has been particularly productive).<sup>15</sup>

In some cases, the renewed interest in literary history is arguably fed by a desire to retreat from theoretical complexities to the relatively safe-haven of ‘straightforward’ fact-gathering in which analysis plays a subordinate role. But by and large recent literary history (like other fields of history) has been informed by a constructivist epistemology which understands historical knowledge as a product of a dialogue between past and present in which texts of all sorts function as evidence. In the light of this theoretically-informed and reflexive sort of history the division between ‘literary theory’ and ‘literary history’ (implied by the CGW in its initial invitation to write this piece) has ceased to be a fruitful one.<sup>16</sup> As a number of recent works have demonstrated, historical study is in principle a part of, and not an alternative to, theory formation. This realisation has opened up new possibilities for literary scholars to cooperate with historians trained in the historical disciplines.<sup>17</sup> In this interdisciplinary exchange, literary scholars may

have a particular contribution to make to current debates in theoretical history precisely because of their expertise regarding the problems involved in interpreting textual evidence and constructing cultural canons.

Are there any general tendencies which draw together the various theoretical movements of the last decades? One thing at least is clear. There has been a widening of the field of study, and this involves more than literary scholars becoming interested in the new media and the visual culture. Whereas it seemed natural three decades ago that the 'literary text' was the exclusive object of study, by now it has become generally accepted that 'literary' texts are just only one sort of text alongside others. Even more importantly, it has become apparent that texts are less like finished and immutable products, than the starting point for a series of reading acts; that they are hinges in a wide variety of social practices. In this respect, we could speak of a 'pragmatic' turn in literary studies, whereby attention is being increasingly paid to the social context within which literary phenomena occur and the literary medium functions: what do people do with texts and what do texts do for individuals and groups? In light of such questions, the study of isolated texts has become extended to include research into the ways in which actual readers – individuals and groups – deal with specific texts and how their understanding is controlled in the social realm by cultural and political institutions.<sup>18</sup> This interest in what has been called 'the literary culture' – or, to adapt De Saussure's phrase, in the 'life of texts in society' – has been manifested almost across the board: in introspective post-structuralist readings of particular texts; experimental studies of the psychology of reading; sociological studies of contemporary reading practices; historical studies of reading practices; historical and sociological studies of the organization of the literary culture (networks, institutions, agencies); historical studies of the relation between postcoloniality and literary culture.<sup>19</sup> All of this has meant an exciting expansion of the field of literary research and the possibility of connecting up the claims which have been made about the function of literature on the basis of close-reading with the various contexts in which texts actually function. More than thirty years ago, literary scholars nowadays are concerned with the ways in which literature is embedded in social practices alongside other media, and with the ways in which its aesthetic function is linked to other possible functions such as the elaboration of shared values, identity-formation, and the construction of cultural memory.

### Prospects

Whither literary studies? How to consolidate the undoubted gains of the last decades while staking out a distinct place for studies of 'the literary' within the

broader framework of a general study of culture? Future developments within the discipline are naturally dependent both on its current configuration and on the willingness of scholars to take new initiatives and seek out new interdisciplinary partners. But speculation on the future inevitably veers towards laying down some mental tracks directing those developments. What follows then in conclusion is less an account of what in all likelihood will spontaneously occur than a vision of the goals I would like to see us explicitly working towards:

1. Literary studies is conceived as a subset of 'cultural studies,' a term which I deliberately use here without the capitalization of Anglo-American Cultural Studies. Whereas the latter is defined by its focus on contemporary popular culture, especially visual culture, the cultural studies envisaged here is much broader in scope and has a historical dimension. Considering literature as part of a range of cultural practices, rather than as something autonomous, allows us to ask different questions regarding its role (including the role of some works as the highly-valued focus of interpretation). Going back to the situation where literary scholars only talked to each other – and only about highly valued 'great works' whose 'greatness' justified any commentary on them – is an option not to be countenanced.
2. Studying literature within the framework of culture involves comparison with other forms of representation (including painting and the plastic arts; performing arts, film and television, internet). Within this framework, literary scholars and those concerned with the other media talk to each other about such issues of common concern as 'narrativity,' 'representation,' 'esthetic value,' 'persuasiveness,' 'identity formation,' 'cultural canons,' 'intercultural transfer,' 'cultural memory,' and so on. They work towards developing research programmes around common questions and they work towards comparing their results. But within all of this, the study of the production and reception of texts remains the central task – the core business – of literary scholars. This specialisation is not simply a matter of parochial self-interest based on a fear that the discipline might otherwise dissolve in some great cultural soup. Rather it is based on the conviction that understanding how texts are made and how meaning is produced, what sorts of effects texts can have on people, and what sort of long-term changes can occur in what is written about and what is valued, is vital to the understanding of culture both past and present. This calls for a specialist knowledge of writing and reading conventions, of textuality, and of the workings of imagination through language.
3. As this emphasis on 'writing' implies, literary scholars do not restrict themselves to literature as this has traditionally been defined in terms of genre (fiction

of all sorts, poetry...) or in terms of quality (valuable texts, usually written in a particular genre). Traditionally literary studies focussed on (English, French, German, Greek) literature, conceived of as the canon of texts recognised by cultural authorities as having literary quality and as such meriting preservation, dissemination, and 'study.' For a variety of convergent reasons, including the cultural developments mentioned at the beginning of this piece but also theoretical reflection on the nature of literary value and the pervasiveness of literary models in representations of the world, focussing exclusively on the literary canon is no longer defensible. Too many other literary phenomena call for analysis: on the one hand, popular and 'second-rate' works in literary genres, and works with a cult status; on the other hand, the literary dimension of works written in non-literary genres (journalism, philosophy, history, memoirs and other sorts of ego-documents, letters). By 'literary dimension' I understand the way in which language and models from earlier texts are recycled in the making of new texts which give shape to thought and experience and which may please readers in such a way that they too acquire value as texts and hence cultural longevity. The matter of cultural value continues to be extremely important within this broader framework, then, but as an issue to be investigated alongside other issues (for example, the construction of cultural heritage) and not as something given.

4. Literary scholars focus on texts as meaning- producing and pleasure-producing artefacts which function as such within a social context. This means that attention is paid to the composition of particular texts – poetics and discourse analysis remain the core of literary studies – but also to the uses to which texts are put and the activities involved in their production and dissemination. In studying the latter, literary scholars will collectively call on a variety of forms of evidence, ranging from textual analysis, to the results of experiments on actual readers to different sorts of archival materials bearing on the literary culture under examination. The broadening of the sorts of issues being addressed and the methodological pluralism this implies mean that individual scholars can no longer 'go it alone.' Thus alongside methodological pluralism will come new skills in cooperating with other scholars both within the discipline and outside it, as they deal with different cultural periods or linguistic areas, different media, or with the material domains of culture.
5. In all of this, literary research breaks with its own past and becomes more oriented towards the formulation of interesting questions. Whereas most polemics in the past revolved around the object of study (Literature-with-capital-L or not) or questions of method ('interpretation of individual texts' or

something else), future literary research spends more energy on formulating interesting questions regarding literary activities and their relationship to other sorts of social practices (what is the influence of fictional representations in general, and literary ones in particular, on the elaboration of shared values? how do fictions provide models for interpreting public and private events? for guiding behaviour? and so on). It is the questions being asked and the desire to find answers to them, and not any a priori preference, which determine the relevance in any given instance of a 'national framework,<sup>20</sup> a particular method, a comparison with the visual culture, or the need to cooperate with specialists in other fields.

6. The fact of working within an inter-disciplinary framework will make literary scholars more aware of the specificity of their own academic mission and expertise. As importantly, it will make them more adept in explaining their goals and making explicit their procedures – to themselves and to others – a skill which will hopefully increase their chances of success in the competition for funding research.
7. Finally, literary scholars do not have to spend yet more time and energy on yet more reorganisation of the infra-structural parameters for research at faculty and national level. Given adequate funding and regular sabbaticals for the purpose of sustained research, they simply get on with the manifold and exciting tasks still awaiting them.

## Noten

- <sup>1</sup> Eugene Goodheart, *Does Literary Studies have a Future?* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1999). see also in the same vein: Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "The Future of Literary Studies?," *New Literary History* 26.3 (1995): 499-518; Bruce E. Fleming, "What is the Value of Literary Studies?," *New Literary History* 2 (2000): 459-76; David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
- <sup>2</sup> *New Literary History* was founded in 1969; *Poétique* in 1970; *Poetics* in 1971; *Critical Inquiry* in 1974; *Poetics Today* (initially entitled *PTL*) in 1976.
- <sup>3</sup> Antoine Compagnon has recently complained bitterly about the under-representation of literary scholarship in public discussions in France, pointing to the absence of literature as a theme in a series of 366 programmes on "l'ensemble des connaissances humaines" and to the fact that when literary scholars do manage to put in a public appearance they are usually presented as 'historians' or 'philosophers' – as if, Compagnon concludes, to be a literary scholar was to be untrustworthy; *Le débat* 110 (2000): 136-54. Gumbrecht (op.cit.), reflecting on the situation in the U.S.A. and Germany, also believes that literary scholars are having a public relations problem, but sees this as a matter of literary scholars continuously thinking they're being marginalised, whereas the public are in fact looking to them (in vain) for guidance. The idea of 'literary scholars' guiding the public fits awkwardly into the Dutch situation where the role of 'cultural critic' à la Matthew Arnold or of the 'intellectuel' à la Sartre has never been a prominent one.
- <sup>4</sup> Keith Jenkins, *Why History?* (London: Routledge, 1999); Alan Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997); Norman J. Wilson, *History in Crisis? Recent Directions in Historiography* (Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999).
- <sup>5</sup> The term 'comparative literature' is used here as a translation for 'algemene literatuurwetenschap,' a term which was recently replaced by ministerial decree by 'literatuurwetenschap' in the university courses of study. Although in the short term this poses problems for the recognisability of ALW as a discipline, the term 'literatuurwetenschap' does have the advantage of allowing us to conceive of a general (historically and theoretical informed) literary studies to which both ALW and the individual philologies belong as variants. When the national philologies and comparative literature are thus conceived as part of a common enterprise focussed on the study of literature (comparable as such to linguistics which is focussed on language) the distinction between 'literatuurwetenschap' and 'letterkunde' (sometimes used to indicate a 'softer' and less 'scientific' alternative) becomes redundant.

- <sup>6</sup> Compagnon, *op. cit.*; on figures for the Netherlands, see Wim Knulst and Gerbert Kraaykamp, "Trends in Leisure Reading: Forty Years of Research on Reading in the Netherlands," *Poetics* 26 (1998), 21-41; for trends in Germany, see Bodo Franzmann, ed., *Handbuch Lesen, im Auftrag der Stiftung Lesen und der Deutschen Literaturkonferenz* (Munich: Saur, 1999).
- <sup>7</sup> A strong disciplinary basis at the level of undergraduate teaching remains crucial since that is where future researchers get their primary training. In the Netherlands, fortunately, most undergraduate students of the national philologies are obliged to follow an introductory course (*Inleiding Algemene Literatuurwetenschap*) which gives a basic introduction to literary studies as a scholarly endeavour which is rooted in the individual language departments while also extending beyond it. Hopefully, those designing new BA and MA-programmes will strengthen the 'inter-departmental' perspective in the treatment of national literatures by conceiving supplementary courses in comparative literature and methods of literary study so that when students get to the level of specialization they both know the literature (and culture) of a particular language area and are theoretically and methodologically equipped as literary scholars to carry out work in whatever interdisciplinary framework seems appropriate to the questions they want to ask. Hopefully too, those designing programmes within the new study *Algemene Cultuurwetenschappen* will also maintain distinct disciplinary emphases within the broad framework they provide.
- <sup>8</sup> See à titre d'exemple with regard to historiography, Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in R.H. Canary and H. Kozicki, eds., *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 41-62; id. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Philippe Carrard, *Poetics of the New History: French Historical Discourse from Braudel to Chartier* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). With regard to anthropology, see for example, James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (University of California Press, 1986). For the range of discourses which became open to poetical analysis, see Christopher Nash, ed., *Narrative in Culture: The Uses of Storytelling in the Sciences, Philosophy, and Literature* (London: Routledge, 1990) and Frank Ankersmit, Marinus C. Doeser, Aron Kibédi Varga, *Op verhaal komen: over narrativiteit in de mens- en cultuurwetenschappen* (Kampen: Kok-Agora, 1990).
- <sup>9</sup> The journal *Representations* (1983-) reflects this broad interest in representation and has provided a forum for both literary scholars and historians. In the Netherlands, the highly successful journal *Feit & Fictie: Tijdschrift voor de*



*geschiedenis van de representatie* (1993-) reflects a similar trend. The introduction to *The New Cultural History*, ed., Lynn Hunt (University of California Press, 1989), is significantly entitled "History, Culture, and Text" (pp.1-22), a conjunction of terms which indicates the importance textual analysis has assumed for cultural historians. [Since this essay was originally written, 'Cultural Studies' has been introduced to Dutch academia in Ginette Verstraete and Jan Baetens, eds., *Cultural Studies: Een inleiding* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2002).]

- <sup>10</sup> In recent years, jargon-ridden literary analysis has been a frequent butt of sardonic commentary in the English-language media; see for example, the *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 December 2000 (p.14).
- <sup>11</sup> The keynote lectures at the large international ELS conference which took place in Utrecht in 1998 provide a good survey of the field; see S. Janssen en N. van Dijk, eds., *The Empirical Study of Literature and the Media: Current Approaches and Perspectives* (Rotterdam, Faculteit der Historische en Kunstwetenschappen, 1998). For empirical studies of literary socialization see *à titre d'exemple*, E. Andringa and D. Schram, eds., *Literatuur in functie: empirische literatuurwetenschap in didactisch perspectief* (Houten: Bohn Stafleu, 1990).
- <sup>12</sup> For a polarized view of 'interpretation' and 'empiricism,' see for example Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch, *Literatuurwetenschap & cultuuroverdracht* (Amsterdam: Coutinho, 1992). In a recent number of *Frame*, Frans-Willem Korsten provides (an equally polarized) critique of the empiricist position entitled "Sasotr(I)t," 14/2-3: .28-42. In the same issue, Margrit Schreier's contribution, "Methods and Methodology for the Empirical Study of Literature," seems to suggest a greater willingness on the part of 'empiricists' to address the issues involved in qualitative research and (to a lesser extent) textual interpretation; pp. 5-27.
- <sup>13</sup> On New Historicism, see for example, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000); a critical review of the movement is to be found in Jürgen Pieters, *Moments of Negotiation: The New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2001).
- <sup>14</sup> The field of postcolonial studies is enormous and extends far beyond the area of literary research; on the relation between literature and postcoloniality, see for example, Bill Ashcroft, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989).
- <sup>15</sup> As an indication of type and scope of the enormous work done in book history in recent decades, see Henri-Jean Martin and Roger Chartier, eds., *Histoire de l'édition française*, 4 vols. (Paris.: Promodis, 1983-86) and, with respect to the

Netherlands, J.J. Kloek and W.W. Mijnhardt, *Leescultuur in Middelburg aan het begin van de negentiende eeuw* (Middelburg: Zeeuwse Bibliotheek, 1990) and J.A. Baggerman, *Een lot uit de loterij: familiebelangen en uitgeverspolitiek in de Dordtse firma A. Blussé en Zo* (Den Haag: SDU, 2000).

- <sup>16</sup> For an example of the way theoretical reflection can be interwoven with historical exploration and analysis, see James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (University of Chicago Press, 1998); also William Warner, *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684-1750* (University of California Press, 1998). In contrast, Mieke Bal's *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago University Press, 1999) thematises history, but fails to engage with the past in its intractability.
- <sup>17</sup> Part of this interdisciplinary cooperation will also involve sorting out territorial claims to certain types of competence and perhaps to a partial revision of the institutional divisions between cultural historians -- the historians 'proper' -- and literary historians; on the rivalry between 'cultural' and 'literary' historians, see my "Reflections in a country churchyard: Over de grenzen van de literatuurwetenschap;" *Tijdschrift voor Literatuurwetenschap* 1: 6-14.
- <sup>18</sup> The interest in literary institutions could already be seen in Peter Bürger, et al, eds., *Aufklärung und literarische Öffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980) and Jacques Dubois, *L'institution de la littérature: Introduction à une sociologie* (Brussels: Labor, 1983). Recently, it has led to a series of specific studies relating to the workings of literary institutions at particular periods: Theodore Ziolkowski, *German Romanticism and its Institutions* (Princeton University Press, 1990); Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (Yale University Press, 1998); Frans Ruiter and Wilbert Smulders, *Literatuur en moderniteit in Nederland 1840-1990* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1996). The project "National Learning: Scholars and Cultural Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century" (currently being directed by Joep Leerssen at the University of Amsterdam participates in this more general contextualising approach to literature, while focussing specifically on its role in the evolution of cultural nationalism.
- <sup>19</sup> Wolfgang Iser's *Literature at War, 1914-1940: Representing the 'Time of Greatness'* (Yale University Press, 1999), for example, provides an exemplary account of the relationship between literature and military interests in World War One. Similarly, Alice Kaplan, *The Collaborator: The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach* (University of Chicago Press, 2000) studies the symbolic role of 'the writer' at a time of social crisis.

<sup>20</sup> Among other things, attention to processes of dissemination and reception means that the rationale for studying literary texts on the basis of the language in which they were produced (French literature, Dutch literature, and so on) becomes less obvious: after all works are also read in translation and, as the controversy around the Oxford literature curriculum brought to light several years ago, there is as much reason for studying the *Decameron* (a huge influence on Chaucer) as part of the literary culture of England as there is for studying *Beowulf*.