

Confusing present : teaching (French) literature in Silicon Valley

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Confusing Present.

Teaching (French) Literature in Silicon Valley

For twenty-six years now, I have been teaching in the Departments of Comparative Literature and of French and Italian at Stanford University. Stanford's well-deserved international aura is that of a technical university (in spite of not wearing the adjective "technical" in its name). Silicon Valley indeed, the model and still very lively hub of the so-called "start-up companies," goes back to an initiative of several Stanford Engineering professors in the years after World War II, and has since become, largely due to a continued intense exchange of theoretical and practical knowledge with the University, the world-wide center of innovation in electronic technology. But twenty-two active Nobel Laureates among its faculty also speak to Stanford's unique strength in the Classical Sciences, in Medical Research, in Business, and in Law.

How can one explain that a school so dedicated to "real life" issues has at the same time developed a remarkable strength in its literature departments, not the least in the field of French literature and culture? Any answer to the more specific aspect of this question must point to a number of distinguished scholars from France whom the University has managed to bring to the Pacific coast (for full or part-time positions) during the past decades: to the late René Girard and to Michel Serres from the "Académie Française," above all, but also to Jean-Marie Apostolidès and to Jean-Pierre Dupuy. Institutions like Stanford are driven by a powerfully naive and thus unlimited ambition for excellence – and they can usually afford it.

This specific ambition thrives on a structural premise that need not be mentioned to American readers, while its importance seems to be widely unknown (or at least underestimated) by observers from abroad, in particular by observers from Europe. More than doctoral or professional education at the so-called "graduate schools," what primarily accounts for the national prestige of American universities and what shapes, on the other hand, individual identities within their student bodies, is the quality of the four-year college education programs (one becomes a "Harvard boy" by going to college there, not by attending Harvard Law School, like President Obama, or Harvard Medical School). College education

(which, as an idea and institutional framework, must be considered an American idiosyncrasy) is so predominant because it relies on a traditional concept of “studium generale,” on being all-comprehensive – with a never exclusive emphasis on more specific areas of knowledge (“Majors”) chosen by students for their two final years of study. This commitment to “Bildung” in the both most complex and most elementary sense (for which the English language does not have a fully adequate word) is the simple reason why no American university can score high in the national rankings without achieving excellence in the Humanities and Arts. And as long as this is the case, the Humanities and Arts will never be seriously challenged.

An astonishing coalition built on the understanding of education as “studium generale” and “Bildung” has recently emerged between university administrations and a majority of the tuition-paying parents (largely independent of the parents’ own level of education) – and this coalition tries to resist a probably still-growing tendency among contemporary undergraduate students to conceive of their college years as a stage of pre-professional education. One of the traditional points of condensation for the middle class commitment to the Humanities and Arts as a source of “Bildung” is the aura given to “Reading” in general, and to “close Reading” and “literary Reading” in specific. As an academic instructor in the United States, one hardly ever receives class evaluations that do not complain about the lack of a “more careful concentration” on a small number of canonized texts.

Against the backdrop of such classical values that most of our undergraduate students seem to have internalized (in spite of their tendency to privilege perspectives of pre-professional instruction), a number of recent developments within the college curriculum at Stanford must appear quite confusing. Confirming a national and international trend, undergraduate enrollments in the Humanities are dwindling, while the number (and the quality) of applications for our five- or six-year graduate (doctoral) fellowships are at best stable. Second and more importantly, at least for Stanford, IHUM (for “Introduction to the Humanities”), a five-hour-per-week core program established in the 1990s, running through

the three trimesters of the academic year, and compulsory for all first-year college students, had become unpopular enough around 2010 to be canceled and replaced by a new program under the title “Thinking Matters” – for which each department is invited to invent its own version, thus bypassing the Humanities. Our world-renowned Department of Computer Science, for example, is offering a class for “Thinking Matters” that compares the human brain and advanced computers.

In this present context, French culture and literature have preserved a certain, mostly vague prestige, with the number of students learning French language remaining stable, although the most talented among the few undergraduates who major in literature at all seem to prefer “Comparative Literature” or “World Literature” over individual national literatures – which only reflects the increasingly “global” reading habits of the twenty-first century. These new undergraduate students in the literature departments are immediately impressive through the quantity of pages and books that they manage to “process,” i.e. to “read for content,” in very short stretches of time, whereas they often face difficulties when trying to concentrate on the texts’ rhetorical and formal qualities. And yet most of the famous American universities, somehow enigmatically, have cultivated and maintained in their curricula locally specific and locally traditional attachments to certain formally demanding texts from the Western canon. At Stanford, of all places, Saint Augustine’s *City of God* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* have long been among those local and indeed quite “popular” classics.

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On the institutional and administrative level, however, my University does not quite seem to know what to do with the Humanities and Arts today, and this is probably typical within the contemporary academic institution. If one thing is certain, Stanford will not give up any time soon on “Literature” in general or on “French Literature” in specific as part of college education (and also on the graduate level) – there is not even any financial pressure towards such a decision. On the contrary, the positive financial situation makes our helplessness in thinking about the present and future of the Humanities only more visible. In my personal teaching experience and much to my surprise, that recent termination of the

Humanities core course at Stanford has improved our everyday situation. As the core no longer absorbs large numbers of students, the enrollment in the monographic literature classes is growing, while the majority of our students in these classes make their choice out of personal interest – and not because the curriculum mandates a specific selection.

Now it turns out that a large part (if not the majority) of students with such a motivation do not major in literature but want to work on literary texts from the past and present as a compensation or even as a counterpoint to their majors in the pre-professional areas of study that they have embraced for financial and general practical reasons. This was the true reason why, several years ago, the Stanford Department of Computer Science (which has among the largest numbers of undergraduate majors among all the departments at our University) approached the Humanities departments with the proposal of introducing a “joint major”¹ combination between a major in “Computer Science” and a major in any of the participating Humanities departments, including Comparative Literature (normally, students are allowed to have two equal (double major) or non-equal (major / minor) areas of concentration, but “double majors” are difficult to complete and are therefore unusual). Against the enthusiastic and unanimous support of my colleagues who felt that this institutional template would keep us connected to what has become the center of teaching and learning at Stanford, I abstained when we voted because I feared that the new form of study would cement our status as a “pleasant little backyard” for what “really matters.”

Today, I stand corrected – for the new “Joint Major Program” has not only brought a great number of undergraduates into the literature classes, these students also use a fresh type of analytic and associative intelligence and thus truly energize our debates. I am not even speaking of the occasional “double major” who decides to apply for graduate studies in literature instead of accepting one of those very lucrative offers that most of them receive from the electronic industry (during the past academic year, my nineteen-year-old advisee, a double major in Computer Science and Comparative Literature, got admitted to literature graduate programs at all Ivy League schools, after rejecting offers from

¹ For more information on the Joint Major Program, see the Stanford University “Undergrad” website: <https://undergrad.stanford.edu/academic-planning/majors-minors/joint-majors-csx>.

Google, Microsoft, and Oracle). What impresses me most about this intelligence that still remains new in the literature departments, is a specific existential investment and seriousness. It became palpable, for example, in a survey course on “The Novel” for third year college students (juniors) in whose first session I distributed some key passages from Georg Lukács’ *Theory of the Novel*, with the goal of stimulating an intense initial discussion – only to realize, on the way back from the classroom to my office, that this assignment had most probably gone far beyond the capacity of such young students to grasp and deal with Lukács’ complex philosophical reflections.

Counter to this second thought, however, Lukács’ views about the Western novel stemming from an early modern collective intuition of “transcendental homelessness” became personally important to most of my students as they tried to describe and to understand their own reactions to the novels we jointly read. After all, they have been born into a world of overwhelming freedom and choice where the last remaining layers of phenomena and values that had been appearing to be either “necessary” or “impossible” are now fast melting away into a global universe of indeed infinite freedom and utter randomness. This exactly turned out to be my students’ version of “transcendental homelessness.” But the in-class experience with the Lukács motif is but one example of a much more powerful tendency. What many of my students seem to be looking for – and indeed find – in literary texts is a sphere of concreteness that they can hold on to within their universe of randomness. I also have the impression that these students, in their reflections triggered by literary texts, often arrive at a situation of individual and collective contemplation. This word describes much more appropriately what we are doing when we work through literary texts than the concept of “research” that is so tainted (and even haunted) by a problematic analogy with the sciences.

Instead of “doing research” or “applying methods,” my undergraduates react to each text at a time, both closely relating it to their lives – and keeping it an “aesthetic” distance. Thus, without any program nor specific intention, a style of reading emerges that goes way beyond “processing contents” – and may in the end converge with certain classical forms of aesthetic autonomy and aesthetic experience. In their accumulation, such intense moments of literary reading can trigger for my young students the

capacity of thinking “outside the box,” above all within their main intellectual fields of Computer Science or Engineering at large. Thus, they become part of what Stanford’s President John Hennessy, an eminent Computer Scientist, once described as the key function of the Humanities and Arts, i.e. to produce “a specific noise that gives universities the status of intellectual places”. Under college circumstances, my students can by no means acquire the breadth and depth of knowledge that European professors would expect – but, as Hennessy meant to say, they become part of an intellectual movement that may stay with them for lifetime.

And what truly good arguments do we instructors really have to persuade our students to make “Literature” their profession, in a national and international environment that is by no means able to absorb all the scholars that my generation of academics has shaped and promoted? The college status of a “minor” seems much more appropriate for most of them – while their sheer presence, without any doubt, makes their instructors’ thinking better and our aesthetic experience more intense. In the larger context, therefore, I do not even regret the termination of the Humanities core program at Stanford anymore. That reading literary texts, knowing history, and doing philosophy should be considered to be a sound basis for a good life used to be taken for granted in Western nations until about half a century ago. Ever since, this premise has lost much of its conviction – which may indeed make it the best possible solution for us to continue offering a great variety of courses within the Humanities, without making any of them compulsory.



If our endless, curriculum-based discussions about the status of the Humanities and Arts within present day college education have been the equivalent of the permanent top-down “reforms” that have shaken and not improved the European university systems over the same span of time, then both trajectories have been accompanied by internal changes regarding the contents and conventions of the profession of “Literary Criticism,” changes that did not necessarily react to new teaching situations but must inevitably have had an impact on our students’ experience. The most visible of these changes has been the all but vanishing, since the

late twentieth century, of the intellectual practice called “Literary Theory” that had once been the most lively stage of debates within the Humanities – and that had been dominated, above all in the United States, by multiple protagonists and works subsumed under the name of “French Theory.” At Stanford today, we read and discuss more philosophical texts than ever before in the Literary Departments – which may amount to a non-programmatic compensation for the loss of Literary Theory (but it could as well be a more or less random local development). At the same time, the lists of classes announced each academic year shows a growing focus on literary classics, read from perspectives that seem to favor aesthetic experience (and reflections about its conditions) more than historical contextualization. Meanwhile, together with “Literary Theory,” the former obligation has ceased to replace the word “literature” by the word “culture” in conversations within the profession.

We read, study, and teach “literature” again, without feeling politically or epistemologically guilty about it – but we do not celebrate this movement as a return to traditional standards either. Perhaps our classes tend to be more about opening opportunities for the students’ own experience than about providing them with comprehensive master-interpretations of individual texts, and perhaps one can go so far to say that we have become more deictic and less hermeneutic. This, I hope, goes along with a downswing in the rigor with which politically correct agendas were being promoted until not too long ago. Questions of gender, for example, have enormously enriched our work – even more so since students and colleagues have no longer been restricted in their choice of new topics and perspectives.

Personally, that is at the end of an academic career started in 1971, I enjoy teaching literature more than ever before – and my classes certainly include classics from French literature. And while I may fall victim to a deception typical of advanced age – this positive general impression seems backed up by the evaluations that I receive from my students – and converges with impressions about teaching literature that multiple colleagues are holding today, not only within my own generation. “Things are o.k.,” we like to say in California – and yet the specific feeling inside the profession today is not one of strength or resurgence. Having lost our status of a core dimension in the college program (at least at Stanford) has most likely improved our classroom experience – but it

also irreversibly means that, from now on, we will always be on the verge of disappearing.

Reading Literature has become less of an institutional condition within higher education – and more of a personal option, an option that the institution still honors and respects. “Being o.k.” in a Literature department today therefore includes the hint of living in an end-time. I don’t mind this impression – it indeed makes me want to write another essay precisely about how we may have gone full circle, that is how we may have arrived at the end of a history that began in the early nineteenth century with protagonists like the Grimm brothers, Matthew Arnold, or Paulin Paris. Perhaps we should never have taken for granted that “teaching literature” must have the status of a “profession” under any historical, cultural, and social circumstances. Once the thought of its historical limitations becomes a premise of our professional everyday practice, its present will stop to appear so confusing.

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