

## Foreword

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As the heritage of Enlightenment grows paler, so does the institution of the humanities. Anti-intellectual periods such as ours see in theoretical activity the seeds of irrelevance or procrastination. Kant had given philosophy pre-eminence over the professional schools—Law, Medicine and Theology—in modern establishments of higher education. Von Humboldt had implemented that view, and so the modern university was born. Yet, with a slow turn of the screw (which took some two centuries), that symbolic arrangement was turned upside down. Present-day universities are led by their professional schools—Medicine, Law and, above all, Business, which was called Theology in Kant’s times. The social contract under which universities justify their doings now asks for “outcomes,” which indicates the students’ readiness to face the real world. Thus, marketable skill—essentially, the skill of marketing—is winning over knowledge for its own sake, accountability over self-reflection, restricted specialization over multi-disciplinarity, precision over subtlety, and self-effacing language over polyglotism. By no means is this a model dominated by science: it is, rather, one that reproduces capital as technology. After all, theoretical mathematics or physics are as disenfranchised within the neoliberal university of numbers as critical theory and comparative literature, in North America, at least. What is not visibly useful might as well be called useless; what comes branded as useful is prepackaged to sell faster than disciplines, such as critical theory and comparative literature, for which self-definition is a daily operation. Systematically impatient, the neoliberal university has placed the liberal arts on tolerance row. The spectacle of this dim decadence has been shown, replayed and judged too many times for it to be saved from tediousness.

In the distribution of favors, liberal arts end up by getting the lean—any detective following the money would find this out right away—while the professional schools and the sciences are damned to the embarrassment of riches. Such favoritism elicits

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whining or straight resentment in various humanities quarters; it also encourages dubious measures to attract, through the rhetoric buzz, fuzz and fad, unsuspecting student-clients and financial favors from university administrators and granting agencies. So far, the shiniest concoction of the sort is a tenure-stream teaching job in Global Digital Religion advertised by New York University in 2012. If one saw the relationship between the sciences and the humanities as pitting the spoiled teenager against the aging lady, today's university would look like a staged melodrama. For both attempt to play the role of the other: science, of the entitled rich inheritor to progress, and literary studies, as a marginal pretender. Would it be too much to say that, for each, getting together with the other would result in yet another misalliance?

The imp of science does not elude literature. Yet, it is not science; rather, it is the will to technics that, disguised as science, technologizes literature. The worst case scenario—and common practice—has scientific methods transform literature into available fields of application of the very methods. This is not the grand theory said to have collapsed in the wake of postmodernity: this is the imp of methodical thinking that gave way to the age of technology. The best case scenario has literature resist, quixotically, as a material enactment of spirit, as the odd man in the pack, to methodical appropriation and transformation into standing reserve. In this case, literature would correspond to a science of singularities and to a logic of events. Yet, what can such a “proper” understanding of literature bring to science? Would this science be literature's fiction as much as literature is science's fiction? Are the “science wars”—as the dispute for public authority of the “two cultures” and their mutual fictions were called in the 1990s—over?

Such were the questions tackled in the “Literary Theory and the Sciences” ICLA Committee on Literary Theory workshop, which took place at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich between June 30th through July 2nd, 2011. During three days gloriously hosted by the Committee Chair, Professor Robert Stockhammer, and replaying the *psychomachia* between literature and the sciences, well-known scholars from a few continents and more countries engaged some of the fundamental aspects of the mutual acts of or misrecognition between literature and the sciences, starting with a critique of C. P. Snow's standard “The Two Cultures.”

According to Marko Juvan, “Snow took up a critique of the growing gap between the social community of literary intellectuals and that of scientists. While the latter were reproached for being uncultured because of their ignorance of high literature, the former were proven to be even more uninformed about the basic scientific laws. Snow maintained that the elite literary intellectuals in Britain unjustly enjoyed greater social prestige and had more public influence in comparison to natural scientists and engineers, who were in his opinion better equipped to solve crucial problems of modern industrial society and more helpful in fostering social welfare. Although Snow's observations about class tensions of industrial societies on the national and global scales were insightful, he proposed a regressive remedy provided by the Enlightenment discourses of education and progress (i.e., everybody should better learn the basics of sciences and get access to higher education in technologies). It is significant that Snow as a proponent of natural

sciences and technology still criticized literary intellectuals in terms of “culture,” that is, on behalf of the traditional humanistic values of cultivation which he otherwise found so annoying.”

Sowon Park added that “this hierarchization of disciplines also had a political aspect. Snow’s scheme of the two cultures equated the scientific mode of investigation with political progressivism. His lament was that although the empiricist and rationalist foundations of scientific progress in the twentieth century were revolutionizing life in post-war Britain, the nation continued to be governed by an elitist culture of letters which refused to acknowledge, let alone embrace, the forward-thinking culture of hard science.”

Years after Snow’s 1959 paper, though, and that, after the decline of post-structuralist and post-modern high theory, along with the consequent feeling of a fatal crisis, “the humanities have rediscovered the sciences as their secretly coveted other” (as Juvan quotes Kelleter 2007,155).

Reflecting on how to secure “a space for the humanities within this University that is less and less securing,” Reingard Nethersole focuses on the overriding pecuniary consideration characteristic of the present-day ‘university of excellence,’ which, “in contrast to the ‘university of culture’ in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, is charged by economic rationality to produce accelerated innovation in science and technology in order to secure a competitive edge in the global market.” In her take on Bernard Stiegler, Nethersole points to the cohorts of literary theorists who “have been—and are again—seduced by the lure of pathways taken by the Hard Sciences: thus Darwinism, and cognitive poetics ranging from rhyme and rhythm studies to narratology, and psycholinguistic studies of literary phenomena, among others, have taken over were the empiricism of Structuralism and Systems Theory left off.” Via Stiegler, she warns that “those who oppose technics to civilization do not accept that, as the versions of the Prometheus/Epimetheus myth in Hesiod, Aeschylus, and Protagoras teach us, humans are prosthetic beings, without qualities, and that temporality (as *elpis*, waiting in hope and fear) emanates from this de-fault of and at the origin, this originary disorientation” (Stiegler 2009, 2). “Stiegler’s philosophy,” writes Nethersole, “underwrites my long cherished premise that so-called Art and Science do not constitute irrevocable binaries. Rather what are commonly called today *Kulturwissenschaften* (cultural sciences) in place of the old Human Sciences—and *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences) need to enter into a mutual relationship for two reasons: first, as Michael Hardt reminds us, because “the creation of ideas, images, code, affects, and other immaterial goods” is not yet recognized as the primary key to economic innovation in the global biopolitical economy; and secondly, Natural Sciences, especially the new techno-sciences that operate functionally and not interpretatively and hence without memory, need to remember that human life is both *zoon* and *dios bíos*.”

In their interventions, Park, Biti, von Koppenfels and Lavocat tread on interface between literature and the neurosciences.

Von Koppenfels’ more enthusiastic version has it that, “with the growing influence of neuroscience and empirical psychology in the humanities, transdisciplinary fields like ‘cognitive poetics’ claim to redefine the epistemic status of

literary studies. Drawing from the working experience in a research project dedicated to the emotional processing of poetic meter, [I discuss] some of the implications of this claim. Poetic meter seems to be of special interest here, because even in classical poetics it was considered rather an object of measuring than of interpretation, thus forming a sort of intermediate object between a hermeneutical and an empirical approach. In order to be introduced into an experimental setting, a poem has to be transformed into a ‘stimulus,’ which raises the question of how the experimental process relates to the individual act of reading: Who (or what) is reading the poetic stimulus?” In the concluding part of his article, von Koppenfels posits psychoanalytical transference to describe the difference between the act of reading and the cognitive experiment, and comes to argue that “transference is precisely the effect the experimental setting is designed to exclude.”

Taking to task both Siegfried Schmidt’s brand of empiricism and findings in current neuro-approaches to literature, Vlad Biti asks, “How does our brain mirror the others? The starting assumption is that mirror neurons are not only activated by observed actions of real persons; also actions of literary figures that we read about trigger in our brain projections of similar actions. That is to say, we comprehend literature thanks to our embodied mimetic ability which is provided with a ‘motor vocabulary’ that well precedes the linguistic, literary and cultural equipment of our educated understanding ability. Paradoxically enough, this embodiment is conceived as a uniform engraving of all various human bodies by the same Mirror Neuron System, which actually purifies all the bodies of their linguistically and culturally specific experiential traces, i.e., in the final analysis, disembodies and dematerializes them.”

Sowon Park’s article scrutinizes “the embryonic interdisciplinary field that has emerged along the borders of evolutionary psychology, neuroscience and literary criticism against the background of the two cultures legacy.” At that, it focuses on the “possibilities and the implications of a convergence between literary studies and cognitive science [and] questions to what extent such attempts, where they have been made, have been successful.” She concludes with a discussion of “the centrality of the concept of ‘affect’ in developing a theory of consciousness that reaches across the divide between the two cultures.” The “primitive instrumentalist reflection, which [presently] seems to be the special province of cognitive neuroscience and evolutionary psychology when merged with literary criticism, does very little to illuminate the specific nature of texts and our experience of them, though it certainly helps our understanding of proto-literary transactions made by some early humans.” Park’s critique of Steven Pinker’s reductionist “literature is entertainment,” tout court, can be extended widely. Pinker, writes Park, “is in the habit of beginning his argument by diagnosing what is wrong with the humanities and ends by offering a suggestion for their revitalization which is: humanists should learn from the cognitive sciences.” In contradistinction, Park invokes Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux’s understanding of the “experiential affect at the centre of the rational thinking process,” along with the former’s more precise idea of somatic thought or affective rationality. She finds such a common ground in modernist writing, in Leavis, for instance, and more so in Virginia Woolf’s typically “modernist desire to capture the whole of human experience” in the novel. The

techniques of interior monologue, shifting focalization and free indirect discourse (FID) and ‘stream of consciousness,’ produces in the reader a perceptual mimesis of consciousness which approximates the actual process of not only of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch but, crucially, of thought. The fluid mixture of the first person and the third person has the power of intimating what the characters are thinking or simply registering and showing us the silent incongruity of their thoughts without making the characters speak. Thus we experience a mind which is alone with itself; we get to feel what it is like to be that character, objectively. The similarities between consciousness as represented and produced in modernist fiction and accounts of the affective brain in Neuroscience amount to mutual corroboration, even if they are not in epistemological agreement, and they carry weight precisely because they were obtained by independent methods, offering new hopes of an intellectually coherent framework that speaks across the divide between the two cultures.” As Woolf writes, “Still, as Mr Hamilton uneasily perceives now and then, you may dissect your frog, but you cannot make it hop; there is, unfortunately, such a thing as life.”

Françoise Lavocat invokes the cognitive turn in the contemporary reshuffling of knowledge in which the face off between cognitive sciences (psychology and neurosciences) and literary theory led to the further blurring of the boundaries that separate fact from fiction. She notes a curious role reversal: one the one hand, some neuro- specialists (Gerrig, Oatley, Jeannerod, Metz-Lutz, etc.), in taking the definition of metaphor as transportation and simulation at face value, pushed speculation too far and both overstated the powers of fiction and erased the specificity of fiction. “Paradoxically,” she writes, “fiction theorists [such as Schaeffer, Currie and Pelletier] have considerably reduced these powers, all the while reinstating a dividing line between fact and fiction, where mental processes and texts are concerned.

Willer, Yokota-Murakami, Howell and Kistner contributions focused on historically well defined issues.

Stefan Willer focuses on the status of comparison in natural and social sciences, as well as literature, around 1870, a critical period for the comparative studies that had dominated the nineteenth century. In the wake of the past decades’ study of the rhetoric of science, Willer holds, “a new research paradigm about the interrelation of *literature and science*, or, more generally, of *literature and knowledge*” has been established. His article discusses the problematic notion of sameness in Darwin’s *Origins*, the call for comparative shrewdness in Max Müller’s study of comparative religions and the complex status of comparisons in Lautréamont’s *Maldoror*. The latter’s surprising and harsh juxtapositions should not be framed as metaphors, but as comparisons; only these comparisons can do without similarities. The poetic comparisons *with* are thus traced back to the (quasi-)scientific perspective of comparing *to*; just like, on the other hand, the problem of scientific perspectivism, of the naturalists’ “sharpened eyes”, in Darwin, can be traced back to poetic comparisons. This observation creates a chiasm: a figure somehow bridging the otherwise widening gap between science and literature in the late nineteenth century. Systematically, this chiasm is also a suggestion for the problem of

conceptualizing comparisons in general, which, until today, certainly is a task for both science and literature.”

Takayuki Yokota-Murakami writes that towards the fast-westernizing end of the nineteenth century, Japanese culture came to recognize the brain as the center responsible for mental activity. The interest in neurological and consciousness related phenomena and in relating psychological issues with epistemological principles inflected the development of the modern Japanese novel. The nervous breakdowns early-modern Japanese literati often suffered were regularly understood as cerebral malfunctions. In turn, this view “arguably enabled a confessional mode of literature, which in turn contributed to the emergence of new sexual subjectivities.” Focusing on “the complicity between the narrative engines of modern Japanese fiction and the available Western medical/psychological/sexological discourses,” Yokota-Murakami historicizes Kitamura Tokoku’s epoch-making article “The Pessimist Poet and the Woman” (1892), and goes on to discuss in more detail Futabatei Shimei’s *Ukigumo* (The Drifting Clouds; 1887–1889) and *Heibon* (Mediocrity; 1907). “By invoking Buddhist philosophy, and thereby demonstrating a sort of “post-colonial” abrogation and appropriation of European theories, he claims: ‘To my view, Buddhist philosophy is constructed on the Spencerian theory of relativity of human knowledge,’” writes Yokota-Murakami, who concludes that “the role of natural science in the emergence of modern Japanese literature should not be underestimated.”

Yvonne Howell retells the ups and down of the attitudes toward cybernetics in the Soviet Union: this discipline went from being vehemently attacked as a “reactionary pseudo-science” in the early 1950s, to being seen as a vehicle of reformist ideas and intellectual liberation by the late 1950s and during the 1960s, and to being institutionalized as “cyberspeak” in the repressive discourse of Party ideologues, where the status quo was justified as the “scientific management of society.” In Alexander Zinoviev’s *The Yawning Heights* (1976), cybernetics famously became the satirical target of a vicious literary exposé of Brezhnev-era society. Rather than discussing Zinoviev, Howell chooses the case of Strugatsky brothers (Arkady and Boris), who, in Vyacheslav Ivanov’s words, “were able to write about precisely ‘what mattered most’ at the time—the barely-predictable interplay between scientific-technological advances and global social and ethical changes.” In their 1976 novella, *One Billion Years Before the End of the World*, the Strugatskys created a “plot of greatness... which absorbed this scientific paradigm into the structural composition of their story, the underlying formal premises of socialist realism were bent and distorted to the breaking point.”

Closing this cluster, Ulrike Kistner’s solid contribution looks at Ludwik Fleck’s career and influence on the sociology of knowledge (and on Thomas Kuhn who, indebted as he was to the German, resisted approaching Fleck’s crucial focus on thought collectives). For Fleck, as for Freud, the emotional common quality that ties the members of a group comes to constitute individual identity via the group, under the headship of a leader or an idea. Fleck’s group work, rather than teamwork, requires “solidarity of thought in the service of a superindividual idea” and this is “determinable by cognition alone.” Kistner acknowledges that “the relationship between exoteric and esoteric circles of knowledge, between externalist and internalist accounts of the formation of knowledge, cannot be fixed once and for all,

and would have to be contextually and conjuncturally investigated and understood,” a consideration that emerges from reading Fleck’s account of the work of scientific collectives in the concentration camp of Buchenwald, which he published in 1946 (after having also worked in 1942 the paltry ghetto hospital of his native Lwów and, in 1943, at Auschwitz). Under harsh conditions, writes Kistner, the ethics of science may reach a black-and-white state, differentiating sharply between “the scientist intent on holding onto the integrity of life-scientific research (Fleck) and the activist intent on resisting the demand for the production of the typhus vaccine for the benefit of the SS and the German army, by foiling scientific experiments (Eugen Kogon). According to Kogon’s statement to the Nuremberg trials, ‘the prisoner[-scientists] first learned from Fleck that their vaccine was ineffective... Approximately 600 l of the ineffective vaccine were produced, and delivered to the Waffen-SS. The effective serum produced amounted to 6 l, which was given to prisoners in exposed positions.’”

## References

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