



Personal essay by Albert Braz

In praise of literature

A literary scholar looks back, and ahead, to diagnose
the problems facing his field



Photography by Cara Barer

– the beginning –

“Personally, I would sooner have written *Alice in Wonderland* than the whole *Encyclopædia Britannica*.” Stephen Leacock (1912)

NUMEROUS EXPLANATIONS ARE usually offered for the seemingly permanent crisis in literary studies, from the domination of science and technology, through the businessfication of academia, to the rise of the factual paradigm in which the imaginative is acceptable only when disguised as real. However, one crucial element that hasn't received much attention is that many literary scholars and teachers no longer believe in literature. The loss of faith in literature by its purported guardians, professors of literature, is obviously linked to the other factors that have culminated in literature's waning prestige since the mid-20th century. Yet it's both the most perplexing and, in the long run, likely the most harmful. After all, if teachers of literature don't believe in it, why should anyone else? Even more critical, the rejection of literature by so many literary scholars calls into question our ability to determine what is most significant about our discipline, and thus our authority to assess texts.

It is hard for anyone actively involved in the life of an English department in the last few decades not to notice the way English professors have become ambivalent about our ostensible *raison d'être*. Whenever one discusses the future of the discipline, it soon becomes apparent that most people feel that if it can be saved at all it will be by embracing some related field, such as film studies, cultural studies or that academic catch-all that goes by the name of theory – anything but literature. In fact, no other term appears to cause more anxiety at departmental meetings than literature itself. Instead of being a source of disciplinary pride, or at least of disciplinary identity, it has become an embarrassment, an anachronism, and we handle it as if it were an explosive device. Some colleagues would love to discard the word literature altogether, openly advocating that it be removed from course titles and replaced with supposedly less elitist descriptors like texts. Similarly, they make little attempt to camouflage their excitement about teaching almost any subject except traditional literature such as poetry, drama or non-fiction.

For instance, in a recent essay on the relation between stories and collective identity, Neil ten Kortenaar, a professor of English and com-

parative literature at the University of Toronto, casually notes that “[m]ost literary scholars – it can hardly be a secret – do not love literature.” He claims that much of the appeal of theory is that it provides literature professors with “a sense of mastery (I know better) and virtue (I am on the side of the right thinkers).” This explains the pervasiveness of “the scholastic appeal to authority – ‘as [Michel] Foucault says’ or ‘as Homi Bhabha says’ –” in contemporary criticism, as well as the move away from literature. Likewise, the curmudgeon but polymath literary critic Harold Bloom states that his polemical book *The Western Canon* is “not directed to academics, because only a small remnant of them still read for the love of reading.” While the verdicts by Kortenaar and Bloom may sound rash, it's incontestable that a considerable number of literary scholars have lost their faith in the power, to say nothing of the magic, of literature. Even those who love literature have developed serious doubts about its cultural capital in the 21st century and therefore its authority and that of the people who teach it or write about it.

In some ways, it could be argued that literary studies has been pluralized to distraction. The idea of what constitutes literature has become so amorphous that it can cover anything from ideology and philosophy to the material, such as airplanes or the faces of pop stars. In particular, literature is now largely under the aegis of theory, leading someone like the late feminist scholar (and murder-mystery writer) Carolyn Heilbrun to confess that “it has always seemed to me that one of the chief advantages of retiring was that I would never have to think about catechresis again.” For Shakespeare specialist Paul A. Cantor, the author has been displaced by the critic and “literature has been theorized” to such a degree that the endless debates about its epistemological, sociological, moral and political dimensions threaten “to overwhelm literature itself.” Cantor adds, “We all know graduate students who are more familiar with, say, the critical debates about Renaissance drama than with the great works of Renaissance drama themselves.” But it's clearly not only students who appear more interested in critical matters than in strictly literary ones; the same is true of many professors.

In fact, the most striking aspect of what Cantor terms “the Age of the Critic” is its antagonism toward the literary imagination. Many literary scholars seem to be engaged in an oedipal battle, not only against the author but against literature itself. Faced with the marked institutional decline of their discipline, instead of attempting to preserve it by helping



to identify its tenets, they turn against it. In his ominously titled *The Death of Literature*, Alvin Kernan gives the example of the profession's response during the famous obscenity trials of novels like *Ulysses* by James Joyce and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D.H. Lawrence. When asked by the courts to define literature, literary scholars either refused outright or provided innocuous answers. The result was that the judges did it for them, and in the process demystified the very notion of authorship. Literary scholars actually appear less comfortable defending literature than attacking it, seeing it as the repository of just about every sin in the particular society in which it is produced. In Kernan's words, we live in "a strange time," but there are "few things stranger than the violence and even hatred with which the old literature [is] deconstructed by those who earn their living teaching and writing about it." Indeed, for many literary scholars, literature appears to have become the enemy.

The extent to which English professors have come to devalue literature is conspicuously evident when foreign writers visit campus, no matter how celebrated they may be. A few years after he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the novelist José Saramago came to my university to receive an honorary degree, and I was asked to chair his meet-and-greet session. Given that Saramago was the sort of writer who arouses strong passions in readers, both positive and negative, the hall was overflowing. People came from across the university and the wider community, many of them carrying several dog-eared books for the author to autograph. It was extremely gratifying for me to witness the enthusiasm with which Saramago was greeted by philosophers, political scientists and even business professors, to say nothing of the public at large. However, one group that was largely missing was literary scholars, something that I have noticed at other readings. It's as if Stephen Hawking gave a lecture on campus and most of the physicists didn't show up.

The lack of engagement by English professors with writers and with writing from other literary traditions is usually attributed to a reluctance to read works in translation, a line of reasoning I've always found unconvincing. To begin with, one of the classics in the language, the King James Version of the Bible, is not only a product of translation but also of translation by committee. Even more significant, those same individuals who are reluctant to read literature in translation tend to have remarkably few qualms about teaching works of critical theory in translation. Most English departments continue to require that their students be conversant

with the ideas of theoreticians like Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Derrida and Friedrich Nietzsche, ideas that the vast majority of professors are unable to adequately establish whether they belong to the authors or to their translators. In other words, translation cannot be the true reason so many literary scholars show such little enthusiasm for literature.

Moreover, this disconnection with literature transcends foreign writing. In many institutions, literature professors are also seldom seen at readings by either local or other English-language writers, unless they involve celebrity authors such as Margaret Atwood or Michael Ondaatje. Thus one is led to deduce that the real explanation for the lack of commitment to literature by professors of English is more likely to be that we, like many of our colleagues across the humanities, have been profoundly affected by what U.S. scholar Louis Menand terms the "crisis of legitimation" that has befallen our field. More specifically, we have become uncertain almost to the point of paralysis about what is knowledge in the humanities. This uncertainty has compelled many of us to search for new ways to make the discipline relevant, which we often do by moving away from what historically has been its core, literature.

The irony, of course, is that literature remains the most fruitful aspect of literary studies; it is the one element that is likely to infuse the discipline with vitality, not least because it has the broadest appeal to both intellectuals and the general populace. As recently as the end of the 19th century, it was widely accepted that a crucial difference between literary and scientific discourses was that the former was addressed to society at large. In what is considered the first book on comparative literature in English, Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett writes that "Unlike the man of science, the man of literature cannot coin words for a currency of new ideas; for his verse or prose, unlike the discoveries of the man of science, must reach average, not specialized, intelligence." Because of the science-envy that has dominated literary studies since the 1930s, when prominent scholars like the New Critics could dismiss over 2,000 years of literary scholarship as being largely the work of "amateurs," a major rift developed between criticism and literature. Troubled by the spectre of amateurism, literary scholars have passionately embraced the scientific model, at least when it comes to linguistic hermeticism. We thus often equate obtuseness with wisdom.

The Canadian-U.S.-French novelist Nancy Huston, in her book *Losing North: Musings on Land, Tongue and Self*, gives a fair indication of what has been lost with the marginalization of literature. A former student of the

– the end –

celebrated French semiotician Roland Barthes, Huston relates that soon after she arrived in Paris in the 1970s, she unconditionally accepted the common view that independent thinkers should strive to “achieve a sort of ‘degree zero’” and, instead of “blindly putting their trust in the intrinsic wealth of [...] language” they were using, they ought to make it “their job to mistrust it because of the coded concepts for which it was the vehicle.” However, she gradually became disenchanted with this development, and turned against it. As she describes her ideological transformation:

The important thing at the time, for us *Barthésiens*, was to prove that we were clever, lucid and theory savvy. We were so well trained at spotting the “myths” and political assumptions hidden behind every statement, and so blithely convinced of the absence of any connection between language and the world – that the credulousness required of novelists was beyond our reach. Barthes himself had dreams of writing a novel, but was brought up short by the first obstacle he encountered – namely, the difficulty of inventing proper names for his characters and then *believing* in them. Could anyone be so gullible as to fool himself that way? Like the proverbial centipede, who can’t figure out which leg to start with, Barthes was paralyzed by his own need to understand how novels worked; therefore he had no choice but to renounce novel writing. Yes, whatever we say, writing requires – no, *is* – an act of faith.

For Huston, theoreticians like Barthes have had an extremely negative impact on literature, not only because they question that there’s any link between texts and the world, but also because they don’t appreciate the literary imagination, in particular that literary texts still try to speak to the general citizenry in a manner that self-consciously critical texts do not.

The power of literature is evident in its ability to enable us to imagine other worlds by transporting us there. More than any other discursive medium, literature also has the power to give life to the forgotten or erased, as a play and a biography of the 18th-century slave Marie-Joseph Angélique illustrate. Angélique was a Portuguese-born captive who in 1734 was charged with, tortured and hanged for the burning of Montreal. Her story is politically significant, among other reasons, because Angélique tried to escape captivity by fleeing to New England, reversing one of the dominant narratives in Canadian culture. When it comes to the discourse on African slavery, Canada is typically portrayed as the terminus of the Underground Railroad, a sanctuary for U.S. slaves who follow the North

Star into freedom. But instead of following the North Star, Angélique flees it. She thus forces us to consider whether Canada is really a Canaan for enslaved people of African descent, or whether the word white in the Great White North refers to more than the colour of snow.

Perhaps not surprisingly, in the last few decades Angélique has emerged as one of the most popular figures in African-Canadian culture. Among the writers who have tried to unravel her story are Lorena Gale, who in 1998 produced a play called *Angélique*, and Afua Cooper, the author of the 2006 biography *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montréal*. Both authors make little secret of their identification with their subject, whom they clearly champion, yet there’s a critical difference between the two texts in the way they present their protagonist. In her play, Gale is able to place Angélique at the centre of her narrative. In particular, she gives Angélique a voice that the character uses to let the audience know why she is so determined to escape Montreal for New England: so that she can return home to her native island of Madeira. This is not quite what happens in *The Hanging of Angélique*, though. As a historian, Cooper simply cannot avoid the fact that she’s dealing with an individual about whom remarkably little is known, starting with her name. Since she’s unable to determine how Angélique felt about her condition, Cooper has to concentrate on the milieu in which she lived, often giving us the context without the text, or rather without its main subject.

Comparing the strategies employed by Gale and Cooper to convey the story of Angélique underscores this: if we are to recover marginalized figures from the past, we usually can do so only through imaginative literature since, by definition, the unsung lack archival records. Admittedly, literature no longer has the cultural capital it once possessed, which partly explains the crisis in literary studies. Writing early in the 20th century, the humorist (and political economist) Stephen Leacock does not hesitate stating that he “would sooner have written *Alice in Wonderland* than the whole *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.” Although many people may continue to share Leacock’s love of literature, it’s rather apparent that this is far from being a universally held sentiment in the age of both science and the factual, not the least among literature teachers. Indeed, when one ponders why literary studies has become so peripheral in academia, part of the answer would seem to lie in our loss of faith in what used to define our field, literature. ❧

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