Literature, Culture, Mirrors


Simon During proposes – as I read it – six sets of reasons for the shift within departments of English from traditional literary studies towards cultural studies. The first is the academic appropriation of a tradition of Romantic anti-academicism stretching from Wordsworth to Dada. The second is a new mode of subject formation by which students are trained as consumers of cultural goods. The third is the valorization of social identities perceived as marginal within a traditional academic framework. The fourth is the development of new regimes of student choice, reflected in changed patterns of enrolment. The fifth is the emergence of a policy framework designed to enhance national economic competitiveness. The sixth is a regime of training which prepares students for jobs in the cultural sector.

These sets of reasons fall into two groups: the first three have to do with changed modes of ethical formation in the academy; the latter three have to do with changed institutional structures and strategies. Four of them (Romantic anti-academicism, the training of consumers, the valorization of social identities, and market-driven demand) seem to me to be bad, or at least insufficient, reasons for the curricular shift that During describes, while the causal connection posited between cultural studies and strategies of enhancement of national competitiveness seems to me weak, and the vocational rationale is, I think, wrong: cultural studies doesn’t, by and large (and other than the way any Humanities training does), prepare students directly for jobs in the culture industries.

One might share Don Anderson’s impatience - one might, that is, if he had anything to offer other than blind reaction and a decidedly Prufrockian sense (“I ... have been passed over, and what has succeeded me?”) that a world he values is slipping through his fingers. There’s surely something unreal about his desire to freeze literary studies into a fixed and final form, to equate a certain state of this recent and volatile discipline with that “two thousand years of cultural heritage” that is invoked as the ultimate conversation-stopper: as though our job were to preserve the certainties, the fixed codes of taste of an unchanging social order. And his denunciation of “kiddielit” and “soft options”, with its curious mirroring of the charge of lack of methodological rigour so often brought against literary studies by the “hard” scientific and social-scientific disciplines, almost certainly betrays an anxiety about his own place and the forms of knowledge that belong to it.
My own impatience is with the cliched form that this play of mirrors assumes: both with Anderson’s discourse of prizes and medals and lost intensities, and with During’s assumption that cultural studies is equivalent to the study of the more glitzy forms of popular culture. The opposition set up here between cultural and literary studies is a phoney one. Cultural studies is a way of contextualizing texts, of any kind - of analysing the social relations of textuality; and there’s no reason why it shouldn’t include literary texts and literary regimes amongst its proper objects of knowledge. If it’s no more than the subjection of a new set of objects - say, soap operas, rock music, fashion - to the same old discourses of value and the same old pedagogic processes of cultural distinction, then it’s not worth the candle.

I think it is, of course, just as I’m convinced that the tight-lipped refusal of new or different ways of dealing with texts is death to the spirit (and death, in the long run, to the discipline). Let me offer two reasons why cultural studies has the potential to change departments of literary studies for the better. The first is that it forces students to come to terms with different regimes of value, different and perhaps incommensurate valuing processes and their relation to social forces and social positions. It shifts the interpretive gaze from a self-contained text to its discursive and social framings, within which students are themselves implicated; while at the same time it opens a potentially fruitful methodological exchange between the distinct protocols of interpretation that apply in the social sciences and the textual disciplines. The second reason has to do with process. Cultural studies supposes a pedagogy in which students are at least as fully in control of much of the subject matter as are the teachers. This isn’t the end of teacherly authority, but it does transform the learning process by challenging teachers to redefine what it is that they do in a classroom, and by involving students - in a quite orthodox Socratic manner - in the understanding and analysis of what they already know. In neither of these respects is cultural studies the enemy of literary studies; the two perhaps work best when they coexist in tension and exchange; but literary studies will not survive if it is taught as a form of religion.