

Criticism and Critique: A View from French Studies

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Critical reflexion and self-reflexion is at the heart of everything we do: intellectually desirable, certainly, and institutionally unavoidable. Establishing the parameters of one's own work, through an evaluation of existing work and the empirical and theoretical gaps it leaves, is an integral part of the work itself from the undergraduate final-year dissertation onwards. Articles, books, and grant applications engage directly with existing scholarship to situate their own intellectual agenda, supplementing or displacing existing readings. It is not surprising that reviewing is frequently used as a pedagogical exercise, so helpful is it in training undergraduates in the art of critical reading. Reviewers are also assessors of promotion applications, of appointment applications, and of grant applications as named or anonymous referees or as members of grant-awarding bodies. We work for commercial publishers assessing book proposals and commenting on final drafts of manuscripts and for scholarly journals commenting on articles. There cannot be many reviewers who are not themselves subject to these processes.

The articles of this issue of *H-France Forum* address the personal, professional, and epistemological dimensions of the scholarly critique and its multiple manifestations from a range of angles. They offer both positive and, if not negative, then circumspect evaluation of the practice of review and peer review, drawing attention not only to different disciplinary and national traditions, but also the extent to which important questions of legitimacy and power are raised: knowledge is not context-free. They encourage the reader to reflect on his or her own experiences and practices, on the positive aspects of the scholarly critique underpinning so much of our work, but also on the tensions and resistances for which it is often a vehicle. Technological, commercial, and global pressures are all shown to be playing a role in the kind of research that is judged worthy of support and publication. It is apt that translation occurs more than once as a description of the mediating work of the reviewer, pointing not only to the connections between the reviewer and the object of the review, but also to the multiple connections across borders of disciplines and borders of national traditions. The articles also ask us to consider less benign mediations, where the scholarly critique operates to police hierarchies of knowledge or political pressures across different national traditions at particular times.

My own perspectives and practices have been forged within French studies, from the "language and literature" focus of my undergraduate courses to the broader cultural studies epistemologies brokered by the structuralist critique of literary history in France and the moment of structuralist and French feminist "high theory" in the humanities in the U.K., resulting in a proliferation of new analyses and new objects of study: literature differently defined, film, women's writing, and so on. My long-standing interest in fictional and filmic representations of the Second World War means that history and more recently memory studies have been an integral part of this work and, to an extent, of my reviewing practice.

It seems important to stress that reviews are *interesting*. I am an avid reader of reviews. This is the first section I turn to in the French studies journals to which I subscribe, usually as soon as they arrive. Reading reviews is a significant part of my week: I subscribe to the *London Review of Books (LRB)* and the *Times Literary Supplement (TLS)*, read large numbers of the hugely diverse H-France reviews as they pop into my in-box, read the book review pages of the Saturday and Sunday national press (*Guardian* and *Observer* for me), and, although rather occasionally now, the *New York Review of Books*. The contrasts between them all are instructive, in terms of what is reviewed and for whom. Introducing the current issue of the *TLS*, which happens to have a section of reviews of learned journals, they write, “The *TLS* is, we like to think, a learned journal, but it is not, by our definition, a Learned Journal. Our coverage is too broad for that.”¹ And indeed, it ranges across history, philosophy, sciences, literary criticism, cultural criticism but also fiction, poetry, performances of opera, theater, and films. It may not have the specialist focus of the learned journals, but the majority of reviewers in the *TLS* (and *LRB*) are academics. Like the *LRB*, their assessment is learned, but they are given a great deal of space and are able to contextualize in some detail, within the discipline and existing state of knowledge, for the interested non-specialist. This is quite a contrast with the fascinating but generally very short reviews in specialist journals; in other words, readership is a crucial factor in the way reviews are written. Although space considerations no doubt determine the length of specialist reviews, they can take the context for granted as they focus their 500 or so words on the text itself. I approached H-France from the outset as an interdisciplinary space, parallel to *Francofil* in the U.K. but with reviews (only later did I become aware of the central connection to history; goodness knows what I thought the H- stood for). But this means that I have always been aware of writing beyond my discipline when writing for H-France; that the extra space allows, even demands a proper contextualization, and the length afforded for reviews by H-France means it can be addressed.

The question of readership, then, or rather the multiple readerships involved in the dialogue across editors, reviewee, peer group, and journal readership, is also constitutive of the scholarly critique. Scholarly critique in books and articles will often range across polemical or theoretical essays, which generally scholarly journals do not review. So far as I can discover, Sartre’s *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* and Barthes’s *Sur Racine* were not reviewed by *French Studies*, though this is not a criticism. The *TLS* and similar will review French fiction and French poetry. I was once invited to review Semprun’s *Netchaiev est de retour*, for *Modern & Contemporary France*, and later the same author’s *Adieu, vive clarté*, but this is very rare. Other disciplines might cast the net wider: I reviewed the English translation of H el ene Cixous and Catherine Cl ement’s *La Jeune N ee* for *Radical Philosophy*. The articles in this issue of *H-France Forum* point to the important distinction between scholarly and popular history, but other lines are also drawn for practical reasons and also to sustain the academic and intellectual focus of the scholarly journal.

There is a strong consensus across the articles on what constitutes a good review and what constitutes an ethical review: it is informative, rigorous, critically engaged and respectful. It displays an intellectual generosity in taking seriously ideas and approaches which the reviewer might not share. One expects the same values in anonymous critical appraisals of articles and books, especially since it has become normal practice for the appraisal to be shared with the author; in the case of articles, it could well be a postgraduate student or inexperienced early career researcher who is in need of constructive advice, not a virtuoso

¹ “This Week,” *TLS*, October 30 2015, 2

demolition job. Looking at the latest issue of *French Studies* I am impressed by how careful reviewers are to engage constructively. When reservations are expressed, the review will still invariably end on a positive note. H-France is explicit in setting out its expectations that disagreements will be couched in courteous, non-confrontational language; one would hope all journals would ask authors of a hostile review to think again.

The hostile review fails on every count to meet considerations of good practice. Academics who love the ring of their own voices, in seminars or in print, practitioners of what one might call the “You cannot be serious” school of analysis, will no doubt always be with us, unfortunately. The scholarly critique as blood sport still survives, as I realized on hearing a second-year doctoral student recently describe being “torn to shreds” by more senior scholars after a workshop presentation. This is pretty unforgivable, and I would certainly agree that there is something self-aggrandizing about an aggressively hostile review. It is irritating, even infuriating, if it seems that facts are being twisted, theories built on poor understanding of the text or context, and mistranslations or errors not eliminated by author or copy-editor, but that in no way justifies shifting the terms of the debate from intellectual argument to a sermon on moral rectitude. However, reflecting on my own experience in the light of this forum, since I have composed a couple of rather outraged reviews in the past, I realize the hostile review can betray a lack of confidence, particularly in the inexperienced reviewer as I was, and be read as an appeal to the reviewer’s peer group over the head of the reviewee. One bolsters one’s own shaky sense of authority by excluding the text under review. What changed me was the experience of being reviewed—constructively, I’m pleased to say—and realizing the effect a dismissive review would have. It cured me.

This is not to say that negotiating disagreement is easy. Scholarly critique, in reviews and articles, will engage sharply at moments of controversy over the shape, values, and priorities of a discipline. There are important moments of paradigm shifts; disciplines move and change, and the scholarly critique in a journal can thus bring clearly into focus what is at stake in intellectual traditions and the intellectual clashes through which the discipline is being redefined.

Is this more apparent in France than in the U.K. or in French than in English? Probably not, but the fact that “la critique” covers a different set of meanings from “criticism” makes the boundaries seem more fluid. “La critique” is an exploration of first principles as well as an analysis of someone’s work: “Examen d’un principe, d’un fait, en vue de porter sur lui un jugement d’appréciation, d’un point de vue esthétique ou philosophique,” including the “art de juger les ouvrages de l’esprit,” as well as “jugement intellectuel, moral, examen de la valeur de quelque chose,” citing *Critique de la raison pure* among other examples (*Petit Robert*); “criticism” is not an exact match: “the action of passing judgement, especially finding fault; the investigation of the text, character, composition and origin of literary documents; the art or practice of estimating the qualities and character of literary or artistic work” (*Shorter OED*).

Reviewing the major texts of the day in order to lay down an encyclopedia of contemporary knowledge, Bataille’s highly influential journal *Critique* is an excellent example: “Nous nous proposons de fonder ... une revue d’information générale touchant l’ensemble des domaines de la connaissance—histoire, sciences, philosophie, techniques, aussi bien que l’actualité politique et littéraire. Cette revue sera composée d’analyses substantielles des principaux

ouvrages parus tant à l'étranger qu'en France."² Twenty years later, "la critique" will be at the centre of the row pitting new paradigms against established scholarship. Barthes more than once drew attention to the etymology of "critique," focusing particularly on the notion of the medical "critical moment" when the outcome will be determined: "*critiquer* (faire de la critique), c'est: mettre en crise, et il n'est pas possible de mettre en crise sans évaluer les conditions de la crise,"³ offering a fundamental challenge to received opinion. Raymond Picard, a leading Racinian scholar, published an angry polemic against the "nouvelle critique," *Nouvelle critique ou nouvelle imposture*. Singling out Barthes's *Sur Racine* for lengthy criticism, he attacked the sham foundations, as he saw them, of the new critics and the incoherence of their "propositions inexactes, contestables, saugrenues"⁴ and "interprétations délirantes"⁵ of this "critique fantasmagorique,"⁶ where "*on peut dire n'importe quoi*."⁷ One is irresistibly reminded of the recent exchange between Professor Niall Ferguson and Jane Smiley on the radio, where Ferguson described the historical novelist as "making it up," whereas the historian has to do "loads and loads of research" before "making the characters come alive." Smiley's mild "so you think I don't do any research?" bounced off his armor-plated certainties that facts plus skill was of a different order than facts plus imagination.⁸ One doubts that the contributors to the special issue of *Annales* entitled "Savoirs de la littérature" would agree with such a clear-cut divide.⁹

The great shifts in the 1960s and 1970s, when "French theory," from anthropology, history, philosophy, and psychoanalysis to linguistics and narratology, proved so influential across the humanities and social sciences, revealed not only the institutional challenges involved, but also the national challenges. Barthes contrasted "la critique universitaire" to the "critique d'interprétation." Semiology was "un mouvement de recherche, de combat aussi."¹⁰ Moreover, Barthes took on Racine, emblematic of key national values and of literature's pride of place as the vector of national values within the nation's identity, which must in part have provoked the ire of the traditionalists in the same way that *Re-Reading English*, a collection of essays informed by the new theoretical approaches and contesting the

² Quoted in Sylvie Patron, *Critique 1946-1996: une encyclopédie de l'esprit modern* (Saint-Germain la Blanche-Herbe: Editions de l'IMEC, 1999), 32.

³ Roland Barthes, "Ecrivains, Intellectuels, Professeurs," *Tel Quel* 47 (automne 1971): 14.

⁴ Raymond Picard, *Nouvelle critique nouvelle imposture* (Paris: Editions Pauvert, 1965), p. 47; and Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Seuil, 1963).

⁵ Picard, *Nouvelle critique nouvelle imposture*, p. 132.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸ The exchange occurred on BBC Radio 4, "Start the Week," October 12, 2015, accessed November 21, 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06gqdwk>. For Smiley's view of the exchange, see Jane Smiley, "History v. historical fiction: Historical fiction is not a secondary form—I was condescended to by a conservative historian who cannot see that he too constructs stories," *The Guardian*, October 15, 2015, accessed November 21, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/15/jane-smiley-niall-ferguson-history-versus-historical-fiction>.

⁹ "Savoirs de la littérature," special issue of *Annales* 65:2 (2010).

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, "Les deux critiques," *Essais critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1991).

ideological, national agendas of “Eng Lit,” including Shakespeare, did in the U.K.¹¹ Traditional critics were indeed accused of acting as “gate-keepers,” or rather ideological customs officers, trying to prevent all the dangerous ideas from crossing the Channel. Accusations of gate-keeping were also raised in questions of who got published, as *French Studies* refused to widen its parameters and as research funding panels were rumored to reject that anything that smacked of “cultural studies.” The discipline of the study of French fractured as new journals were formed to bypass the dominant literary ones, as an interdisciplinary and theoretically informed study of culture, society, and history reformulated literary studies as well, and when their creators moved into positions of institutional power, the curriculum changed also. The shift from French literature to French Studies tended to leave behind the erudite explication of the linguistic, stylistic features of a text, although that still remains an important feature of the French university tradition¹² and even more so in the literary scholarship in central European universities. And I am aware that investigations that take cultural representations as serious objects of study still do not meet with the approval of all historians. “This is what gives cultural studies a bad name,” a senior historian once told me, in a discussion of a particular application for funding. On the contrary, it was a well-grounded cultural history that argued that images and shifts in terminology opened up interesting new paths of enquiry. Cultural studies at its best.

Two major encyclopedic studies of the history of French literature provide strong evidence of the shifting disciplinary and national boundaries of the critical fields of study. Denis Hollier’s *New History of French Literature*¹³ shifted away from a literary history based on the canonical and supposedly superior value of literary discourse by using the simple expedient of producing a history organized around a sequence of dates, from 778 to 1989, with a large variety of different kinds of narrative for each entry. Art, literature, theater are entangled in their histories and vice versa (e.g., February 6, 1934; 1871 The Commune; 1968) and in new sites of intellectual power (1945 *Les Temps modernes*; 1985 *Apostrophes*). Hollier stresses this shift to the multiple and the fragmentary, away from what has become known as “le roman national,” literature as expression of a coherent unified national story. This very extensive overview is grounded in particularity, historical specificity, and multiplicity; the notion of progress disappears, while individual entries capture disparate materials and contradictions which seem to defy a unitary narrative. Literary criticism has been unshackled from a certain national discourse and freed also to range widely beyond traditional academic confines. How can one be French? Hollier asks in the final entry, stressing the fact that this view of France and its culture comes from America; foreignness, real and assumed, becomes

¹¹ Peter Widdowson, ed., *Re-Reading English* (New York: Methuen, 1982). The very negative review by Tom Paulin in the *London Review of Books* prompted a rallying of support to which I also contributed. For Paulin’s review, see Tom Paulin, “Faculty at War,” *LRB* 4:11, June 17, 1982, p. 14. The letters in response to Paulin’s review are available online, accessed November 21, 2015, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v04/n11/tom-paulin/faculty-at-war>.

¹² As this extract from the Call for Papers for a 2017 conference “Reflecting on the Studies/Etudes Paradigms” to be held at the Université Paris 13 shows: “In the 1960s and 1970s, many pluri-, inter- and transdisciplinary thematic research fields emerged and have since become institutionalized in the English-speaking world, under the general heading of “studies”—cultural studies, gender studies, postcolonial studies, childhood studies, conflict studies, etc. Conversely, it is only recently that French researchers have begun to work within these fields, and this late start has been diffident and limited.” (Email to Francofil, November 10, 2015, from co-organizer Anne-Charlotte Husson).

¹³ Denis Hollier, ed., *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

emblematic of literature's evasion of the geopolitics of language.¹⁴ In 2010, Christie McDonald and Susan Suleiman published *French Global*, situating themselves in relation to Hollier whose importance they acknowledge.¹⁵ Challenging the notion of a "seamless unity between French as language, French as literature, and French as nation,"¹⁶ with the analysis subdivided into sections on Spaces, Mobilities, and Multiplicities, they firmly replace the linearity of "le roman national," even the minimalist linearity of a chronology, by a model of contingent connections driving in a variety of directions and with no coordinating template. With the Global Positioning System as a helpful analogy, this literary historical "sat nav" opens up French literary history in time and space in ways that avoid a homogenizing globalization, commercialized disneyification, or presentism.¹⁷

However, as the articles in this forum remind us, disciplines do not thrive on intellectual fuel alone. The institutional organization of disciplines within university structures plays a fundamental role in their configuration and development. While models of transdisciplinary and transnational multiplicities give us new methodologies for cultural and historical analysis, while analysts of technological, economic, and commercial realities offer models of lightning-fast, globalized, commodified connectivities, universities appear rather ponderous in comparison, laboriously restructuring and restructuring again to capture the model that will finally catch the wave. But one shouldn't underestimate the pressures they are under, in the U.K. at least, in terms of external research funding performance and, of course, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) which replaced the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), where the review process seems most clearly to meet the descriptor of gate-keeping. In various oblique ways, the REF has also provoked reflection upon disciplinary boundaries, with increasing anxieties that interdisciplinary work falls between them. I was a member of the French panel in the 2001 RAE and its chair in 2008 where the differences between the study of French history, politics, sociology, or music within those disciplines and within French studies were at times unmistakable: the traditions and methodologies of each have their specificities which are subtle but no less real for that.

The REF also provokes the question: "what is peer review?"—in modern languages at least. As large numbers of panels and sub-panels are formed to evaluate the quality of the nation's research, peer review makes the exercise a cumbersome and expensive one, but academics have united to thwart any attempt to conduct the exercise in any other way. However, it is a moot point as to whether modern languages research still has peer review as commonly understood. In the RAE, French, Italian, German, Russian, Spanish, Celtic, Linguistics, and English were a distinct group of independent sub-panels; in REF 2014, they were all amalgamated (except for English) into one panel, and the specialists on the panel read across the languages submitting to it whether they were from the same language discipline or not. What scholarly journal in Italian or German or Russian studies would send me a book to review or an article to appraise? The first modern language to become a university subject, French as a discipline has always had a tenuous hold on the Academy, has always had to justify its place as an academic discipline rather than a professional skill to be acquired.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1066-7.

¹⁵ Christie McDonald and Susan Rubin Suleiman, eds., *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, x

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, ix-x and xvii.

After an onslaught in the 1980s, when language departments were expected to supplement their income by teaching language in the community (“research is a luxury we can’t afford,” I was told by a colleague at one point), we were saved by a combination of the paradigm shift, producing a much more varied and attractive curriculum, and the RAE which placed high quality research as central to a successful university department. But as undergraduate numbers decline and the REF sets a distance from specialist peer review, clouds are gathering on the horizon once more.

The RAE/REF is one reason for the marginalization of the review as a scholarly activity and is indeed shaping our research in other ways, as the evaluation of the societal impact of research contributes to quality ratings and funding and as universities discourage publication outside what they consider to be journals and publishers of established quality, ever eager to find the silver bullet that will deliver high ratings (they would do better to read panel instructions more carefully, but that is another story). One can understand the irritation expressed in this forum that such a valuable activity seems to have only a lowly status, but I would argue that the acknowledgement that individual reviews do not have the scale and scope of original research, and are therefore no substitute for it, does not alter the fact that they are a crucial element in the scholarly dialogue if ambitious, ground-breaking research is to prosper. That they are not considered to be “proper research” is to pose the question in the wrong terms, for those who are producing big, bold, ambitious research tend to be engaged on multiple fronts rather than advancing cautiously on a few. Reviews are an integral part of a balanced portfolio of academic activities: one may be seeking to push forward the frontiers of knowledge with one’s own research, but productive engagement with the wider discipline, through conference organization, journal and learned society involvement, and, of course, scholarly reviewing is also important. Research leaders within departments and those responsible for enabling strong career development should be encouraging rather than discouraging reviews and other scholarly activities, since they can only enhance an individual’s research by enhancing their understanding of what is at stake in discussing, defining, and refining disciplinary and interdisciplinary parameters of knowledge. And in this, the RAE/REF is not unhelpful, since the research environment (i.e. putting forward evidence of a productive research culture to support good research within a research unit) is a small but significant part of the assessment, and in Modern Languages at least, this includes the requirement to provide evidence of its members’ contribution to development of the discipline nationally and internationally, which clearly includes the writing of reviews.

Serious engagement with existing research, which is what the scholarly critique in all its forms is, is a *sine qua non* for serious research. Reviews are a wonderful space for the cross-fertilization and dissemination of ideas. To be one of the first to publicly engage with an extensive piece of research, to see where it fits, what it contributes, what it is displacing or re-writing, this is a challenging and responsible exercise that any reviewer should find intellectually exciting, and those that do are a joy to read.

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