UC Berkeley
Occasional Papers

Title
Knowledge Work, Literary History, and the Future of Literary Studies

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2z9649w4

Authors
Liu, Alan
Sas, Miryam
Ascoli, Albert
et al.

Publication Date
1998-03-01

KNOWLEDGE WORK, LITERARY HISTORY, AND THE FUTURE OF LITERARY STUDIES

ALAN LIU

MIRYAM SAS
ALBERT ASCOLI
SHARON MARCUS

Knowledge Work,
Literary History,
and the Future
of Literary Studies

■

■

■

Contents

Celebrating 10 years of the
Townsend Center for the Humanities

Preface

It was clear from the start that literary studies would figure importantly in the Townsend Center's 1997-98 programs on the future of the humanities. Not only do literary critics and historians outnumber other humanities scholars in the academy, they are also responsible for the most heated debates about purpose and direction that have flared up in the humanities over the past two or three decades. A recent number of *Daedalus*, the journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, points to literary studies as a prime example of "division and fragmentation" in American academic culture. In a survey of humanities disciplines sponsored by the Mellon Foundation it is a literary critic who, only partly tongue-in-cheek, caricatures developments in the humanities as a spiralling list of insurgencies: "radical social protest in the late 1960s; deconstruction in the 1970s; ethnic, feminist, and Marxist cultural studies in the 1980s; post-modernist sexuality in the 1990s; and rampant careerism from beginning to end. What else is there to say?"

There is of course a great deal more to say. The Mellon volume arguably testifies as much to continuity as to change, to intellectual energy and productivity, to the critical engagement and capacity for renewal that keep the humanities and literary studies in particular from withering on the vine. In other disciplines the rise and fall of hypotheses is regarded as a sign of vitality, not as a failing. Without the burden of a double standard, the practice of literary studies looks, unsurprisingly, like a varied, prolific, often contentious field where people quite rightly worry about the nature and the status of the literary.

No one is more engaged or more provocative on this issue than Alan Liu. Professor of English at the University of California at Santa Barbara, he is a major historian of British romantic literature whose magnum opus *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* examines the creation of a distinctly modern literary imagination. He is also a literary theorist whose essays pay particular attention in a post-modern key to the contexts of literary theory and practice. Then again, Professor Liu is the "weaver" of the Voice of the Shuttle (from the Greek myth of Philomela, who weaves a tapestry to convey a story she is unable to speak), the premier web site for humanities research on the internet (http://humanitas.ucsb.edu/shuttle). This hands-on work connects in turn to a fullscale inquiry on the prospects of literary knowledge in an "information age" driven by digital technology, management systems, and corporate economics. *The Future Literary: Literary History and the Culture of Information*, Liu's book in progress, investigates a series of parallels and conjunctions that the newest of the "new" literary studies have hardly discerned, let alone come to terms with.

What follows is an abridgement that Professor Liu generously allowed us to make from a longer paper he presented in Berkeley on March 12, 1998. This is followed by comments solicited for the occasion from three Berkeley colleagues working in very different literatures and literary-critical traditions. Excerpts from Alan Liu's responses to those remarks and questions from the audience round out the record of an occasion that was as collegial as it was spirited and intense. This is a good sign that literary studies do have a future after all.

—Randolph Starn
Director, Townsend Center for the Humanities
Marian E. Koshland Distinguished Professor in the Humanities

The Downsizing of Knowledge:
Knowledge Work and Literary History

Alan Liu

This talk is about literature caught between the current fascination of academic intellectuals with cultural context and the matching dazzlement in general culture with information.

This is to say that my talk is not about literature at all—which has increasingly lost its category distinction on a gradient spanning from "textuality" and "discourse" to information—but the literary. Whether we should elegize or celebrate "the death of literature"—as in Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* or John Beverley's *Against Literature*, respectively—is now beside the point. The vital task for literary study in the age of total context/information is to inquire into the independent fate of the value, labeled "aesthetic," once managed primarily by literature. In the wake of literature, is the value of the literary also inescapably dying? This is one way to read the powerful dirge John Guillory sounds in *Cultural Capital* over the "perceived decline in the cultural significance of literature itself, the perceived marginality of literary culture to the modern social order."[1] Or if not—to entertain Guillory's concluding prophetic-elegy, his surprising surmise of a redemptive "aestheticism unbound" (340)—where could literariness go and what does it yet have to do?

Since the fate of the literary is an abstraction unless we also address the fate of literary people, the operative question becomes: what is the relation

between the predominantly academic knowledge workers who currently manage literary value in "context" and the broader realm of professional, managerial, and technical knowledge workers who manage information value in "systems"? What, in other words, is the relation between those who train (and embody) the "well-read" once destined for power and those who now ensure that power goes to the "well-informed"?

The recognition that starts this line of inquiry is perhaps most sharply etched for academic intellectuals like myself who staked their careers in the 1980s on joining at the hip literary studies to cultural studies. It might be said with Kafkaesque irony: I went to sleep one day a cultural critic and woke the next metamorphosed into a data processor. It is not just that cultural "context" and "information" have come to approximate each other in their gross anatomy (each requiring the same kind of gathering, collating and filtering work to "decode"); now even the fine structure seems to match. In a convergence so massive as to be all but indiscernible in normal academic practice, advanced academic literary theory has evolved since the 1970s from structuralism through deconstruction to cultural/multicultural criticism so as to swing into conjunction with an information society evolving from logocentric corporations and broadcast empires to the techno-informatic equivalents of "diversity": flexible-team corporations and distributed information networks. To put it crudely, the academic controversies of the past two decades may not have been about supplanting the author or the canon with the deconstructive "intertext" or cultural "context." Perhaps such controversies were really about recruiting professional interpreters for an impending epistemological merger with the software-telecom-cable-Hollywood conglomerates now promising that ultimate intertext or context: high bandwidth information.

The well-known epilogue to Stephen Greenblatt's paradigm of New Historicist criticism, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, needs to be updated. For the 1990s the scene in which Greenblatt reads Clifford Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures* while sitting on a plane with a man whose son is dying would require the camera to pull back to reveal the laptop computer that all the corporate intelligentsia up and down the aisle have open instead of a book. Greenblatt romancing Geertz (and, admittedly, myself romancing Wordsworth's "sense of history" in the 1980s)

is as expert at opening archives of cultural memory as the managerial/professional/technical intelligentsia are at neuromancing databases and spreadsheets. Cultural-critical experts such as Greenblatt "read" in a manner originally schooled by the technical rigor of formalism, while corporate intelligentsia "process" in the burgeoning corporate learning-industry—Disney U., Motorola U., Solectron U., BMW Study City, and so on. Even the technical jargon and overall *ethos* seem congruent: "politically correct" academic anti-foundationalisms are matched by the mytho-Japanese anti-foundationalisms of the new corporate correctness: "continuous improvement (*kaizen*), just-in-time delivery, total quality, statistical process control, and 'design for' manufacture and assembly."[2]

Of course, the convergence between academic humanities "research" (the very term is symptomatic) and corporate, government, media, or military knowledge work has developed over time—in some views since turn-of-the-century U.S. universities first modernized under the influence of corporate capitalism, since the subsequent period from 1900 to 1930 when the academic and white-collar sectors boomed in tandem, or at least since the post-World War II boom when the relation between academic science and the military-industrial-government complex most claimed attention. Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) is one well-known earlier critique of such convergence upon "performative knowledge" or what Bill Readings, extending Lyotard's case in *The University in Ruins* (1996), calls corporatist "excellent knowledge." But it is only in our present moment, I would argue, that it has become possible to grasp the full implications of this convergence—above all, to recognize that the key issue now affecting a field like literary studies is the link between academic literary management and extra-academic information management. The combined ideological and infrastructural build-up to year "2000" witnesses the emergence of a new pan-knowledge that seems destined to make all other kinds, and especially all historical knowledges, obsolete.

Such a recognition is called forth by the massive change in the status of knowledge work since the 70s and 80s when the media myth of the "me"-generation arose on the assumption that there was indeed a universal knowledge identity/class coming to be. Given the seeming *fait accompli* of a consciousness- or expertise-based culture, we should remember that the emancipatory potential

of knowledge once seemed to be the issue. Could consciousness be liberating? Could expertise be vanguardist? But now a great, mind-numbing retrenchment has come: "restructuring" or "downsizing," the U.S.-led systemic reorganization of knowledge work with such corollaries as total quality management, just-in-time production, out-sourcing, flex-timing, and, above all, information technology (IT) has been overtaking all our major public and private sectors. First the 1981-82 recession generated the twin attraction of IT and "demassing layoffs" in the industrial-equipment and commodity-oriented industries. Then the early 90s recession prompted the subsequent gold rush (continuing through the mid-90s "jobless recovery" to the present enigma of job-creation with downsizing) toward ever more IT and increasingly pervasive, if also more surgical, "reengineering," "flattening," "decruiting," and "disintermediation" layoffs.

The rationale for all the wirings and firings has now arrived in virtually every register of social experience, so that it might well be called our postindustrial doxa or foundational belief. It is tempting to play this explanation on multiple tracks—as it appears in academia, the military, medicine, or government, for example. But it is most crucial, I believe, to emphasize the corporate sector, the present conceptual and not just practical influence of which most academic humanists have barely begun to recognize. As Michel Vilette puts it, "The field of management has contaminated all segments of society and is perceived as a univer-sal cultural model."[3] It is in the corporate sector that the new one-size-fits-all paradigm of knowledge is being fashioned for wholesale application to other realms—even to the extreme, for instance, of the unabashedly corporatist "Continuous Quality Improvement" (CQI) and Just-in-Time Training (JITT) movements in higher education. My particular objects of study are the prolific business bestsellers of the 90s, all of which depend in turn on a more specialized archive of business research. "These books," Armand Mattelart comments, "which enjoyed a transnational readership far broader than just business executives, provided a medium for the followers of the new business doctrine... a veritable cult of enterprise, bordering on the religious."[4]

According to the orthodoxy of such works, in the age of global competi-tion knowledge work is essential, so essential as to have caused a foundational shift in the "being" of business organizations. Whereas matter had been the essence in

the industrial age (a corporation not only processed matter but was its material factories, inventory, and people), now matter-work is for the third world. If the U.S.-led West is to stay ahead of its Latin American and Far-Eastern minions, so goes the thesis, postindustrial corporations must de-essentialize themselves until they are nothing but information processors or (since durables and consumables still have to be produced) at least can be made to act like information processing— i.e., to consist of plants, goods, and people endowed with the quick-turnaround responsiveness, flexibility, and ultimate erasability of bits.

Hence the basic logic of downsizing. Picture the postindustrial corporation as a superconducting wire designed for resistance-free flow of information. The ideal organization is one that has stripped out all intermediary levels of equipment, inventory, processes, departments, and people so that the information necessary to produce, for example, a new car flows laterally between customers, sales, design, plant, and suppliers with the speed of light. Everyone and everything is part of an information network whose base units are flexible team workers incessantly communicating with each other and with the larger organization. Any vertical hierarchy remaining in the flattened organization is greased for information flow: the ideal CEO communicates with operations directly or through severely pared down middle-manager layers. Nor, we may note, is the image of a superconducting wire far from literal truth. The mania for information flow in the 90s has been a symptomatic form of corporate IT: LANs, "groupware," "intranets," and team-communication products. "Hey, look," IBM's Lotus division declared in an advertisement for its SmartSuite™, "Another software ad promising to get everyone working together in complete harmony. Be still, my heart." SmartSuite™ included products such as Team Consolidate™. Similarly, Microsoft pitched its Project™ program under the slogan: "Keep everyone moving on the same track with open lines of communication."[5] Information flow is everything.

So, too, according to the orthodoxy, knowledge workers shall be everything. For the information flow thus envisioned can only function if the network is operated at all its nodes by super-informed people able to subsume the roles of laid-off middle managers. Every team-worker in the new regime, therefore, must be trained and equipped for smart work. To cite the mantra of what Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith call "the wisdom of teams," there will be

frequent team brainstorming meetings, perpetual retraining motivated by "pay for knowledge," and constant dissemination of company philosophy and performance data.[6] "The newest and lowest-level employee," Joseph H. Boyett and Henry P. Conn say in *Workplace 2000*, "will be expected to know more about the company that employs him or her than many middle managers and most supervisors [once] knew..."[7] And at the top of the hierarchy, the CEO must himself become something like an ultra-clerk able to make fluent sense of company IT (spreadsheets, for example) to gain instantaneous apprehension of what scores of middle managers once would have taken weeks to synthesize.

The entire organization, in sum, will live or die by the current *idée fixe* of "Life Long Learning." Consequently, the jeremiad of neo-corporatism—in book after book—concerns the failure of traditional education to prepare the new force of smart workers. Instead, we learn, the new corporation must itself shoulder this responsibility and become, in Peter Senge's now famed phrase, the "learning organization." The learning organization is "where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together."[8] If to academic ears accustomed to the rhetoric of commencement ceremonies this sounds like wholesale appropriation of the educational mission, that is because it is. Tom Peters thus opens a section of his *Liberation Management* by at one stroke redefining his alma mater, Stanford University, as the creation of a great "information organizer" (Leland Stanford). The conclusion follows with pitiless efficiency: "Organizations are pure information processing machines—nothing less, nothing more."[9]

Despite criticism in the press and elsewhere, and despite the tightening of the skilled labor market in the late 90s, the new corporatism has not seriously had to acknowledge heterodox objections to such orthodox neo-corporatism as anything more than a public-relations problem. Neo-corporatism assumes fundamentally that total determination is a done deed (enforced by "global competition") and that the dissent of employed individuals, groups, or classes is irrelevant. While it would be too facile to say that the new corporatism will never accommodate any critique within, the salient fact is that such critique emerges on a different plane. Representative are the social policy issues that Davidow and Malone pose in their last chapter when they ask if the "virtual corporation" can be

"virtuous" (266) or the recommendation by Maynard and Mehrtens that "fourth-wave" corporations must "make the intellectual shift from wanting to beat the competition to wanting to serve the world."[10] Critique of, and in, the new corporatism plays out on the plane of the *whole* corporate entity.

And herein lies what for us in the academy is the very crux of the issue. To bring to a head this review of explanations of knowledge work, the new corporatism knows neither the subject nor class of knowledge as the academy knows them. It is the "dispersal," "weakness," or "contradiction" of both (as academe characterize them) extrapolated to become the total negation of both that is the whole corporate entity. The new corporatism, in other words, is at once the logical extreme and annihilation, the *Aufhebung,* of identity and class. We must rethink the notion of negation accordingly if we are to avoid relapsing into familiar but now outdated heterodox logics of identity-group and class oppression—the oppositional or dialectical formulations, that is, of "them" versus "us" or "big company" versus "little worker." What is distinctively new about the new corporatism is that it does not so much arouse identity and class antagonisms as take them over through that most powerful manner of postindustrial negation: simulation. The team is designed from the ground up to "simulate away" identity groups and class.

To understand how, we must turn our gaze full upon the anti-historicism of business prophecy. As should be clear even from our brief view of it, this anti-historicism is profound yet often also so automatic and slick that it might be likened to a shrink-wrapped, one-minute version of Alvin Toffler's *Third Wave* bundled together with Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man.* On the menu bar of each of the business bestsellers, as it were, there is a big button marked "Delete History." Here, for example, is the precision model of historical obsolescence offered by Maynard and Mehrtens's *Fourth Wave*:

> The First Wave of change, the agricultural revolution, has essentially ended and will not be of concern here. The Second Wave, coincidental with industrialization, has covered much of the Earth and continues to spread, while a new, postindustrial Third Wave is gathering force.... We see a Fourth Wave following close upon the Third. (5-6)

The possibility that the agricultural revolution may just now be reaching broad expanses of the globe in complex collaboration with the industrial revolution (tractors in Africa, for example) is moot: in this starkly unlayered view of history the world is a diskette that can be reformatted any number of times. Or again, consider the Bible of the restructuring movement, Michael Hammer and James Champy's *Reengineering the Corporation*, which urges "fundamental," "radical," and "dramatic" change. "When someone asks us for a quick definition of business reengineering," Hammer and Champy declare, "we say it means 'starting over.' It doesn't mean tinkering with what already exists or making incremental changes that leave basic structures intact."[11] Peter Drucker, the dean of U.S. management theory, sums it up: "Innovation," he says, "means, first, the systematic sloughing off of yesterday."[12]

We might put the case in largest view as follows. Contemporary management theory is the latest claimant in an Enlightenment genealogy. As perhaps the most unmediated of anti-historicisms since the French Revolution (which presumed to throw out the past to start over again in Revolutionary Year One), management theory's universalism, progressivism, and rationalism resolve with stark clarity at base into a neo-Enlightenment theory of history. This theory (in a severe truncation of Fukuyama's thesis) holds that the only significant history is the end of history, or Reason. That end may be imagined at the teleological close to history, but it is ordinarily implanted as a sort of "temporary *telos*" in every point of significance in history. History in this view (and even in its counter-Enlightenment critique, as in Foucault) is finally all about "epochal," "revolutionary," or "epistemic" moments of change when history effectively starts anew—when it is historicity itself, in other words, that disappears from or, in a modern critique, becomes repressed in the apparatuses of Reason. Our greatest, contemporary holdover from the Enlightenment, it might thus be said, is the belief that civilization is "managed history." Whether one champions or critiques it, "civilization" simply *is* the faith that history can be rationally managed and that therefore, insofar as history from another point of view is precisely that which is unmanageable and irrational (Revolutionary mobs, the "unconscious," "Unreason," etc.), it must finally be managed through the overthrow/repression of history itself. Postindustrial management theory is the *ne plus ultra* of the

"restructuring" revolution initiated by the French Revolution with its radical political, economic, military, educational, and other reengineerings.

Now we can understand why those immediate predecessors to academic subject- and sociological-class critique—essentialist identity politics and traditional Marxism, respectively—seem so distinctly unenlightened in the 90s. These perspectives were predicated above all on remembering the historical struggles of peoples and classes—even to the point that the very process of "dispersing" or "weakening" identity (so phrased in subject- and New-Class critique) was experienced historically as the saga of diaspora. And, by extension, we also know what the postindustrial corporation must do to "manage" identity groups and classes so thoroughly (in a constructionism that is the extreme of subject- and sociological-class critique) that it elides their last vestiges. It has to hide their history. Just as the French Revolution attempted to suppress the historical identity of estates and regions to ensure that everyone high and low, Parisian and provincial, would be "fraternal," so now the new corporation does the same for groups and classes.

But there is a difference. The Revolution had substituted for historical identity a "representation" of national identity that was first of all what scholars of the period have called "theatrical" representation. The new representative politics of the nation-state, in other words, was theater before it was political reality, and one could only be fraternal if one "performed" the role, complete with improvised clothes and speech-forms, of "*citoyen*." By emphasizing the poles of the local and global, or intra- and international, to the exclusion of the mediating nation-concept, "multinational" corporations create a post-representational identity that is not so much theater as what postmodern theorists call "simulation." Simulation is representation backed up by no reality—or, what is the same, by "mass" realities too simultaneously local and global for representations of nation-state vintage to capture. The team is the cellular unit of such corporate simulated identity. At once local and global, here and everywhere, teams are a "fraternity" that bypasses both the essential nation and, arising originally to contest the melting-pot identity of such nation-, essential group- and class-formations.

To say that the team "simulates away" identity, then, amounts to saying that it deletes the historical identity of the folk's "habitus" (Bourdieu), "lifeworld"

(Habermas), or (as the Birmingham Cultural Studies group terms it) "customary corporation," and then preempts the recapture of that identity by the great political, economic, and other institutions of the nation-state era that had arisen specifically to manage that recapture, i.e., to "modernize" and "bureaucratize" the folk. Identity is recaptured for a new "flexible" bureaucracy—the team-corporation—designed to forge no recognizable national, group, or class identification ("our country/group/class: love it or leave it"). Instead the new bureaucracy promotes simulated identification with the team, simulated identification with all the higher organizational forms of the team-corporation (enterprise, alliance, megagroup, etc.), even simulated identification with "global competition" itself ("global competition: love it or leave it").

Consider, therefore, the recent fate of identity groups and classes in the corporation. In regard to groups, for example, the most instructive example is U.S. "diversity management." Diversity-management theory arose in several works of 1991—most influentially, for example, R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr.'s *Beyond Race and Gender*—and has since swollen into a whole movement of studies, training programs, and corporate initiatives. Prompted by the highly influential forecast of future demographic diversity contained in the 1987 Hudson Institute report *Workforce 2000*, the movement explicitly discounts diversity efforts driven by statutes redressing past discrimination. Instead, it makes diversity all about present business self-interest. To cite the subtitle of Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe's *Diverse Teams at Work*, it is about "capitalizing on the power of diversity."[13] Or as Roosevelt Thomas puts it: "Burning the increasingly diverse human resource fuel" and unleashing the "power that all the various groups in our national work force have to offer" is "an opportunity for competitive advantage."[14]

"Workforce 2000," in short, means that "Slavery Pre-1861," "Railroads Pre-1850," "Ellis Island 1892-1943," or "California 1990s" are not to the point—except (to put the pedal to Thomas's metaphor) insofar as their power may be drilled out of the historical ground, clarified of their dinosaur identities, and pumped into a corporate engine that had run on gas but now must guzzle any old diesel, methane, or perhaps even gasahol. We cannot be content with mere bumper stickers for history—part of the "Workforce 2000" mindset itself—if we are to grasp the exact manner in which diversity management expends the past to compete in the present. What is the relevant history that is distilled out of the picture?

Without entering into too much detail, the broadly historical intent of the question will be served if we answer it roughly as follows. Identity groups as we now know them originally arose on the industrial-age "line" or "shift" populated in different ways by emigrants from the Old World to the New, the South to the North, and the country to the city. Previously, the identities of many of these migrants had been rooted in agrarian-age work formations on the order of the yeoman "household" (the extended family with or without live-in servants). Together with its clan, village, parish, estate, and other envelopments, such household culture was saturated with the kind of blood, kin, religious, gender, language and other solidarities that would later be called "race," "ethnicity," and so on. But crucially, such solidarities were not in themselves race, ethnic, gender, or other constructs in our sense. Constructs of this modern sort only became experientially real in dislocation from their original location—i.e., in the diaspora that transplanted the household onto the line/shift as a fragmented social system needing to be reconsolidated in a new set of cultural formations in competition with those of other diasporic groups. "Experientially real" in my phrasing here means that while dislocation in fact derealized known cultural reality, it was compensated for by an abiding sense of history—a sense that the very process of reality-turning-unreal (historical change) was a deeper reality cognate with identity. "Everything we once knew is gone and we are as strangers in this land," history says, "and therefore we are who we are."

We now know how diversity management must proceed. Increasingly, it concentrates on "team-building" or, in the now standard terminology, "diversity teams." For the team concept, of course, is the perfect way to deinstall not so much the actual line/shift as the relation between the worker and the line. Join the team; leave your identity group and history behind to enlist in a "small group culture" so semi-autonomous that it meets, talks, works, plays together, and even has the celebrated power to "stop the line." And once team culture is in place, then all the rest of downsizing culture follows: quality circles, smart work, flat management, and so on. The general principle, in other words, is to couple diversity to the total restructuring effort, as in Thomas's notion of "empowerment" in *Beyond Race and Gender*:

> Another word for the process of tapping employees' full potential is "empowerment"... In fact, a managing diversity capability is implicit

in several innovations already in process in progressive organizations. Some corporations.... are moving to "push decision making down." Others are implementing "total quality" initiatives. Still others have downsized their work forces in search of greater efficiency and productivity. All of these initiatives.... have one aspect in common: Their success depends on the ability to empower the total work force. (10)

Anthony Patrick Carnevale and Susan Carol Stone assert similarly that diversity simply corresponds with "total quality management," "reengineering," and other major restructuring imperatives.[15] The real work of achieving diversity, it is now believed, lies in achieving a proper "team" and "corporate culture" in the first place.

The real work, we may thus say, is capitalizing the very concept of "culture" so that the corporate culture at the end of the process becomes definitive of all culture. Such capitalization may be read everywhere in the implementation agendas that diversity management issues for diversity "inventories," "networking," mentoring, training exercises, etc. I take as illustration the section titled "Archaeology 101: Creating a Team Culture" in Rafael Gonzalez and Tamara Payne's article on "Teamwork and Diversity." "Team culture," Gonzalez and Payne define, "is a structure of experience that gives individuals":

1. A sense of who people are;
2. A sense of belonging;
3. A sense of behavior and an understanding of what they should be doing;
4. A set of problem-solving tools for daily coping in a particular environment;
5. The capacity and mechanisms for transmitting coping skills and knowledge.[16]

We can parse this definition of culture into two main components as follows. One is customary culture or culture as a way of being: "who people are" and "belonging" (#1-2). The other, of course, is a way of doing and, in particular, of doing business: the functionalism (#3) and instrumental-rationalism (#4-5) whose specifically postindustrial form is the frictionless alignment of technology and technique called "smart work." Building a team culture means adapting the notions of customary culture and business culture so that they slot easily into each other:

ways of being into ways of doing business. Or what is the same, both customary and business cultures must jack into a common model of capital specifically wired for postindustrialism. To adopt a governing metaphor whose relevance will be clear later, the particular cultural platform no longer matters if all equipment for being and doing link up through standard protocols to the same router.

Starting with #1-2 above, therefore, we see that customary culture is jacked into capital in a single, bold move: it is put in present tense ("who people are"). History is thus cut out of the circuit so cleanly that we might almost miss its absence for lack of obvious torn edges. Yet this one move makes possible the entire procedure of diversity management, which we might imagine on the basis of our governing metaphor as follows. Picture history as an original "file" on a cultural "server" that must be transmitted to the corporate server by TCP/IP protocol (the Internet file transmission protocol according to which information is broken into discrete "packets," routed or switched semi-autonomously over the net, and then reassembled at the other end). Now take a single instantaneous cross-section of the network carrying the transmission. The result is an impression of multiple strands and nodes each holding discrete, self-contained packets that are not only oblivious to other packets from their file but may be intermixed with other files. Just so, the standard procedure of diversity management is to approach culture as disassociated "traits" (i.e., cultural "packets") that do not appear to cohere logically because their historical "roots" (to allude to an older trope for networked identity) lie concealed. In Gonzalez and Payne's own meta-phor, therefore, diversity management is an "archaeology" limited to a single layer in a dig: it is the archaeology of the present. What "Archaeology 101" uncovers in "team members' cultural norms" are "dress and appearance" lying in one spot, "breaks, mealtimes, food" in another, relics for "beliefs" and "celebrations" in a third, etc. (127). The goal is to download "human resources" into the corpora-tion as a stockpile of capital arrayed as if in a single warehouse of the present. Or, rather, "stockpile" with its "just-in-case" philosophy is here exactly the wrong notion of capital. The goal is instead to make human resources conform to the nervous, jumpy, constantly assembled and reassembled "just-in-time" capital of postindustrialism. We might thus translate affirmative action for the year 2000 as follows: "we affirm the right of workers to carry around only as much of their

inventory of customs as needed, to adapt these customs (called "skills") flexibly to suit that final arbiter of custom, the customer, and to turn around on a dime to adopt new configurations of customs as needed (called "changing one's corporate culture")."

Of course, such a post-ethical approach to affirmative action might still ring a little hollow to anyone who expects capital to be legitimated even minimally on customary cultural grounds. Therefore, we must now turn to #3-5 in Gonzalez and Payne's definition to observe that even as diversity management retools the notion of customary culture to suit business culture, so it reciprocally alters the idea of business culture to accommodate customary culture. Or rather—and this is its real power—it inflates business culture until it simply subsumes culture at large and becomes self-legitimating.

The inflation I indicate is implicit in Gonzalez and Payne's prefatory state-ment that "when you create a work community... you're actually developing a culture" (126); or again, "work communities are a microcosm of life" (128). And it is evident in other works of diversity management that explicitly define culture as technological-rational—e.g., Philip R. Harris and Robert T. Moran: "Culture is a distinctly human capacity for adapting to circumstances and transmitting this coping skill and knowledge to subsequent generations."[17] Most crucial to the inflation I indicate is the way in which diversity routinely disappears into its purely technical lookalike: "diversity of talent and expertise." Diversity in the latter mold, we may say, is not multicultural because it is not any-cultural in a customary sense. Constructed not so much from men and women as culture-bare atoms, config-ured around totally ad hoc tasks, and assisted in its internal chemistry by totally ad hoc social supports (the "parties, hoopla, and celebrations" that Katzenbach and Smith say are vital to "high-performance teams"), the team disintegrates all bonds of race, ethnicity, gender, and so on to create "just-in-time" or "on-the-fly" cultures diversified by "skills" and "talents." The capitalization of customary culture as an aggregate of "traits," in short, is legitimate because all culture is merely a modular capital of "skills" and "talents."

The appropriateness of subordinating "archaeology," "atoms," and so on to our governing imagery of "jacks," "networks," and "TCP/IP protocol" can now be explained. The image that best describes "culture" as understood by di-versity management is indeed a network through which culture circulates in packet-

traits of instantaneous, history-less "information." The great allegory (and not just medium) of postindustrial capital, in other words, is digital. Just as all good capital is as simultaneously uniform and flexible as a bit, according to the allegory, so all culture is as uniform in its multiculturalism as, say, Silicon Valley or Seattle technoculture. Not enough color? Just use the managerial equivalent of a graphics program to change the "palette" of traits; apply a "filter"; and instantly re-pixelate the image. A million different images of culture result, yet—and this is why such images are at last "simulations" of culture—all the differences turn out to be part of the same culture of information management. Not accidentally, we notice, the final consequence of the "diversity" = "diversity of talent" thesis is that diversity inevitably expands to include everyone. All differences, as it were, are merely technical. Let us consider, for example, Griggs' ideas on who gets to count as diverse:

> I believe diversity should be defined in the broadest possible way. Not only does diversity include differences in age, race, gender, physical ability, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic class, education, region of origin, language, and so forth but also differences in life experience, position in the family, personality, job function, rank within a hierarchy, and other such characteristics that go into forming an individual's perspective. Within an organization, diversity encompasses every individual difference that affects a task or relationship.[18] (Griggs and Louw 6)

In the end, however much it is possible to admire the practical achievement of diversity management, it is accurate to say that the "team culture" and "corporate culture" it strives for inculcates an undecidable multi-/monoculture: a simulated culture at once so big with ethnic, racial, gender, and other identities *and* neutral with respect to those identities that it is not just "beyond race and gender" but beyond culture. In Harris and Moran's prophesy (chilling in its matter-of-factness): "a unique global culture with some common characteristics may be emerging" (10).

To conclude: the merger of the new corporatism with subject- and class-critique, I believe, puts in place the last piece we need in order to characterize our contemporary understanding of knowledge work. We might equate the kind of "merger" I indicate with "*sous rature*" in literary theory. As in some Shelleyan

"Triumph of Life" (as read by Paul de Man), our contemporary understanding of understanding arises when the subject is at once erased/simulated (Shelley: "masked") by the New Class; and then both subject and class are in turn masked by the new corporation. Such is the real-life deconstruction of knowledge that is the Triumph of the Corporation. Indeed, perhaps that is how Shelley's late-Enlightenment poem with its unfinished vision of multitudes driven before the chariot of Life would had to have been completed: upon the clarification that the ultimate multitude, and life, is corporate. Capping the sequence of Enlightenment theories of civilization, the new corporatism is an end-of-history vision of civilization that not only throws all its predecessors into the dustbin of history but throws away the very notion of relevant "history." History conceived as erasure—the disfiguration of one age by another—itself operates under the sign of erasure.

Now, perhaps, we can understand the true meaning of that emancipation proclamation of the information age uttered as early as 1984 by Stewart Brand, publisher of *The Whole Earth Catalog*: "information wants to be free." In the succeeding millennium of the Whole Earth Corporation, "information wants to be free" means that we are no longer allowed to say "we" want to be free. "We" the subject and class of information culture, come fully to know our world only in that blinding moment of illumination when the world-network routes around our knowledge—i.e., the 'us' in our knowledge that Fukuyama (in the other half of his thesis) terms the "struggle for recognition" and Manuel Castells (in the second volume of his Information Age trilogy) terms "the power of identity." And we do not even need the hyperbole of cyberpunk science-fiction, with its unerring instinct for the mutilation of subjects (e.g., the silicon-punctured bodies and flat-lined subjectivities of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*), to grasp the intensity of our loss—nor, the uncanny double of that intensity, the blurred *anomie* of it all. "X" marks the spot where the whole generation of incipient knowledge workers in the U.S. now succeeding the Baby Boomers—the generation caught in the "pipe-line" from education to the corporation—has been deleted from the network. "We" are no more than this "moment" when we have nothing more in common—as Jean-Luc Nancy might say in his *The Inoperative Community*—than our finitude, our extinction, our "death."

My tone, it will be recognized, is again elegiac. But that is because the fatal problem we began upon has been resumed at another level. The "death of

literature," we must now know, cannot be understood except against the background of the death of knowledge in the information age—i.e., the dying of "our" knowledge into a paradigm of knowledge work that grants us virtual "freedom" only by freeing us from all those things once thought to give freedom its point. Like refugees of consciousness embarked on the diaspora of the new century, we are given the opportunity to be free of identity, home, peoples, security, everything.

So what is a knowledge worker—in school, looking for work, at work, or laid off from work—to do? How does one think and feel and live so as to make reparation, to seek what one of our earliest poets of knowledge work, Wordsworth, called "abundant recompense"? And how does one do so, moreover, without being nostalgic for foreclosed group and class identities in a manner that would inauthentically mimic the great fundamentalist, nationalist, and ethnic reactionisms of the peoples of the world excluded from modern "knowledge"? After all, the situation of someone whose identity is excluded precisely through being included in the pipeline of knowledge work is different. Even if one in this position is heterodox enough to mourn the culture of identity groups and classes, one is increasingly powerless to believe that such identity formations can any longer meaningfully organize the experience of work except insofar as they are accommodated within the new corporation as simulacra of themselves (i.e., as a "diversity" of "skills"). Just as "literature" may be dead while the value of the "literary" survives, as I suggested, so groups and class among knowledge workers may now be extinct where it most counts—in the culture of production—even as the need for the identity function they once supplied continues unabated.

Since the very technological-rationality of a phrase like "identity function" is complicitous with the plight of knowledge-worker identity, perhaps we would do better to think of the hunger for identity that survives within the pipeline as a craving for a restorative ethic preliminary to any particular saving identity—an ethic, in other words, able to withstand the otherwise relentless ethics of postindustrialism. For the life that can now make the knowledge worker not just informed but well-informed must be a whole *ethos* able not just to live with, but to make a life of, the great succession of *ethoi* that have been cumulatively recruited to industrialism and postindustrialism to achieve the present "spirit" of technological rationality: Weberian "Protestant ethic," Schumpeterian

"creative destruction," Japanese *wa* or harmony (as pressed into the service of explaining the once blossoming "Asian economic miracle"), and now Castells' "spirit of informationalism."[19] If there is to be a "right" life of information that can make the knowledge worker not just informed but, in a fundamental sense, well-informed, then such wealth—it may be deduced—must lie paradoxically in some shadow *ethos* or shadow *doxa* reposed within the very valley of death of contemporary Knowledge.

It is upon such an "unknown *ethos*" or "*ethos* of the unknown" within the kingdom of Knowledge, as it might be called, that academic knowledge work must now come to bear or not at all. For the humanities, this is where the contest for "humanity" now lies: to educate the *ethos* of the unknown so that it is not also the same as an *ethos* of the unknowing, of resenting the fated life of Knowledge so much that one could "care less" for knowledge. We remember, after all, that the problem of ethical information—of information true for knowledge as well as for life—is a very old one, and that literature above all other knowledges once thought it had the answer. Classical literature had conceived the literary precisely as the art necessary to value the "truth" in any mere information (Aristotle: poetry shows "general truths"; Horace: poetry teaches truth by "informing and delighting"; Sidney: poetry teaches truth by delighting). Only so could information truly be in-forming or what Sidney called *architectonike*, "which stands... in the knowledge of a man's self, in the ethic and politic consideration, with the end of well doing and not of well knowing only." In the face of massive new historical and scientific information (skipping ahead several ages here), Romantic literature attempted even more fully to give truth the distinction of the aesthetic. If factual knowledge had a utility of epochal importance, as Thomas Love Peacock put it in his indictment of uninformed poets (*The Four Ages of Poetry*, a sort of *Workplace 2000* for his time), then utility itself—as Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* answered in its memorable counter-indictment of information—must be accountable to art. Only so could information be *architectonike* in Shelley's sense:

> We have more moral, political and historical wisdom, than we know
> how to reduce into practice; we have more scientific and economical
> knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the
> produce which it multiplies. The poetry in these systems of thought,

is concealed by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes....
We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want
the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the po-
etry of life....

And so, too, in our own century, the New Critics took their stand against
modern industrial and scientific information ("A poem should not mean / But
be") by demanding that knowledge be accountable to an American, pragmatist
architectonike. Art allows us to value amid the dehumanizing data of modernity
the compound "utility + truth" they named "experience." For Cleanth Brooks,
for example, poetry was thus a non-aristocratic Sidneyanism or non-transcenden-
tal Shelleyanism, a tonic as much as *architectonike*: "The characteristic unity of a
poem... lies in the unification of attitudes into a hierarchy subordinated to a total
and governing attitude. In the unified poem, the poet has 'come to terms' with
his experience."[20] "Experience" was the shadow *doxa* of technological rationality
to which Brooks (above all other New Critics) dedicated the poem as "paradox."[21]

What is the restorative experience, tonic, or *ethos* of the contemporary
knowledge worker caught in the pipeline? What is the life-informing or govern-
ing attitude that literariness must now seek to inform well if it is to help repair the
tone of contemporary life? What is the *ethos* of the "unknown" that requires the
intervention of education to lead it beyond the *ethos* of the "unknowing"?

After all, even the mass aesthetics visible in such TV sitcoms of the 90s as
Friends (where an ensemble-cast playing the part of Gen-X'ers at once enacts and
repairs the concept of "team") entertains an abiding inquiry into what "being
well" in the age of the well-informed really means. Why not the literary, too,
informed as it is by such wealth of alternative identities and communities drawn
from that distinctively academic, non-end-of-history approach to literature
currently being rethought by cultural criticism: "literary history"? Why not the
literary, too, since in the academy it is already in the pipeline alongside—but
profoundly stratified from—the paradoxical contemporary experience, tonic, or
ethos of disenchanted knowledge whose name we have only to utter to realize
how difficult is the task of reparation: "cool."

ENDNOTES

1. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 166. See also, for example, x, 81, 153.

2. William H. Davidow and Michael S. Malone, *The Virtual Corporation: Structuring and Revitalizing the Corporation for the 21st Century* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 91.

3. Quoted in Armand Mattelart, *Mapping World Communications: War. Progress. Culture*, trans. Susan Emanuel and James A. Cohen (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1994), p.208. Cf., Herman Bryant Maynard, Jr., and Susan E. Mehrtens, *The Fourth Wave: Business in the 21st Century*, (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1993), 6-7: "The other institutions of society—political, educational, religious, social—have a decreasing ability to offer effective leadership: their resources limited, their following fragmented, their legitimacy increasingly questioned, politicians, academics, priests, and proselytizers have neither the resources nor the flexibility to mount an effective response to the manifold challenges we are facing. Business, by default, must begin to assume responsibility for the whole."

4. Mattelart, pp. 207, 208.

5. *PC Magazine* 15.11 (June11, 1966): 46-47, 2-3.

6. Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High Performance Organization* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

7. Joseph H. Boyett and Henry P. Conn, *Workplace 2000: The Revolution Reshaping American Business* (New York: Penguin, 1992).

8. Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 3.

9. Tom Peters, *Liberation Management: Necessary Disorganization for the Nanosecond Nineties* (New York: Ballantine, 1992), pp. 108-110.

10. Herman Bryant Maynard, Jr., and Susan E. Mehrtens, *The Fourth Wave: Business in the 21st Century* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1993), p. 9.

11. Michael Hammer and James Champy, *Reengineering the Corporation: A Manifesto for Business Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 31.

12. Peter F. Drucker, *Innovation and Entrepreneurship* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1985); quoted in Philip R. Harris and Robert T. Moran, *Managing Cultural Differences: Leadership Strategies for a New World of Business*, 4th ed. (Houston, Texas: Gulf, 1996), p. 114.

13. Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe, *Diverse Teams at Work: Capitalizing on the Power of Diversity* (Chicago, Illinois: Irwin, 1994)

14. R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr., *Beyond Race and Gender: Unleashing the Power of Your Total Work Force by Managing Diversity* (New York: AMACOM, 1991).

15. Anthony Patrick Carnevale and Susan Carol Stone, *The American Mosaic: An In-Depth Report on the Future of Diversity at Work* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), pp. 116-18.

16. Numbers added for convenience of reference. Rafael Gonzalez and Tamara Payne, "Teamwork and Diversity," in *Valuing Diversity: New Tools for a New Reality*, ed. Lewis Brown Griggs and Lente-Louise Louw (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), pp. 126.

17. Philip R. Harris and Robert T. Moran, *Managing Cultural Differences: Leadership Strategies for a New World of Business*, 4th ed. (Houston, Texas: Gulf, 1996), p. 10.

18. But see Griggs reflections on the risk of "taking refuge" in such a broad definition of diversity, p. 7.

19. Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy. Society and Culture*, 3 vols. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996-97), I:199.

20. Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1947, 1975), pp. 206-207. See also Brooks's invocation of T. S. Eliot's standard of poetic statements that can be accepted as "coherent, mature, and founded on the facts of experience" ("Irony as a Principle of Structure," in Hazard Adams, ed., *Critical Theory Since Plato*, rev. ed. [Forth Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992], p. 970). W. K. Wimsatt envisioned the same experience of *architectonike*: "If it be granted that the 'subject matter' of poetry is in a broad sense the moral realm, human actions as good or bad, with all their associated feelings, all the thought and imagination that goes with happiness and suffering... then... the complexity and unity of the

poem, is also its maturity or sophistication or richness or depth, and hence its value" *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Kentucky: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1954), p. 82.

21. Here (and more fully in the larger argument from which this talk is excerpted), I am indebted to John Guillory's discussion of Bourdieu's "*doxa*" and New Critical "paradox." See Guillory's *Cultural Capital*, pp. 134-75.

Respondents:
The Future of Literary Studies

Albert Russell Ascoli

When I originally accepted the assignment of participating in this colloquium on "The Future of Literary Studies," I felt pretty sure of myself. My talk would capitalize on one of several of my various private, intellectual and institutional personae, and would then go on to articulate what the "new world order" in the academic study of literature means to me and mine. Just so you know: I am a scholar, primarily, of periods, the Middle Ages and Renaissance, which have historically been given a central place in the curriculum, but which are now increasingly marginalized; I'm a member of a department that studies a cultural tradition that is at once central and marginal to Europe and to the Mediterranean Basin, and that, as department, is itself both marginal and central, at least historically, to the humanities; I'm a facilitator of the conversion of said department from a strict focus on the teaching of literature and language to a broader, permeable concept of interdisciplinary Italian Studies; recruiter of graduate students into an institution and a discipline whose futures are decidedly uncertain; citizen keenly aware of the gap between an educational institution rooted in traditional content and, especially, forms of knowledge and organized around a concept of individual continuity [tenure] which is increasingly antithetical to most of the forms of work for which we are supposedly training our students; parent of children who are struggling through an educational system on their way to a future whose instability is even more certain in their case than it is in ours.

And yet faced with Alan Liu's dense and remarkably well-informed discussion of the challenge presented by the new corporate culture of knowledge work to the institutional study of literature, I felt that none of these perspectives, by themselves or combined, had prepared me to respond to the challenge he

describes, although they have certainly readied me to fear what he says we should fear. Instead of an informed response, I felt I only had partial, fragmentary, and, in some real sense, deeply ignorant reactions to offer. But then, I thought, perhaps ignorance, "managed ignorance" in any case, is what may be needed when the problem, on the corporate side, and possibly on Professor Liu's, lies precisely in the attempt to master through a total, "comprehensive" knowing.

As I understand Alan Liu's talk, the Future of Literary Studies is pretty bleak. In fact, I infer, the future of the university itself is nothing to write home about, even assuming one knows where home is, off the Net. Professor Liu focuses on the privileged consumer of university-educated persons, that is, post-industrial corporate culture, to reveal a brave new world in which the perspectives of cultural and historical difference generated in the academy are appropriated and emptied of content to the end of making both individual person and external world disappear into an ever-present moment of production and consumption. What's worse, from our point of view, corporate culture has now declared itself free from the need of the general and specialized knowledges which the university claims to transmit: it absorbs all knowledges into itself, asserting, as it were, the complete integration of knowing promised by new interdisciplinary and globalized economies of learning. It does so, however, in the mode of "simulation," in which the perfect representation of integrated knowledge comes at the cost of losing all reference to a "known" beyond the corporate culture itself.

If, on the one hand, the paradoxical corporate model of "lifelong learning" whose goal is to be always living in a present moment which has neither past nor future seemingly makes the academy irrelevant; on the other, according to Professor Liu, the institutional study of literature has in many ways become indistinguishable from the corporation, or at least has been its unwitting collaborator. He observes, and I would certainly agree, that the dissolution of persons into systems and of systems into contradictions promoted by theory in the 70's and 80's morphs from radical critique into stooging for the boss rather too easily and conspicuously for comfort. Moreover, even at the point when he attempts to reclaim a special educational mission for the academy—to snatch "real knowledge" back from the clutches of its corporate "facsimile"—he argues that our knowledge work must, first of all, consist in reappropriating and retransforming

the categories, above all the "cool," which drive the motorless engine of post-industrial capital. The logic I take it is something like the following: they have become "us," thereby eliminating the need for "us," so we must become "them," if there is to be any "us" to oppose "them" at all in the future.

This is the crux of his talk, the place where his project stands or falls: how can we be like "them" without becoming indistingushable from "them"? One possible answer would be that we have "literature" while they don't. But, as far as I can tell, he doesn't make that answer: rather, he says, we have "history," while they don't. And with the addition of "history" culture turns back from "simulated" to "real" (even if in order to reclaim "reality" we have to look back with genuine nostalgia on taylorization and grey flannel suits drinking martinis: at least you knew where you stood under the high capitalist nation-state). In a minute I will come back to his claims about the distinctions to be made between "our" discourse and "theirs," through which the domain of literary study can be reclaimed as the locus of renewed *ethos* and ethical value in the great tradition of Aristotle, Horace, Sidney, Shelley, and Wordsworth.

First, however, I would like to note what to me is a remarkable absence from his discussion of the relation between literary study and corporate culture. His analysis of corporate knowledge work is based on describing the institutional uses to which knowledge workers are put, so that the claims of corporations to house genuine culture, real knowing, are demystified by contextualization. When he refers to our type of knowledge work, however, he omits the institutional frame: there is no attempt to characterize the ratio (admittedly complicated), between the traditional organization of knowledges within the academy, and the new corporate organization of knowing; and, in particular, there is no reference to the university's various attempts to accommodate itself institutionally to the new model (its own corporate downsizing, its own levelling of internal distinctions—known to us as "interdisciplinarity," or what might be called the "programming" of the university).

This omission (which, of course, may only be an omission from this lecture and not from his larger project) has several consequences, the most notable of which in the economy of the talk is that the "us" who oppose the "them" is not the university at large, not the aggregate of disciplinary and transdisciplinary

knowledges housed in and administered by a large institutional entity; instead it is specifically and only those who "currently manage literary value,"—that is, professors of literature (and, I might add, mostly professors of English literature). This leads to the disproportional, and one might argue "ethnocentric," vision of the fate of "aesthetic value" being entrusted solely to professors of literature (omitted: novelists, art historians, musicologists, book reviewers, etc.), and of a face-off, whose stakes are history and culture as we know them, between the Goliath of information culture, *tout court*, and the David of the English department (which to an Italianist always looks more like a Goliath...). Where, one asks, are the medical ethicists, the economists, the students of ethnicity, the specialists in comparative law, the anthropologists, and so on?

Admittedly, an argument from omission is a risky one, even when the claims of the speaker are as dramatically comprehensive as are Liu's. So let me turn, instead, to what *is* in the paper, and specifically to the two themes around which Liu articulates the threat of corporate knowledge work and attempts to distinguish that work from ours, and his: *apocalypse* and *simulation*. Both, I think, are legitimately applied to the nemesis he asks us to confront. Both, however, are arguably intrinsic to his own discourse, and to the institution—ours—which he opposes to the corporate world. There is a danger, in other words, that we have met the enemy and, as the by now thoroughly anachronistic Pogo of my childhood would have said, it is us.

For Liu, the basic problem with the new corporate concept of knowledge work is that it strips all knowing of its temporality and thus projects "the end of history" as the "end of culture," leaving its subjects without an Archimedean point of leverage to dislodge its ever more complete hold on them. But, I have to say, it is very hard to tell where corporate millennarianism leaves off and Liu's begins: his characterization of the new world of downsized, but also globalized, knowledge work suggests that something truly new, utterly different, totally irresistible is upon us, and that its reign may prove to be endless. (How else are we to explain that assembly line work and village life are more similar to each other in this talk than assembly line work is to the new corporate "team" structure.) For him, in other words, the new corporate culture is not just the propagator of an apocalyptic anti-ideological ideology of classlessness and identity-lessness, it is

itself the sign of apocalypse: the end of time, the end of history, or, at least, of "new historicism."

It is pretty hard to resist the sense that something very frightening is happening to us. Near-geometric accelerations in the growth of both population and technology have combined to create something called "globalization" which threatens to engulf us all (well, at least all of us who have computers). It both produces both rates of change absolutely unheard of in human history and, at the very same time, an homogenization of peoples and cultures. It creates situations in which old systems clearly do not work as they once did (e.g., nationstatehood) and in which we are constantly looking around for some way both to slow down change and to keep our sense of individual personhood intact. One possibility that Liu does not entertain, however, is that, given the overwhelming pressures being applied from all sides, some of the corporate strategies he describes *also* have the function of insulating those they surround from the pressures of an intolerably overheated historical machine in which change is constant and often terrifying.

That being said, I can't help but add that I share his sense of the dangers of the "end of history" mindset in corporations. My own way of talking about it focuses on the fact that these models tend to abolish not so much history as the very temporality of individual human life itself: you are inside and a wholly functioning part of the corporate entity only so long as your ability to live precisely and only in its present moment continues. When your ability to produce and reflect its knowledges declines or changes, you will be fired: there is no sense, in other words, that work should accommodate the evolving patterns of an individual human life in any way at all. Before we even get to the question of respecting individuality, much less group identity, this new corporate model fails to respect the basic outlines of humanity itself. I see something like that danger in Professor Liu's approach to the question too: new criticism gives way to new historicism gives way to new corporatism. Whatever is happening now consumes our attention fully—we are not capable of detaching ourselves from it: apocalypse now, apocalypse here. The key is to produce another "new" academic discourse for consumption. Those who can't keep up are left behind: they too are "history."

The first and strangest thing that struck me about Professor Liu's talk, however, has to do with his notion of "simulated knowledges." He describes:

"the merger of competing models of knowledge work once rooted in semi-autonomous academic, business, media, health-industry, government, military and other sectors that now... suddenly seem to fuse into a single, parsimonious continuum able to afford just one global understanding of understanding. It is this "pan-knowledge"... that now seems destined to make all other kinds, and especially all historical knowledges, obsolete." But then, of course, it turns out that this "pan-knowledge" does not actually know; rather, it simulates knowledge, and in particular it simulates the knowledge of individuals, of classes, of cultures, and thereby "disappears" them.[1]

A skeptical questioner might ask what exactly constitutes the line between Liu's discourse and the drive to "pan-knowledge" that he damns? Here is a literary scholar at a forum on literary studies giving a lecture whose primary content is the sociology, not to say epistemology, of corporate culture. Isn't this brilliantly "interdisciplinary" talk itself driven by the impulse to "pan-knowledge," to the comprehensive knowledge of histories and cultures, that informs so much of what is happening in the humanities, and in the Townsend Center for the Humanities, and even in my own little department of interdisciplinary "Italian Studies" today? And isn't there a chance that if a sociologist of corporations, or a particularly articulate corporate management person, happened by, she might think that this talk was itself a "simulation" of knowledge, handicapped by the speaker's lack of direct scholarly or practical expertise in the subject he is addressing? I'm not in a position, obviously, to make those judgments myself (and I genuinely admire the range of reading and thinking that has gone into Liu's project); but I can easily imagine their being made, for a variety of good and bad reasons.

That's not what's really strange about the idea of "simulated knowledge," however. What's really strange is the way that it reproduces a critique that is nearly three millennia old now, a critique that stands at the founding separation of intellectual disciplines in the Western tradition, a critique, not to put too fine a point on it, that Plato levelled precisely at literature, at the "literary," and, most especially, at the "literati," that is, at scholars of literature (or, rather, at their oral forerunners). In Plato's *Ion*, Socrates has a conversation with Ion, the leading performer of Homeric epic in his day. Ion claims that Homer's poems contain the totality of knowledge available to humanity, and that he himself is capable of

expounding all those knowledges, that he is, in other words, the "manager of poetic values" par excellence. Socrates, however, opposes him with the argument that Homer's poem does not contain genuine knowledge of horsemanship, warfare, sailing, medicine, and so on, but rather only empty simulacra of those knowledges, and that Ion himself knows only one thing: how to recite Homer's poetry. Not that Socrates has completely given up on the idea of a total knowledge, of course: he is reserving that for his own particular discourse, philosophy.

Now, what does it mean that Liu's critique of corporate "pan-knowledges" is structurally indistinguishable from Plato's attack on literature and the contemporary equivalent of "literary critics"? One thing I think it means is that Professor Liu is not fully comfortable with the imaginative, the "unreal" side of literature: hence the fact that his talk about literary studies focuses not on the recovery of literature but on the affirmation of *history*, that refreshing discipline which, as everyone knows, deals in the "real" rather than in "representations." Another may be that the basic problem here is not with corporate modes of representing knowledge, but with the purposes to which those representations are being put.

In any event, the implications that stand out for me in this beguiling and I hope persuasive analogy are two. First is that, as I have already begun to suggest, what Liu criticizes looks a lot like what he, and many of the rest of us, aspire to these days: a fully integrated interdisciplinarity capable of naming and confronting any problem whatsoever from the panoptical staging ground of "the Literature department." If this is so, it may well be that we are significantly responsible for encouraging the corporate approach that he describes: we may have been too *effective* as teachers, not too ineffectual. Second, that we might do well to return to the distinction that Plato made, and Liu elides, between the Homeric poems themselves and the people who perform and expound them. What distinguishes the "literary" mode of simulating "pan-knowledge" from either the corporation's or the university's mode (and Plato grudgingly recognized this elsewhere), is that it often marks and unmasks its simulations even as it offers them up. The same cannot be said for those who turn "literary study" into an architectonic science which enfolds ethics, information technology, sociology of corporations, history, and so on.

Now all of this might make it sound like I reject Alan Liu's concerns totally, that I don't see anything especially new or threatening about globalized, networked, post-industrial corporate culture, that I reject the new historicism and the cult (if not the culture) of interdisciplinarity, that I want to see a future for literary studies not much different from its past. Nothing could be further from the truth. His fears are my fears. His desire for interlocked and comprehensive knowledges is my desire. The fact is, however, that we seem to have very different senses of how well our, or anybody's, fears and desires can be translated smoothly into a capacity for mastery through understanding. We don't know where the corporate culture he describes is headed, what rough beast is now slouching toward the conference room. We don't even know how closely those books he's been reading reflect the "realities" of the situation in that benighted room. And we certainly don't know that, even if we succeeded in arresting the worst features of that culture through education, the basic underlying factors that produced it (the unprecedented growth of both population and technology, with all that goes with them: mobility, disposability, accessibility, etc.) will not throw up something worse for us to face.

The alternative I offer, both from preference and from necessity, is a form of "local knowledge" whose credo is crudely encapsulated in the phrase "managed ignorance" with which I began my response. The basic premise is that our capacity for knowing and acting, whether we are university professors, net mavins, or corporate teammates, is dramatically circumscribed no matter how great our access to "information" may seem to be. In the case of professors I would particularly note: 1) our own limited individual capacities to absorb and evolve knowledge (that is, our constituent incapacity for a thorough-going implementation of "life long learning" in the corporate sense, despite the fact that we, of all people, most aspire to realize that goal); 2) the various regimes that govern university professorship (requirement for publication, the tenure system, the department structure, the committee system, deans, the state legislature, etc.); 3) the intellectual and other pressures applied by the prevailing *doxa* and fads of our disciplines and/or groups of affiliation; and, finally, 4) the existence of other forms, some of them more important than our own, through which literature, and the aesthetic more generally, becomes accessible to society (books, movies, TVs, etc.). These

are our limits: but they are also what we have to teach: that the promise of total access and total knowledge is utterly bankrupt—that it is often most important to know what you don't know.

With these strictures I am, like Alan Liu, prepared to discuss the cataclysmic possibilities for the future of culture as we know it, to seek out interdisciplinary and theorized modes of knowledge that allow "us" to gain some sense of access to and mastery of a world that is spinning out of our control, even to try to "be cool" (ridiculous as that may sound to those of you who know me, or even those who have just listened to this talk). Without these premises, however, my feeling is that we will inevitably "become what we behold," as, in fact, I think Liu's talk risks doing. By mimicking the corporate notion of a "total knowledge" we do not become, as Liu hopes, the "real" version of that knowledge. Rather, as Plato might say, we become the "copy of a copy," the simulation of a simulation. Worse than that, we do not become "literary," except in the Socratic sense.

Literature, by which I actually mean any number of different narrativized and/or imagistic media, was always already what Liu says corporate culture is. Plato, and Liu, seem to think that this mode of being, the mode of "simulation," is a bad thing. I don't, or, at least I don't see it as necessarily bad. Rather than lusting after authenticity, insisting on having the "real," perhaps we should turn to what literature "historically" seems always to have been: a space for imaginative "speculation," a mirroring which is also an estranging, which is also, at times, a mode of getting outside of the boundaries of "comprehensive" systems—like Plato's, like the new corporate knowledge work. I think the thing that is most absent from Liu's talk, and most comforting or promising given the apocalyptic scenario he traces, is the idea that literature, in this broad sense, goes on in spite of "information culture," in spite of "them," and in spite of "us," for that matter.

ENDNOTES

1. Albert Ascoli cites a portion of Liu's presentation that does not appear in the edited version published here.

Miryam Sas

The definite article. No abstracting but at dawn or was it dawn but
if at dawn or in the dawn. In other words a thought as sure as a cloud.
Eruption of the river and a bridge. Exhaustively shaping everything.
There. A thing needing no explanation. The moon, like other
proverbs, is the recursive paradigm.

— Norma Cole, "So Probably Earlier"

Alan Liu's terrifying picture of team-information management's entering and
taking over the realm formerly known as identity or class or cultural/ethnic
affiliation is convincing in terms of the rhetoric of corporate and management
writings. This vision of the information future reels with the emptying of formerly
significant human narratives of the past, including stories of dislocation, exile, and
diaspora. As the passage of information loses its link with what was formerly called
meaning, notions of instantaneous usefulness and frictionless information flow
rise to the fore: just-in-time management, continuous quality improvement, and
other terms that many of us in the literary humanities encounter mainly when we
look over the shoulders of our neighbors' reading material on airplanes. Japanese
corporate management ideas (harmony, etc) have their Japanese labels removed:
in any case the connection to Japan seems to partake of the "cultural packet,"
piecemeal quality that corporatism gives to most of its usable data.

Alan Liu proposes the literary (to be distinguished from literature, which "is dead") as one possible place where we might look for a restorative ethic to counterbalance the virtualization of culture—as he says, "Why not the literary, too?" Here an *ethos* that has not yet been invented, an unknown *ethos*, or *ethos* of the unknown, might be created as a response to the problem of ethical information, without implying (necessarily) a nostalgia for group and class identities that are already foreclosed by the new corporate-influenced order of speed, simulation, and erasure.

I can imagine several possible routes by which to respond to such a picture. One could look in works of literature—or if literature as a category is foreclosed, then in the literary—for responses to ideas of speed and utility, facility and imposture, simulation and emptiness, that would offer the possibility of an analysis that responds to Liu's critique. This will be part of what I do today, taking examples from Baudelaire, Mishima, and the Japanese Futurists. Baudelaire's writings address often and explicitly an image of the city that responds—idiosyncratically, and from an earlier time and with different constraints than internet information packaging—to the strange speed and flow of the crowd of information in the city, and to the ways that literature must respond within a culture in which bourgeois power is located outside of literature. Liu cites Shelley's defense of poetry in which "utility itself must be accountable to art." Baudelaire's ironic statements bring us to a notion of art accountable to utility but at the same time undermining utility or bringing into question the utility of such a criterion and such a question. We may recall Benjamin's (in "Task of the Translator") turning away from the useful translation that faithfully attempts to convey the content of the other language's text (with the necessary loss undergone by the original) in favor of the higher contribution of translation as a shock and transformation of what it is possible to understand in the language of the reception. Similarly, Baudelaire gives us speed and utility only to pull the rug out from under these values and, backhandedly, I will argue, return to us a specificity of the literary and artistic forms of value.

One could also imagine a response to Liu that would turn to the corporate literature and advice books proliferating in our culture (in part the texts upon which Liu's analysis is based) and, armed with a rhetorical mode of reading and an

eye to the cultural and contextual operations being performed in this "business literature," one could de-bunk and/or reveal the ideological premises and inherent blind spots and anxieties in that literature. One might imagine discovering that certain simulated or repressed or coopted histories continue to leave traces, and do not manage after all to be deleted fully but rise again in unexpected moments and metaphors. But, as Liu probably rightly claims, such a critique from within corporate cultural rhetoric has its modes of containment whereby heterodox opinions are sucked back within the omnivorous information machine as "suggestions," absorbed within an automatic response system that may efface any claims of exteriority or opposition.

This second response option would perhaps be legitimate, and would have very little to do with literary studies. More and more often in the field one hears voiced such a concern that literary studies, wherever their boundaries may be defined, no longer engage meaningfully with the literary. This concern itself, along with an increasing and in my view symptomatic increase in interest in the workings of memory in all fields, is nonetheless not unrelated to the picture of history's deletion, literary history's cooptation, with which Liu engaged us today.

To begin, however, I will take an approach that works in the interstices of these two options. I will look at some advice literature, advice that claims a practical utilitarian purpose, but it is advice literature with a twist—written by Baudelaire for young literary artists, to help them with practical matters and daily issues, published on April 15, 1846. "*Conseils aux Jeunes Littérateurs*" appeared in "*L'Esprit Public*" and included information/advice on subjects such as "Good and Bad Luck with one's Debut," "On Wages," "On Admirations and Antipathies" "On Savage Criticism," "On Methods of Composition," "On Poetry," "On Creditors," "On Mistresses." It is written for the sake of "*jeunes littérateurs*," Baudelaire claims, and the very term and address designates a strange form of progeny, a projection toward a future when the credit for being *littérateurs* will have been granted in retrospect. Part of the seduction of the text may hinge on its invitation to this self-designation, this imagining of a future which would reflect back on one's present, but which for the young reader and would-be writer cannot yet have arrived.

Baudelaire gives his *jeunes littérateurs* advice that turns on a paradox: how to live as a reasonable genius, a genius in a bourgeois society. "The reasonable man is

he who says: 'I believe that this is worth so much, because I have genius; but if it is necessary to make certain concessions, I will make them, in order to have the honor of being one of you [*des votres*]."

Not without irony, he speculates on the value and future of the literary when he writes: "However beautiful a house may be, it is above all—before its beauty is demonstrated—a certain number of meters high and so many meters wide. It is the same with literature, which is the most inestimable matter—that it is above all a filling in of columns; and the literary architect (this name alone will not give one the possibility of making a living) must sell at all costs." Literature is both priceless and impossible to estimate; when it comes time to decide on the value of things, literature and the literary artist must 'make certain concessions' for the honor of being in the world, making a living (and, he also implies, in order to 'remain among you,' to stay alive). Thus, in "Methods of Composition," Baudelaire gives advice, marked with the present as a particular instance, "*aujourd'hui*":

"Today, it is necessary to produce a lot—one must move quickly." Perhaps anticipating just-in-time rhetoric and Liu's archaeology of the present, or our time, Baudelaire reminds the young writer of the demands of production, the necessity and the process of writing quickly. (In contradiction to the overt utilitarian claims of these notes and words of advice, one might recall the speed-ideal of automatic writing, implying rather an impossible demand for immediacy. Baudelaire nonetheless anticipates such a demand when he quotes Delacroix later in this section of the advice (as well as indirectly in his *Salon* of 1859):

"Eugene Delacroix," he writes, "said to me one day, 'Art is something so ideal and so ephemeral, that the tools are never clean enough, and the means never expeditious enough.' This is also true of literature—for this reason I am not an advocate of erasure, which troubles and disturbs the mirror of thought."

Holding these contradictory visions of speed in mind, I would like to jump into another paradoxical vision of speed that implicates the crucial questions of identity and identity-as-performance, within an ambiguous fictional-autobiographical work, Mishima Yukio's *Confessions of a Mask*. There, introspection takes the form of a Moebius strip: Mishima writes,

> My powers of introspection had a structure that defied one's imagina-
> tion, just like those circles made by twisting a long narrow piece of
> paper once, and then pasting the ends together. What you think is the

outer surface turns out to be the inner. And what you take to be the inner surface is really the outer. In later years I slowed down a little, but when I was twenty-one I did nothing but run blindly around the track of my youthful emotions, and the speed of my rotations became dizzyingly fast due to the frenzied apocalyptic feelings that arose with the final stages of the war. I was allowed no time to go one by one into causes, effects, contradictions, or confrontations. The contradictions continued, just as they were, to rub against each other at a speed so great that they were not discernible.

Spiralling outward and spiralling inward, *Confessions of a Mask* is famous for the self-questioning of the narrator that gives the confession 'credibility,' and at the same time, proposes that this self-questioning may be just another mask, thus undermining that very reliability as it is created. With the blinding speed of running around the track of his youthful emotions, the narrator describes the blurring of the inner and outer worlds: the information, the "causes, effects, contradictions, or confrontations" come to seem uniform, indiscernible in the sheer speed of the rotations. Like the diversity of examples in Alan Liu's paper, this speed levels all distinctions and understandings (of difference) in the process of introspection. At the same time, this frenzy and speed is given a specific historical impetus, the final stage of the war. The historical impetus itself leads to a kind of erasure of history, in a millennial blur, "frenzied apocalyptic feelings" that turn inward and outward at once and dizzyingly fast. Yet what, we might ask, is in question in this inward turning reflection that turns itself back, inside out, to the outer world of historical events that move too fast to be discernible in their contradictions? Here, Mishima leads us into a description of an end of historical distinction and of millennial "apocalyptic feelings"; and finally all of this is re-placed within a historical autobiographical narrative, so that the frenzy itself is connected with the speed of youth that comes itself to an end: "In later years" (post-frenzy, post-war), "I slowed down a little."

Baudelaire writes in *Conseils*, "*il faut donc se hâter lentement; il faut donc que tous les coups portent, et que pas une touche ne soit inutile.*" (One must hasten, slowly [press on, but without bustle or waste]; every blow must take effect; not a single touch [stroke; shot] must be without utility.) "*Hâtez-vous lentement,*"

literally a contradiction, to hasten slowly, is also a greek/latin maxim that is generally translated, "more haste, less speed." Interrupted by dashes and semi-colons, speedy writing, Baudelaire's advice pauses for a moment in the contradiction of the "slowly," to emphasize the effect, the lack of waste, in a metaphor of fencing or blows. Every touch must hit its mark, not a single touch must be without its purpose. Writing here as elsewhere in Baudelaire is figured as a fencing, a parrying of blows. Like Mishima's text, this formulation moves on the contrast of speed and the deliberate; as in Mishima, there are many hints at the possibility of imposture, so one must remain suspicious of the counseling, or confessing, voice.

Thought is figured as in a mirror, something that can be captured only by its reflection, and that would be troubled by erasure. At the same time, there is not only immediacy, but a mediation through the afterward. The present moment has two sides: it is both an immediate and effective visible act and the result of a long invisible past, in fact, of repetition or rehearsal in the invisible past. For the writer who has a successful debut, Baudelaire claims, "every beginning was always preceded and it is the effect of twenty other debuts that others have not known." Again, he writes, "In order to write quickly, it is necessary to have already thought a good deal—to have trailed around one's subject with one, to walk, to the bath, to the restaurant, and almost even to one's mistress." The speed of writing reflects back on a long habituation, a constant companionship; the immediacy reveals traces of a silent past. This temporal doubling has to do with the bridge of production from the invisible into the visible, with the tenuousness of the possibility of translating the *langage du rêve*, (language of the dream) into the everyday, of hitting with every blow something which is itself not only moving but also a reflection.

In other words, literary works and old advice books by poets have already had much to say about the kinds of erasures of history that occur within a world of change and information—speed. In literature, the enemy or partner against whom one is parrying becomes a ghost crowd of words, not unlike a crowd of digital moving bits, and this mode throws into question the place and qualities of the person who does the parrying, pointing, and clicking. Frenzied apocalyptic thoughts, Mishima teaches us, happen when one attempts (as Liu describes it) to "start the clock of history anew" (i.e., reset the clock in a way that disposes of

history altogether). In time these thoughts slow down, revealing and untangling their contradictions and conflicts, but they never give one back a clear or stable vision of the self.

The idea of a future of culture in which all human qualities will be digitized out of the picture, deleted or simulated away in the sheer speed of the machine, is something that has a prominent role in the early texts and manifestoes of Japanese futurism. I will conclude, then, with a few fragments of the idea of speed from a manifesto leaflet distributed to passers-by on the streets of Tokyo by the first Japanese futurist, Hirato Renkichi, in 1921, one year before his death at the age of 29. He describes collective life in the city as a power like a motor, a dynamo-electric power generator:

*Heart of trembling gods, the central instinct-movement of humanity emerges from the core of collective life. The city is a motor. Its core is the dynamo-electric.

*Intuition [*chokkan*; gut feeling?] should be substituted for knowledge; the enemy of Futurism's anti-art is the concept. "Time and space have already died, and we already live in the absolute." We must quickly volunteer our bodies and dash forward and create. All that is there is simply the active voice of humanness that attempts to feel directly by intuition a supreme rhythm [...] in the chaos before one's eyes.

*Futurist poets sing of the many machines of civilizations. These enter directly into the internal growth of the latent movement of the future, and sink deep into a more mechanical and rapid will, and they stimulate our unceasing creation, and mediate the speed and light and heat and power.

Here the mechanical civilization moves to overcome humanity's animal and historical capacities to move toward a kind of growth, seemingly organic, that is a beginning of movement of the future, so that the will itself becomes mechanical and speedy. The creation of Futurist poets in language is mediated by machine— the speed, light, heat and power that earlier Renkichi described as replacing gods and animals in the motor-metaphor of collective life. The intuition he describes as substituted for knowledge is not an animal intuition, but a mechanical one. It is a direct and immediate fast-moving vision of experience based on the passing of

information by sheer speed and light, based on the triumph of a mechanical will, and the elimination of what would formerly have been called human. This is an old vision of something that nonetheless resonates with the *Workplace 2000* team vision, an old version in which poetry would be there along for the ride, as an integral part of the mechanization. Without succumbing to nostalgia it is instructive I think to consider the precedents and therefore also the changes that have come about: in the new corporatism, god is not mentioned, but is nonetheless in some way a contender for this place-in-absence of a supreme power in the information-corporate totality.

From Baudelaire to Mishima to Hirato Renkichi, we have heard delicately balanced visions of the place of utility, speed, and information in rapidly evolving images of the future. In Baudelaire, a certain kind of speed and immediacy is both necessary and impossible. In Mishima, blind running introspection becomes a Moebius strip of the historical and anti-historical, which when slowed down can be seen for what it is. In Hirato Renkichi, human locatedness and qualities are distilled and mediated into the heat, light, and speed of the early twentieth century Futurist machine, itself both an object of nostalgia and highly prescient in its view of an intuition become mechanical. All three reinscribe the impulse toward simulation, and the co-optation of history, within a structure that rewrites the meaning of what is useful and reinvents the reductions and necessary compromises involved in moving too fast toward the future.

Sharon Marcus

I want to thank Alan Liu for providing a thought-provoking point of departure for my remarks today, which will focus on a question implicit in our colloquium's title: Does the future of literary studies depend on coherent definitions of the category "literature"? If this is the question, then yes is the only answer, because the question is tautological: once we call what we do literary studies, we require a definition of literature or the literary. But do we define what we do as literary studies? Aren't panels on literary studies in the future inspired by doubts about the existence of literary studies in the present? The interest (or lack thereof) in the future of literary studies stems from the dissipation of literature as a common and unquestioned object of our discipline.

Many recent accounts identify this situation as new and different in kind from previous decades, when debates proliferated but literature was their focus. (Of course, if we go back *many* decades, what looks new and different is university study of vernacular literature itself.) How do these accounts describe what is new about our inability to define literature? We are no longer simply asking whether literature is best defined and studied through philology, evaluation, or interpretation; we are no longer even debating about whether it is possible or impossible to define literature. Theoretical statements about literature as the impossibility of its own definition have now acquired a retrospective solidity—since they at least offered impossiblity as a unifying principle.

The acceptance (by no means final) of gender studies, sexuality studies, ethnic studies, post-colonial studies, new historicism and cultural studies into lit-

erature departments has fostered a basic lack of agreement about what professors and students in literature departments study. We no longer simply disagree about how to define the literary, which presupposes an agreement that the literary is the thing to define. We no longer agree that literature is what we disagree about.

Why does this radical lack of agreement matter? What problems would be resolved if we had more disciplinary unity? It is indisputable that it would be intellectually beneficial to demarcate new objects of shared disagreement; if, for example, literary studies is becoming cultural studies, we need to have widespread debate about how to define and study culture. And because so many of us have been trained at least fractionally as literary critics and will not be able to abandon the category of literature or the habits of literary criticism at will (nor should we necessarily do so), we will also need to think about where the debate about culture, the new object of inquiry, leaves the debate about literature, an object that may be in the process of becoming antiquated but will not so simply be superseded.

I would like, however, to defer the question of what we should be studying and to focus instead on why it matters, returning to my opening question, posed in a slightly modified form: in exactly what way does the future of a discipline depend on the coherent definition of its disciplinary object? I take future to mean here what the American Heritage Dictionary defines as "prospects of advancement; chances of success" (535), but in light of the downsizing of knowledge, let's reduce that expansive sense of futurity to something less grand than success—say, survival or continuance. So my question becomes, "does the continuance of a discipline depend on coherent definitions of its disciplinary object?" Although once again it would seem that the only and tautological response to this question is an affirmative one; my answer is no. Even if by discipline we mean only areas of research, what intellectual benefit accrues to prior restraint of the kinds of work scholars do? Our attachment to disciplinary coherence is not simply to its potential intellectual benefits, however; our attachment also stems from a wishful belief that such coherence will make our departments and professional identity more secure. Why do I call this belief wishful? Because disciplines are neither free-standing nor determining. Therefore, even if clearly demarcating disciplinary borders were intellectually productive, that demarcation would not guarantee our institutional or social

future. When I say that disciplines aren't free-standing or determining, I mean, then, that disciplines depend on departments and professional organizations; that departments and academic professions depend on educational institutions; and that those institutions depend as much on political, economic and social relations as on the knowledge produced in them.

Everything depends, of course, on how we define 'depend.' I'm going to comment briefly on how Alan Liu's talk and recent books by Stanley Fish and John Guillory define the interdependence of these three factors: disciplinary knowledge; its institutional and professional context; and social, political and economic relations. I'm particularly interested in how these studies situate disciplinary knowledge and in the consequences that they ascribe to its situation.

For Alan Liu, the relationship between academic knowledge, academic institutions and economic relations (represented in his argument by corporate institutions) gets defined as *identity* within unity. The recurrent terms that posit this identity within unity are convergence, conjunction, merger, and extension (as in "by extension"). We are all knowledge workers, and there is a single "paradigm of knowledge work"; all "models of knowledge work... fuse into a single... continuum." "Academic literary management" and "information management" are convergent; the "convergence" and "conjunction" of literary theory with "information society" means that our "academic controversies" are "really about" our "merger" with information technology. "Really about" postulates the true relation between academic knowledge and corporate knowledge as one of identity.

When there's only one model of knowledge and that model of knowledge is the same "in virtually every register of social experience," it becomes impossible to pose the question of the *relations* between two kinds of knowledge, or between knowledge, institutions, and economic forces; impossible, because merged, identical objects have no relations to speak of: they're all one thing.

I don't agree that all these elements are identical; for example, knowledge is not identical to its management; using a computer is not identical to participating in the corporate knowledge or culture that produces the computer. Indeed, Alan Liu does not sustain his own claim about convergence and notes several ways

that academic and corporate knowledges differ, but these local perceptions of divergence never perturb the overall argument for a single paradigm. Differences are historicity, but this confounds an orientation within academic knowledge with a condition of corporate labor; and corporations see "traditional education" in universities as failing to teach the information that corporations value.

At the end of his paper, Alan Liu calls on "academic knowledge work" to contest the information paradigm of knowledge. He thus implies that a clearly demarcated object of disciplinary knowledge, one that differentiated literature from information, would be able to defend itself against, even overthrow, corporate models of knowledge. But the immense power this grants to academic knowledge work contradicts his own definition of academic knowledge as identical to the corporate knowledge he also wants it to oppose. The strong claim for the force of a coherent disciplinary object (coherent because unique) is contradicted by the equally strong claim that such a coherent disciplinary object exists only as a reflection of economic downsizing.

In *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (1995), Stanley Fish argues that literary criticism requires absolute professional autonomy, which he equates with any profession's necessary "immanent intelligibility." His method exemplifies immanence—he explains what literary criticism is by demonstrating it, and he justifies literary criticism as "its own reward." For Fish, professional identity is insular, based on the distinctiveness of what we do (16); professional identity is also negative, its distinctiveness defined by doing what no other profession can do, or doing what others don't do. He thus dismisses any avowed political goals of literary criticism by declaring politics to be another profession: as such, politics is not what literary critics do, or what they can only do badly, or what they can do only at the expense of being literary critics.

Fish also develops a more positive sense of the distinctiveness of literary criticism. He derives its positive distinctiveness from two very different sources. On the one hand, he locates literary criticism's disciplinary uniqueness in its mimetic relationship to the distinctiveness of literature itself (in the first lecture, esp. 13-15; 25). On the other hand, he derives literary criticism's professional uniqueness from the internal debates that periodically yield a new consensus about what we do and how we do it. These two sources of distinctiveness—literature

itself and professional debates—are currently in contradiction, since we in fact have a professional consensus that literature is not the sole object that defines what people in nominally literary disciplines do.

Because Fish's criterion of professional self-determination undermines his criterion of literature, he resorts to misrepresenting the form and content of the new disciplinary consensus: he depicts two major sources of the new consensus, new historicism and cultural studies, as more professionally marginal than they really are (although the book's polemical thrust concedes their centrality). He also single-mindedly reduces new historicism and cultural materialism to citations of some of their practitioners' claims to "engage directly and effectively with the project of restructuring the whole of modern society," that is, to take on the work of another profession (political lobbyist). In this way, he can cast cultural studies as not being an academic discipline at all, hence as an interloper in professional debates about what our discipline should be. By reducing those who no longer focus solely on literature to those who no longer want to be academics, Fish can claim to save academic knowledge and professionalism *in general* by saving literature.

Fish does not prove that what we do, or should do, is study literature. His more general point, that professional existence depends on immanent intelligibility, is more tenable: if we no longer agree that we study literature, we should figure out who "we" are and what we do study. (This is also Catherine Gallagher's conclusion in "The History of Literary Criticism.") But what is the force of this "should"? What do we think will result from better definitions of new objects of study? For Fish, the rewards that result from disciplinary coherence are not only intellectual, but also professional and institutional; indeed, he uses "professional" and "institutional" interchangeably, as synonyms for the more modest term "discipline." From the professional and institutional, Fish moves easily to the social: he calls professions "autonomous in the sense of having primary responsibility for doing a job *the society wants done*" (20, my emphasis). But even Fish cannot uphold this blithe sense of causality, in which literature produces good professional boundaries that in turn produce a social good. Further along, he equates the distinctiveness of literary criticism with an autonomy that is profes-

sionally positive but socially negative, calling literary criticism a "marginal" activity and literary critics professionals in whom "the larger society has no interest... at all" (64).

Fish wants to define disciplinary boundaries as all-powerful; he wants the professional immanence conferred by disciplinary coherence to confer institutional and social value as well. It's a pleasing picture, because as Fish himself points out, it's easier for academics to produce coherent disciplines than to change budgets and social values. How nice to think that if we could only just concentrate on our proper task, everything else would follow.

For a sense of why everything else won't follow, I want to conclude by talking very briefly about John Guillory's *Cultural Capital.* I take the model I began with—of interdependent disciplines, educational institutions, and social and economic relations, from Guillory, who takes it more or less from Pierre Bourdieu. Educational institutions, in this analysis, exist to regulate access to the cultural capital that they distribute; literature has a place in educational institutions because it provides linguistic capital through training in reading and writing and symbolic capital as a badge of social distinction. Guillory explains disciplinary debates about canon formation as displacements of a larger crisis in literature's status as cultural capital. He attributes that crisis to the rise of mass culture and to "the technobureaucratic restructuring of the university," which creates "new institutional conditions of intellectual work" (xii).

There are two points I want to extract from this model, which defines the relations between disciplinary knowledge, educational institutions, and social relations not in terms of identity or autonomy, but as determination. First: determination moves in only one direction, and this means that new forms of disciplinary knowledge cannot change the educational institution, which in turn cannot change social relations. Second, and more surprisingly, this is not an argument for the collapse of social relations and disciplinary knowledge into mirror images of one another; it is an argument for the *relative autonomy* of disciplinary knowledge, with an emphasis on autonomy. The content of disciplinary knowledge can be relatively independent of social and economic relations precisely because it can't affect them. Disciplines reproduce social relations not

through what they teach but through the ways educational institutions shape who is taught, and how. Guillory can thus propose a new direction for literary critical research (studying the historical production of literature as a category) without reducing that research to an expression of economic interests, and without inflating that research into the solution of an economic problem.

What follows from this? The implication of much recent rhetoric is that if we can define our disciplinary object coherently we can do much more than secure our intellectual future; we can also secure our professional future, our institutional future, and the future in general. The stakes of literary studies, however, are not that high. If we want to solve professional, institutional and social problems, we need to develop professional, institutional and social solutions; and we'll have an easier time working on those daunting tasks if we remember that our arguments about how to define disciplines, no matter how intellectually compelling, are more or less incidental to those other tasks.

Open Discussion

Alan Liu: I want to say first of all that these are an excellent set of responses. I don't recall ever taking part in an event whose respondents were quite as substantial in critiquing my project as this panel has been. There is a certain kind of coherence—not entirely, I can't foist that fiction upon you—among your three responses. What I'm hearing, in particular in Albert Ascoli's and Sharon Marcus' presentations, is a consistent worry and charge that the kind of academic knowledge that I not only thematize but enact and embody is "identical" with the corporatist knowledge that is ostensibly the target of my prosecution in this talk.

My response is that I both agree and disagree with that critique; and while this may be a sophistic move, I risk it because it is integral to where I see my project going. First, I agree that the kind of knowledge that I see myself representing in some variation—in the English Department, of course, as opposed to Italian, or to raise an even more fraught example, Classics—this pan-knowledge, let us call it, that I'm espousing and talking about in the university, is identical with the corporate, almost encyclopedist, vision of knowledge. Complicating the picture, however, is a meta-narrative of the humanities that suggests a view of "humanity" in the singular even as it co-exists in disciplines that rest upon professionalization and technological rationality. If you were a Russian Formalist, for example, and were talking about things like poetic technique or poetic devices, it would be extremely important to draw your analogies, as in the case of Victor Schlovsky, from fixing car engines and other pieces of at-that-time high technology. For the Formalists, to model a procedure of knowledge that was instrumental-rational or technological-rational was to pursue the method of the profession. This strategy has gained us a lot: big buildings, lines to hire on, legitimation, and so on.

Now we find ourselves needing to assert a difference between what we do as professionals of knowledge and what a business does or what a business school does—I understand that Berkeley has the first Professor of Knowledge at this point—but the irony of course is that our old stand-by for asserting a difference is this vision of interdisciplinary knowledge. It is very much as if the kind of knowledge I offer as an interdisciplinary English Department pan-encyclopedist is exactly what a "Chief Knowledge Officer" would make the ideal for a learning organization in the private sector. But I want to assert as well that a new kind of difference can be found in the stance of identity with corporatist knowledge and that's what my book is getting at. What is different about academic knowledge is that it has the capacity to put knowledge in quotes. The bone of contention brought in by Albert Ascoli's comments in this forum has to do with an interpretation of what history means in my discourse. It's a very complicated thesis, the simplest version of which is that we have a historical consciousness in the academy—in the non-controversial sense that an English Department is a department of literary history—that is different from the just-in-time mentality of the corporation.

Ultimately that's not it at all, though. If you think about it, the kind of history we now do under the rubric of such things as new resources and cultural criticism are histories of discontinuity. That is, like a corporation, we are implicated in a moment by moment apocalyptic model of history. We perform analyses by which we juxtapose Queen Elizabeth I's unchanging portrait face to Lenin's face in the present, not because we think they are the same and continuous and part of one evolution, but precisely to appreciate the disjunction. Our history, in other words, is a kind of historicism, a kind of non-history, simulated, fabricated, or fictional. Like a drowning man, then, I grasp for the star of history in a sea of information because I actually do think that literature is, for practical purposes, in terms of social impact, dead; but that history is not dead because its position in the age of information has changed. The very act of espousing a historical consciousness, even as a kind of historicism, is an aesthetic act. In our present age, to say that history matters is an aesthetic, literary act, an act of novelistic imagination, an act in which not just English Department and literature people but historians and political scientists and others can share together and agree upon as something that academic knowledge offers that other disciplines do not.

Audience Comment: There is an issue of knowledge and interest here, and I want to bring up the word "interest" in both its senses: in the academic or individual sense of personal interest and in the sense of knowledge and its capacity to generate capital through interest. Both of these seem to be inherent in your idea of the knowledge group. My question is this: if the model of knowledge that is coming into being is corporate knowledge, then how are we to think about the academies where academics work at least partially on their own interests? How are these academies situated, now and in the future? Why, finally, should they be financed, or why should corporations want to finance such self-interested institutions?

Alan Liu: I won't try to answer that question in its entirety at this point. But I will direct you to a new website that I have been working on. It's called "Palinurus: The Academy and the Corporation Teaching the Humanities in a Restructured World" (http:\\humanitas.ucsb.edu\liu\palinurus). There has been some debate about the propriety of the term "Palinurus," whether it is serio-comic or tragic or self-critical or what, but I like it.[1] At present the site is a fairly extensive hypertext analytical, that is, topical, bibliography of both print and on-line resources in these related fields: the idea of business, with the mission of teaching academics about post-industrial business principles; the idea of the university, including its history; relationships of antagonism and collaboration between the academy and the university, precisely of the sort that Albert Ascoli was calling for when he mentioned the omission of the institutional factor in my talk; and, finally, the role of information technology in forming the very interesting bridge or causeway between the corporate world and the academic world.

    This site that I have created will ultimately be connected with a course component as well as, I hope, an outreach component that will enable us to elicit contributions from people actually in business or universities. The broad project is precisely to address the kinds of issues you bring up: Why should society in general, by delegations finally to university administrators, finance the kinds of apparently self-interested activity that we are engaged in here? My own feeling about this—and it is no more than a feeling at this point—is that there is no reason unless we are willing to give something up in order to get into the game of

knowledge as it is now being played. I'm not sure we want to give up tenure, but I am pretty certain we need to be willing to give up our claim to specialist fields as some kind of a god-given right, that, for example, there should be so many lines for romanticists in a department of a certain size. We're going to have to give up the model of knowledge—the rut—that we have somehow fallen into, because it is both a blessing and indeed a rut—the model of solitary humanities work where you go away and retreat to a cubicle and work on your particular project. At Santa Barbara we are implementing a course that will be called "Transcriptions: Literature and Closure of Information." The basic idea is to build IT-enabled courses down two parallel tracks. One track will include courses on things like post-modernism and post-industrialism and all the content that now makes information so important to society. But down the other track will be courses in, let us call it, the historical technology of the literature: courses in orality and manuscript culture, print culture, copyright status, etc. The idea is to make these two tracks talk to each other and embody modes of engagement in the classroom so that, for example, our students will be working not as individuals writing papers but actually in web-authoring teams trying out in the flesh, as it were, a teamwork model.

Audience Comment: Most of what has been discussed here is way over my head so I must admit to being a bit fearful of speaking. I've been on some committees that look into issues like developing web sites for courses, or the role of the faculty in developing and maintaining course sites, or intellectual property issues for course sites, etc. It seem to me that faculty must position themselves in relation to three new institutions: electronic publishers, digital libraries, and virtual universities. And in a sense, the more virtual these three institutions become the harder it is to tell the differences among them. Electronic publishers produce electronic text-books which look very similar to the kinds of course sites produced by virtual universities, and because digital libraries are interested in charging for access to the resources now, they are also getting into the digital publishing business. It seems that there is a struggle for control over the means of instruction, and the question is, will the academic workers of the world unite, and if so, will it be behind one of these three virtual institutions or behind the more traditional residential university?

I've been in discussions, for example, that ask whether the development and management of course sites will become a part of the employment contract faculty have with the university, or whether faculty will basically make presentations as a part of their employment contract with the university and develop materials and sell those copyrights to the electronic publishers. In the latter case they are in fact casting their lot with electronic publishers as opposed to the virtual or residential university. It seems to me that these discussions are germane to the sort of issues that you are raising here, but the committees holding the discussions do not include many representatives from literature departments. Perhaps literature professors don't think they have the mastery of the technology, but, believe me, that is the least important issue; the amazing range of ideas and concepts that I have heard in your talk would be very valuable to the folks who are trying to work out the answers to some of these issues. I think what I am really offering is more an invitation than a question.

Alan Liu: I've been on three campus-wide computing committees of different sorts on my campus. When a committee starts up I get put on it. But I would agree. I think many of the questions you have in mind about what model or models the academic faculty will finally converge behind—answers to those questions aren't going to arise until we actually sit down in the same room with UIT folks and people who work in information sciences and the library disciplines. There are certainly not enough humanists going in that direction right now. I have more fraught dealings, even more substantive intellectual dealings, with the system operator of the Humanitas system at UCSB than I do have with my department chair or colleagues. There are brass tack issues— "can you give me permission to do this on the server?"—as well as more political and philosophical issues—"who gave you the right to decree policy on this issue?" Academics, I think, are unaware of the immense amount of power—strategic, intellectual and otherwise—accruing in what is to most of us the invisible sphere of IT and information sciences. And this is happening because of a power vacuum between the administration on one hand, who say, "IT—go to it" (and that's about it in terms of their interest), and faculty on the other hand, who are just getting past email, just getting into network modes of information and don't know yet how to be interested in the larger issues.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ALAN LIU, Professor of English at University of California at Santa Barbara, is author of *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (1989). The paper included here is from his work in progress, *The Future Literary: Literary History and the Culture of Information*. Alan Liu is also the "weaver" of the Voice of the Shuttle, a web page for Humanities research.

ALBERT RUSSELL ASCOLI is Professor of Italian Literature at the University of California at Berkeley. He is author of *Ariosto's Bitter Harmony: Crisis and Evasion in the Italian Renaissance* (1987) and editor (with Victoria Kahn) of *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature* (1993).

MIRYAM BELLE SAS is Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature and East Asian Languages at the University of California at Berkeley. She is author of the forthcoming *Fault Lines: Cultural Memory and Japanese Surrealism* and of various articles on theater and poetry in comparative literatures.

SHARON MARCUS is Associate Professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley. She is author of the forthcoming *Restless Houses: Domestic Architecture and Urban Culture in Paris and London, 1830-1880,* and of various articles incorporating the fields of English Literature, Feminist Studies and Political Theory.

Extra Copies can be requested
with a donation to cover
postage and handling.