Feeding on Alterity:
Reading in the Knowledge Society

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THIS BRIEF ESSAY PONDERS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN two events: the emergence of the paradigm of the knowledge society as a desirable model for social and economic development, and the practice of criticism I call slow reading.[1] It is my contention that the attentive, detailed reading of literary texts interrupts and disturbs the unrestricted flows, vertiginous velocity, contraction of space and amoral voracity of knowledge capitalism by suspending its movement, by introducing a pause, so to speak. It is in this space of retardation that reading/interpretation as an event -an intervention- in the classroom where we can create the conditions for a moral and politically responsible and respectful encounter with literary worlds. This is not to suggest that either the literary text or the reader exist in a vacuum; rather, I suggest that the interpretation of the articulation of lived actuality in real concrete processes, which is the domain of literature, may provide us with a solution to the monolingualism characteristic of "Euro-US" scholarship.

Knowledge societies are driven by useful knowledge, that is, knowledge that can directly feed into economic growth, knowledge that is incremental, radically innovative. Tacit knowledge –intuitive, habitual, reflexive, difficult to articulate, non-transferable because context-bound- is relegated to the margins of the useless. Yet, if nothing else, literature thrives upon insensible gradations, nuances, the grey rather than the black or white of binary oppositions, matters of judgement, sentiment, affect rather than general principle. Slow reading is attentive to these gradations. This is not an effort to reconstruct the other on its own terms –to "contextualise"-, nor is it a lesson in *laissez faire* cultural relativism or an uncomplicated process of identification of sameness between members of what Roland Barthes calls "The Great Family of Man", but an imaginative effort, as critics, to politicise the particularity of the everyday by exploring the ways in which it inscribes and/or rewrites prevailing value systems, customs, etc. At the centre of this exercise is the idea of the other, but not the other as suggested by Spivak's assertion that "to be human is to be intended toward the other" (73), but the other that we are to ourselves, a

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[1] I have borrowed the phrase "slow reading" from J. Hillis Miller in *On Literature*, although I have elaborated upon the concept and complicated the reading process.

collection of irreconcilable selves rather than a self constituted by sameness and repetition and which can be set in motion as a result of the process of defamiliarisation which is characteristic of literariness.

To begin with, "knowledge society" and "information society" are umbrella terms that tend to be used indiscriminately to refer to a post-industrial capitalist world in which productivity and economic activity are no longer driven by labour and property because these have been radically transformed by the strategic impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs), as well as the formation of an interdependent global economy. Thus it is said that Western economies are becoming deindustrialised because the workforce is increasingly occupied not in the manufacturing, goods-producing sector but in service-handling activities which require and are dependent upon the manipulation of ever more specialised information. UNESCO, the OECD, the Spellings Report on the Future of Higher Education in the US issued in the summer of 2006, as well as policy makers of all kinds and technology enthusiasts hold up the paradigm of the knowledge society as a desirable model of development towards which we should all direct our energies.

Higher education plays a crucial role in this process. The occupational structure of knowledge societies, based as they are on the provision of services, requires an increasing amount of knowledge workers, highly educated social groups including managers, professionals, experts, technicians and scientists, counsellors and advisors. This social group is becoming increasingly powerful because the production and control of knowledge and information decides who holds power in society since knowledge, which is immediately productive because it can be quickly transformed into a product to be sold on the market, is itself a commodity and can be appropriated, recognized and treated as property (Stehr 109). In terms of higher education, as Bill Readings points out, market forces increasingly determine research and teaching activities, and those departments that cannot justify themselves in terms of optimal performance and return on capital cease to be useful. The traditional goal of forming a liberal, reasoning subject has been gradually substituted by the mission to supply a managerial-technical class to satisfy the needs of capitalist corporations. Defensive appeals to the necessity of providing a non-instrumental study of literature are now increasingly naive and irrelevant.

These structural transformations necessarily alter social agents and their relationships. Cultural critics from across the political spectrum –Christopher Lasch, Richard Sennett, Gilles

Lipovetsky, Zygmunt Bauman, Charles Taylor, Anthony Giddens– have persuasively suggested that the contemporary self is decidedly narcissistic. This latest mutation of Western individualism is one response to the quickening pace of capitalist expansion, the decreasing symbolic and political power of the nation-state and the desertion of the public sphere, as well as the appearance of a more flexible networked society dominated by mobility and uncertainty. Given the velocity of change and a corresponding indifference to the past, individuals take refuge in a perpetual present, an apparently liberatory move because more traditional social relations that are tied to specific locations are replaced by small social circles that function as support groups which gather on the basis of shared personal interests. Lipovetsky suggests that we are in the midst of a process of personalisation because the self is primarily concerned with personal development, emotional immediacy, and above all, a sense of having some control over its life. However narcissism is more than just the location of desire in the self, or the equally ubiquitous necessity to maintain feelings of self-identity and self-esteem, because the public sphere is being colonised by private interests as a result of the collapse of the collective values and aspirations with which social life and action were directed in industrial societies. The post-industrial world of advanced capitalism requires a centreless, hedonistic self, that is self-inventing, self-absorbed and easily adaptable to the fluidity and flexibility that characterise networked companies and work practices. Such self-centred individualism seeks only self-satisfaction, pleasure and well-being; insensitivity and indifference dominate the narcissist's attitude toward whatever does not impinge directly upon him or her. This means that civility, the "activity which protects people from each other and yet allows them to enjoy each other's company" (Sennett 264) tends to disappear because it is premised on social distance. Incivility would thus mean that we burden the other with the self (Sennett 265); thus, once the impersonal conventions that regulate social life become inoperative meaningful interaction becomes difficult.

So perhaps we should address the fact that our students are, to some extent, narcissists, and the implications of this particular subjective orientation are particularly important in the more specific context of the practice of what may be called critical, engaged pedagogy, best explained by Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren and bell hooks [sic]. In *Teaching to Transgress* hooks critiques the conventional banking system of education and proposes that the classroom be seen as a communal space that enhances the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community in which students actively participate in the creation of

knowledge rather than behave as passive consumers. One way to build this community is to "recognize the value of each individual voice" (40), not only because students express their opinions in class but by keeping journals or reading each other's work, exercises that, according to hooks, encourage mutual recognition since students learn to listen to one another (41). I would like to reiterate the importance of this type of teaching precisely because it opens up the possibility of addressing the complexities of tacit knowledge by using inferential reasoning, since it brings into play the knowledge that has been internalised from the "daily, secular repetition of actions, impressions, and meanings" (de Lauretis, 158) constitutive of experience, that is, the "process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed" (159).

Feminism, for example, has transformed our teaching and research practices by showing that the personal is political, which means that power operates in all social relationships in various guises. The phrase draws attention to the fact that we may be complicit in our own oppression to the degree that we internalise the meanings of femininity as they are expressed in our culture, as well as the values that relegate forms of femininity to a subordinate position, thus showing that the self is a subjected being. In the field of feminist literary criticism, the idea that there is an ungendered human nature which transcends history and finds expression in literature has been challenged, and instead there is an interest in the experience of gendered subjectivity among members of a particular culture, the historically different expressions of gender within that culture as well as the relationship between gender, literary forms, canon formation and creativity. When we historicise feminine and masculine subjects in this way we seek to demonstrate the complex role of history and the place of cultural processes of differentiation in the production of the personal. When the personal is political, that is, if the politics of gender is located in the everyday, emphasis must be placed on the connections between the self and those factors that shape the self, a process in which the self is the starting point of reflection. Consciousness, the self, subjectivity: these are also the very material of fiction. Since readers are situated, and given the narcissistic turn, this interpretive strategy should be revised because the narcissus is no longer the angry, politicised woman reader, nor the alienated self of modernity, but a voracious self that acts as a centre of gravity pulling everything around it to itself in its hunger for an impossible fulfilment.

Thus we may venture to say that today the reader employs a personalising reading method that seeks identification with literary worlds rather than distance, chooses unity over

fragmentation in texts, and tends to overlook the unintelligible because it is not immediately available. In this sense the reader usually behaves as a consumer, so how are we to avoid the commercialisation of literature, itself turned into an object of consumption, sought as a mirror of the self, a source of useful information for a reader that constantly seeks an image of itself in the endless quest for an impossible sense of plenitude? For the narcissist the world is an object that is not independent of the self; rather, he or she constantly seeks authenticity and creates opportunities to voice experience; thus in a sense all interaction becomes a disclosure of personality (Sennett 219) rather than a communicative act. But, as Terry Eagleton has pointed out, we have no unfailingly privileged access to the meaning or significance of our own behaviour, as evinced by the fact that another may sometimes provide a more cogent explanation of it than one can oneself. As Eagleton suggests, one way to acknowledge the autonomy of others and realise that the world is largely indifferent to one's opinions of it is to recognise "the presence of others whose behaviour manifests the fact that, at a very basic level, reality is pretty much the same for them as for ourselves. Or, if it seems not to be, then at least there is someone out there with whom we can argue the toss" (138). But how are we to avoid the notion that we all share a common humanity, that difference is a matter of surface rather than constitutive of the subject? I would like to suggest that what we do have in common is the *subjective* experience of living as *others*, an experience which may be located in the practice of everyday life rather than in the relatively marginal position we may hold in society as members of a particular group. A reorientation of our reading practices may be effected when we learn to acknowledge our everyday experiences of strangeness as well as the stranger in ourselves that occasionally breaks through the veil of everyday life at moments when we are forced to acknowledge our own excesses and limitations because we are by nature "desiring, destructive, fearful, empty, impossible" (*Strangers*, 192).

There are two main ways to interpret representations of the foreign: first, it can be trivialised, naturalised and domesticated. Otherness is reduced to sameness and unity with the logic of equivalence. Alternatively, the Other can be transformed into meaningless exotica, "a pure object, a spectacle, a clown," to quote Roland Barthes (249). In both cases, the reading process assimilates the unfamiliar to the known and already formed. Multiplicity is simplified by abstraction, commonality exists at a very general level: our interpretive strategies are sorely inadequate when we try to understand detail and nuance. To avoid the habit of employing

automatic explanatory tools and concepts which are accepted as given, one must, following Barthes, begin by transforming the literary work, understood as a self-contained finished object of consumption ("From" 1471) into a Text: open-ended, never readily available, difficult to pin down, never more than an unstable fragment in which other texts, individual and collective, written and unwritten are inscribed. This requires an exercise in scrutiny of the materiality of signification and the mechanisms with which, and the reasons why, readers tend to stabilise meaning: in this respect, reading is an activity of production rather than of consumption. A focus on the reader's signifying practices requires that he or she become acutely aware of the process of reading in relation to a specific text, observing that which is experienced as unreadable or bizarre as well as that which is felt to be familiar and intelligible.

Literature defamiliarises at two interdependent levels; at the basic level of language, literature wrenches signifiers from their usual chain of signification, thus calling attention to the text's self-referentiality and reflexivity by foregrounding the performative nature of language as well as our own naturalised practices of naming. At a more general level, defamiliarisation may be one of the consequences of slow reading which, unlike close reading, does not focus on the interrelationships of language and linguistic devices within a single text, nor does it interrogate the ways in which a literary work, read as sociological or psychological evidence, reproduces or challenges beliefs about class, race or gender relations, which is the practice of cultural criticism. Slow reading implies a particular form of respectful attention to the text in which nothing is lost (Hillis Miller 122): what matters is how and why the narrative voice or poetic persona articulates every detail and how the textual horizon of meaning allows such an arrangement, the specific choices concerning things, descriptions, dialogues, that is, all those interlocking aspects of the literary text that tend to go unnoticed by our students who, behaving as if the text were already read, impatiently rush to form opinions, infer ideologies and worldviews and fix meanings and values. Any literary work will always remain specific, although it simultaneously registers collective particularity because, if nothing else, literature offers us a very dense figuration of everyday life, shedding light on a domain that tends to be inchoate, intricate, unfathomable, saturated with apparently insignificant detail, often invisible, and resistant to totalisation. Yet it is in the practice of everyday life that institutions, ideologies and dominant systems of belief are lived actively and become social consciousness because it is here that meaning and value converge.

It is in the particular configuration of literary devices where the cultural and historic specificity of everyday life becomes most evident. As an example, Franco Moretti, in his essay "Conjectures on World Literature" (2000) introduces the notion of distant reading, "where distance is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes –or genres and systems" (57). Thus, when studying the novel, one may encounter "foreign form, local material *–and local form*. Simplifying somewhat, foreign *plot*, local *characters*, and then, *local narrative voice*" (65). And it is precisely the job of the narrator to give form and assign meaning to the material according to culturally specific configurations of the imaginary, since "members of a society judge fictional texts in accordance with the prevailing general laws of the imaginary" (Pavel 99). In this sense, a text may be seen as registering the general although it is never simply reducible to it because it always remains specific. More often than not we do not share imaginaries, nor do we necessarily share the codes and conventions to which readers in a given culture or historical moment refer in trying to make sense of texts and to which authors themselves refer. So the purpose of a slow reading is to make strange and almost unfathomable the codes and conventions that are usually the most familiar to us from everyday experience and which guide non-conscious life. In the shrinking world of global system interactions in which communication is instantaneous and the flow of massive amounts of information incessant, our temporal and spatial coordinates are being radically transformed. It is as a response to this change in our perception of time and space that slow reading becomes a means to catch one's breath, so to speak, and inhabit the distended present of the text. This is also an opportunity to focus the gaze on the foreground instead of the background and negotiate the relationships between different registers of the everyday at microscopic levels of analysis, the ways in which capitalism –its institutions, practices, ideologies, values– structures desire and exchange and how power works at all levels because, as Moretti points out, "forms are the abstract of social relationships: so, formal analysis is in its own modest way an analysis of power" (66). Just as fictions acquire a variety of recognisable forms, lived experience is always tacitly shaped already, if only on ambiguous, provisional terms.

Given its social function, the formal study of literature should be oriented to the cultivation of the virtue of toleration, understood not as a resigned acceptance of difference for the sake of peace, nor the apparently benign indifference to difference, nor patronising, enthusiastic endorsement of difference, but an openness to others, curiosity, perhaps even

respect, a willingness to listen and learn (Walzer, 10-11). But an encounter with difference cannot be premised on the identification of oneself *in* the other. Rather, again following Kristeva, an encounter with difference "confronts us with the possibility or not of *being an other*. It is not simply –humanistically– a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of *being in his place*, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself" (13), that is, to stand at a skewed angle to oneself. A slow reading would teach us "how to detect foreignness in ourselves" (*Strangers* 191) simply because every text asks us to cooperate in its production, a move which requires that we put our selves on hold. Our task is to trace how we incessantly strive to create meaning when we face a strange fictional world, distant by virtue of its cultural, geographic or historical location. The narcissistic self seeks to break free of the restriction which is itself, so perhaps it is necessary, therefore, to stress the point that there is no way in which one can break free of the self, although it is possible to very briefly, imaginatively, suspend self-assertion and attentively contemplate what is beyond our self-aggrandising fantasies. We can only momentarily make ourselves other to ourselves.

The day-to-day is generally presented as the repetition of the same, oppressive and uninspiring, but it may be transformed into the home of the bizarre and mysterious by means of an interpretive strategy intended to shock us out of our established forms of attention. It is precisely in the unintended recurrence and repetition of the same where Freud locates the possibility of experiencing the *unheimlich*, given certain conditions and circumstances, namely, an unexpected shift in our attention. This shift brings about the awareness that repetition is involuntary and that we perceive it as "something fateful and inescapable" (942) against which we are powerless. If we ponder the possibility that the virtue of toleration may be encouraged not by exploring proximity to and similarity with the other but via a recognition of our inherent strangeness, not our strangeness in relation to one another but our shared experience of the *unheimlich* in relation to the everyday in which the strange is immanent to familiar "things, persons, impressions, events and situations" as Freud suggests (930), it might be possible to focus, however fleetingly, on the fact that we are driven, unawares, by our insatiable desires. These, in turn, are not private, idiosyncratic and isolating but an expression of historically available and variable formal meanings and values, institutions and systematic beliefs. This is the terrain of what Raymond Williams has called "practical consciousness" (35): rather than understand dominant systems of belief, world-views, ideologies, material causes and objective

conditions as external to literary worlds, we move into the domain of affect in which these are lived, felt, thought within specific relations and as continuous, open-ended processes in particular literary configurations.

Given the recrudescence of nationalisms and particular identities that provide a semblance of stability to the self, and the contrary political move towards multiculturalism and tolerance, we should attempt to denaturalise our own cultures when we encounter those that are far removed from our own, either historically or culturally, without commodifying them to supplement our own lack and exhaustion. We might also want to acknowledge our theoretical, linguistic and cultural limits: just as texts are only a very small fragment of a particular reality, we might humbly accept that there are aspects of ourselves and of other cultures that will always remain, for better or for worse (and I tend to think that it is for the better) beyond our understanding. Being a stranger is, as Simmel pointed out, a specific form of interaction. In a world in which we encounter the dissimilar on an everyday basis, a world also characterised by mobility both within and across different kinds of boundaries for those who live in a particular social space (whether or not they inhabited this space initially) so all our relations –if only temporarily– are constituted by the play of remoteness and nearness. We all bare the trace of strangeness and the practice of slow reading can help us recognize that strangeness.

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