

The Bounds of Critique, Critique out of Bounds

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This issue of *H-France Salon* on “The Scholarly Critique” has been designed to be a conversation about the practices and ethics of scholarly critiquing. For long a venue that actively promotes and widely disseminates this academic practice, with this Salon the virtual pages of H-France have become explicitly self-referential and self-reflexive. The aim here is to turn the critical lens of H-France-style critique upon itself, in a perfect example of the critical self-reflexivity instituted with Immanuel Kant’s notion of Enlightenment critique. Moreover, like Kant’s *Aufklärung*, this critical self-reflexivity is characterized by a certain double bind, for there seems to be no way to engage in a critique of critique except in its own terms. To improve what we’re doing, do we just need to keep doing it? If so though, does the present conversation on scholarly critique not risk amounting to words in an echo chamber, nodes on a feedback loop? How could such a risk be avoided, if not by breaking the double bind of critique, then perhaps by displacing and resituating it? In so doing, might this conversation on scholarly critique lead to a different way of understanding—and engaging in—scholarly critiquing?

I’ve been asked to contribute to this conversation by offering my perspective, based on my personal experience, on “critiquing across cultural boundaries and disciplinary boundaries.” One way to describe that experience is certainly in anecdotal terms. (In writing a review, for instance, what criteria do I bring into play? How do I avoid the temptation merely to give a narrative version of a book’s table of contents instead of assessing the project’s strengths and insights or needling at an argument’s short-cuts, oversights, and blind spots? How have my own books been reviewed and according to what criteria?) But I’m afraid the anecdotal mode can become tedious and potentially self-serving. Yet we shouldn’t overlook the role of experience altogether, for experience shapes perspectives, even if our disciplines teach us and encourage us—or perhaps require us—to rephrase or even silence the voice of the experiential—our experiential—in our writing and teaching. So the perspective on scholarly critiquing that I propose to sketch out here will be experiential, at least in part; it will be a situated perspective or a “view from somewhere.” Put telegraphically, this perspective is that of someone who works both in and across languages, intellectual traditions, academic disciplines, interpretive methods and paradigms, institutional networks, and geographically determined places. The particulars of these categories could and should be filled in, but they are not so important, in any case less important than the numerous and diverse placements—and displacements—that I want to suggest here with the prepositions that qualify the kind of intellectual work done “in” and “across.”

But these placements and displacements are not unique. All “H-France scholars,” to varying degrees and in diverse ways, work in and across languages, traditions, disciplines, methods,

institutions, networks, and places. In fact, the mobile and transversal nature of scholarly work itself may well define the contemporary academic more broadly, well beyond the confines of H-France, and certainly beyond the humanities. And perhaps by definition, scholarly work has always been characterized by this mobile, transversal quality. Given this configuration of scholarly work and the activity of the scholar-worker, the knowledge-producer, what is the corresponding practice of scholarly critiquing? What stakes are involved in that practice? Shifting the question from the descriptive to the prescriptive, a first step towards understanding the practice of scholarly critiquing in ethical terms, we can ask what that practice should entail.

Scholarly critiquing is one phase in a larger process of knowledge production. In the early modern period, various procedures emerged for acquiring new knowledge or correcting and integrating previous knowledge. In the sciences the procedure that won out—although pockets of opposition seem vexingly long-lived—has come to be called the scientific method. Scholarly critiquing is a kind of scientific method for the humanities. Numerous historical and structural parallels could be drawn between the development of the scientific method in the sciences and the development of critique in the humanities. Part of the larger process of knowledge production, scholarly critiquing implies that this process not only involves the formulation of new explanatory hypotheses, the articulation of new conceptual paradigms, and the production and communication of new knowledge, but also entails dialogue, disagreement, and robust debate. In other words, there is a rhetoric to knowledge production, which means that knowledge must be thought of as not simply factual, empirical, and descriptive; it is potentially—perhaps necessarily and constitutively—conflictual. Knowledge production is about dissensus as much as about consensus. The idea that critique is an essential part of scholarship implies that the value of one form of knowledge can and must be set in relation to another form, with the result determined according to various regimes and systems, adjudicated by members of the “scholarly community,” these members of an academic “republic of letters,” “public sphere,” or “marketplace of ideas.”

“Community,” “republic,” “sphere,” “marketplace”—these are metaphors commonly used to designate the space where critique takes place. Metaphors give substantive form and shape to ideas, and if we attend to language carefully we grasp that there can be no ideas except those figured in language. Such figures serve to locate critique spatially, to give the practice of knowledge production a place. What is that place and how do we conceive it or occupy it? To take the example of the language of the invitation extended to me to participate in this Salon by providing my “perspective on critiquing across cultural boundaries and disciplinary boundaries,” the space where critique takes place is figured by the metaphor of “boundary.” What are some of the spaces of critiquing, and what boundaries define them? Is “boundary” the most appropriate figure with which to think about critiquing?

One space in which critiquing takes place is that of language. The two working languages of H-France are English and French. In a straightforward sense, this means that the language of books reviewed and of reviews written must be either English or French. Other languages will be present in the pages of H-France only insofar as they are translated into one of these two languages. The H-France reader who “has” only one of these two languages can always read reviews of scholarship in the other. But in another sense, both languages are always implicated in any review, independently of the linguistic expertise and proficiency of a particular author or

reader. One language is implicated and imbricated in the other in a way that makes critiquing a process that always involves translating (in the first instance between languages, but between many other things as well, such as disciplinary norms, intellectual traditions, or academic cultures). One of the aims of scholarly critique thus must be to gauge the extent to which a book or project is aware (and exemplary) of this multi-faceted translational relation.

A telling example involves conceptual vocabulary. If a French-language book I'm reviewing makes extensive use of specific theoretical language (attributable to Foucault, Bourdieu, or Furet, for instance), in my review how do I translate that language into English, assuming I should? What is the most equivalent term? But translation is not only about equivalencies, for it involves resistances as well. So I must ask what other terms resist my translation, and why? Is it a question of the specific characteristics of English? For example, English requires more perspectivism than does French, which is why the French *on* is often better translated into English as "I," "we" or "they" than by the more free-floating "one," except perhaps in the case of British English, which is another kettle of fish (or a different pair of sleeves). As an example of more conceptually determined (non-)equivalences, can what Foucault names *discours* be adequately rendered in English by "language" or "speech" or even "discourse"? What theoretical assumptions come into play in determining translational—and conceptual—equivalence? But the question is the same when I review an English-language book. Here the issue equally involves how I translate another's language into my own, with translating working not so much between languages as within them. What equivalencies—and resistances—are in play in the process whereby my review translates another's language into my own?¹ At stake is something quite different from what is sometimes called "methodology" or "methodological differences." These terms are commonly invoked to describe differing points of view, but they more likely amount to a reductive way to think about how the theory and practice of translation is involved in scholarly critiquing. Viewing scholarly critiquing in terms of translation brings into focus the interpretive operations involved in moving between languages. It also raises the question of what can just as equally make such passage difficult, if not impossible, as recent reflection on the question of "untranslatability" has intriguingly revealed.²

Scholarly critiquing as a translational practice involves far more, of course, than just moving between languages. The scholarly work presented and assessed in the pages of H-France is shaped not only by its language but also by its relation to one or more disciplines. We can think of a discipline as a way of producing knowledge and, more specifically, as a set of rules that prescribe what can be said—and also what cannot—in order for that knowledge to be receivable—to make sense or be true—in terms of that discipline. Take the case of "evidence," for instance. What counts in the discipline of history as the kind of evidence that can legitimately be used to support an argument might be quite different from what counts in the discipline of literary studies. To frame the difference between the two disciplines in shorthand fashion, we could ask whether an argument should be supported by the evidence of data or by

¹ This phrase implies that we in fact "possess" "our" language. Jacques Derrida famously claimed, "I have but one language—yet that language is not mine." *Monolingualism of the Other: or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

² Barbara Cassin, ed., *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Paris: Seuil, 2004); Eng. trans., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, translation eds., Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

that of signs? Does an epistolary novel constitute a different kind of evidence from an original letter found in the archives? To what extent can an analysis of literary form (such as the novel) legitimately invoke extra-literary formations (the social)? In short, is empirical evidence stronger than symbolic evidence, or is the opposite the case? Or does the show-down between history and literature I'm staging here amount finally to a false binary, an ill-posed question? Whatever the case, disciplines have answers to these questions couched in terms of methodological procedures and analytic rules.

Besides "evidence," another disciplinary-inflected value is "innovation." Scholarship always takes place in relation to a tradition, as part of an ongoing conversation or debate. To what extent should scholarship recognize and voice that relation, and how? What needs to be footnoted and what does not? What balance should be aimed for between rehearsing the "critical literature," on the one hand, and presenting what's called a new take on things, on the other? Less a matter of personal choice, the question here is how disciplines inflect the way this balance between tradition and innovation should be struck, a tension that characterizes disciplines themselves.

A third disciplinarily-embedded concept is "time." Insofar as time is understood to be linear and irreversible, anachronism is inadmissible in scholarly work, for it brings together two temporalities that are meant to be kept apart. But one could imagine transgressing the methodological rules of certain disciplines in order to rethink and rephrase the idea of historical break and change in terms besides repetition, continuity, and becoming. In short, scholarly work may respect the rules of a discipline, or it may ignore them, question them, or attempt to reshape them. As for scholarly critique, as a practice of translation it must be aware of how scholarly work positions itself with respect to these disciplinary rules. The question is whether a greater awareness of disciplinary boundaries, and thus the possibility of negotiating them otherwise, can help create a project that helps us see around the corner, so to speak, to understand a critical issue more richly and capaciously.

But disciplines may not provide the most solid of foundations for thinking about scholarly critiquing. According to cultural historian and journalist Louis Menand, a great deal of "paradigm loss" has occurred within the traditional humanities disciplines, so much loss that he asks whether we are in an age of postdisciplinarity.³ This term may be no more than one of the latest 'turns' of the disciplinary weathervane. But Menand is right to observe that current humanities scholarship displays more methodological eclecticism, transdisciplinarity (a literature scholar writing on art or a history scholar writing on novels), and post-professionalism (writing for a non-academic audience) than was previously the case. Moreover, he suggests that some fields are more postdisciplinarity than others, the scholars working there being less concerned with playing the role of a gate-keeper resolutely determining what cannot be taught or written than with introducing discipline-bending 'foreign agents' into syllabi, articles, and books. In a moment of disciplinary transformation, although perhaps not decline, how should scholarly critiquing assess scholarly work? What disciplinary criteria should it invoke? How should it assess—or at least consider—the relation between scholarship and disciplinarity?

³ Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).

Scholarship is inflected by other factors besides language and discipline, and thus scholarly critique might legitimately take into account the mediating role played by academic institutions, intellectual traditions, and national cultures in the design, production, and dissemination of scholarship. Consider the relation, for example, between the French historian's work and French national identity. Is identity solely the object of the historian's work, or does that work potentially contribute to expressing and forming a version of that identity? One could certainly define the "French historian" in various ways, thinking of Froissart, Voltaire, Michelet, Nora, or numerous others. Nevertheless, the writing of French history seems inextricably bound up in complex ways with the construction of French identity. Moreover, this imbrication of history-writing and identity production seems to be essentially different in the case of the French historian working in a French institutional and cultural setting, on the one hand, and the French historian working in an academic setting in an English-language country, on the other. This former kind of historian, in some fundamental sense, might understand him- or herself to be working on "our" history, however critical of or resistant to it his or her work may be. But a second kind of historian will always be 'outside' that history, writing from another place, whether literal or symbolic, and seemingly free from the constraints—and solicitations—imposed by the very fact of doing French history "in" France. Yet the freedom of this second kind of historian is not absolute, for he or she will remain equally bound by being located in another academic setting, doing history in a way that constructs, confirms, or contests another skein of national and cultural narratives. Both sets of historians may not be aware of the extent to which crucial issues such as identity, community, nation, and culture inflect their work, in both its aims and effects. It may appear instead that their scholarly work involves universal issues, or at least issues located elsewhere, but these issues play out ultimately in ways that have inevitably more local significance. For instance, the scholarly work done by the American—or British or Australian—scholars on race and slavery in nineteenth-century France belongs in some sense to twenty-first-century attempts to rethink race and ethnicity, both in French contexts and in contexts located elsewhere than in France, in the Anglosphere, for example, a rethinking occurring in a moment other than the nineteenth century. To what extent, then, should one "actualize" historical work, establishing unanticipated connections designed to bring out its contemporary pertinence? Another example is that of scholarly work done on the topic of "Francophone writing," that is, writing in French produced outside France—or within France yet in some sense marginal to "hexagonal culture." The way that particular writing is understood—and thus read, researched, written about and taught—is mediated by a scholarly critical agenda, which may be personal or collective, but that has as much to do with the reading of these texts as with their writing. What I'm suggesting is that there exists a productive tension in scholarly work, this practice defined by the assumption of—or rather desire for—universal values that express transhistorical and transcultural criteria, yet a practice shaped at the same time by particularities and "bounded" or mediated by specific local and contextual factors. As a form of scholarly work, critiquing cannot help but play out this productive tension between the universal and the particular.

In an article on the internationalization of intellectual life, Pierre Bourdieu observes that in the international exchanges that make up scholarly life, texts often seem to circulate without their context. They are frequently read outside what the sociologist calls their field of production, there where authors and their social positions are located in their author's "habitus," that is, an author's embodying social structures, including their "capital" (be it social, economic, or

cultural). Instead, Bourdieu argues, texts are read in relation to—and accordance with—their field of reception, which can determine the sense and function of a foreign work as much as the field of production does. This passage from the field of production to that of reception involves a series of operations, which Bourdieu argues can be described in terms of “interests”: “I am aware that the word “interest” might shock here. But I do believe that anyone, no matter how well intentioned, who appropriates an author for him or herself and becomes the person who introduces that author to another country inevitably has some ulterior motive. It may be sublime, or it may be sublimated, but it should be revealed, as it is clearly a determining factor in what is being done.”⁴

Bourdieu’s reflections on international work resonate with the theory of cultural transfer formulated by Michel Espagne. “Whenever a cultural object passes from one context to another, its meaning is transformed in a process of resemanticization, which can be recognized fully only by taking into account the historical vectors of this passage.”⁵ What Bourdieu calls “interests” and Espagne a historically-determined resemanticization is not unrelated to the boundaries discussed earlier, insofar as these often unvoiced boundaries give constitutive shape to intellectual work. Perhaps we should replace the term “boundary” as a way to think about the role played in critiquing. What would scholarly critique look like if it were located not in a bounded space but in one figured as made up of bridges, pathways, and corridors, built of networks and transfer points between languages, disciplines, institutions, and traditions? Such encounters could be designed and promoted in terms of a variety of questions. How has the discipline of French history taken shape—and been reshaped—in particular local contexts and in the name of what “interests” (institutional, ideological, ethical)? In “France-related” disciplines more generally, what kind of disciplinary transfers have occurred and are occurring, driven by what forces, and in what institutional, (trans-)national, and cultural contexts. What role can “the personal” and “the local” productively play in understanding and engaging in the practice of scholarly critiquing? Such questions suggest that while critique cannot escape boundaries to become freely unbounded, conducted in the name of impartial and universal values, it can nevertheless be deployed in and through more porous spaces, with the goal of promoting less disciplined, perhaps even unruly, encounters in and through the process of scholarly critiquing.

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⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, “Les conditions sociales de la circulation international des idées,” *Romanistische Zeitschrift für Literatur*, 1-2 (1990); Eng. trans., “The Social Conditions of the International Circulation of Ideas,” in *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Shusterman (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999), 222.

⁵ Michel Espagne, “La notion du transfert culturel,” *Revue Sciences/Lettres*, 1 (2013), accessed August 23, 2015. <http://rsl.revues.org/219> (my translation). See his *Les transferts culturels franco-allemands* (Paris: PUF, 1999).

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