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La Formation de l'imagination / Constructing the Imagination

Groupe thématique d'articles / Thematic Cluster

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Liminaire

Among literary scholars today there is an intense debate about the nature of literary study. On one side there are those who oppose new directions in postcolonial and sociofeminist research and deplore the academy's turning away from what they call the aesthetic quality of writing. On the other side of the debate, colleagues question the established norms by which literature has been examined and literary history written. Homi K. Bhabha challenges the established discourse of literary study and the concept of aesthetic quality as a fixed norm. Cultural representation itself has been opened to close scrutiny. In *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) Bhabha writes: "Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order" (171). This debate will work itself out in the multiple avenues of scholarly and popular exchange, but behind the debate looms the larger question of the importance of the arts in today's world and this is the question that led me to explore the role of the arts in the necessary human activity of world-making. My proposal for literary scholarship, which is neither new nor revolutionary, but has been notably absent from the current debate, is that our major tasks as scholars in the humanities are to explore how the second order constructs of scientific and cultural theory are related to first order constructs of the ordinary living of life, what the phenomenological sociologists used to call the life-world, and commit to examine the mediating role that the arts perform between the two constructs. In these articles six colleagues have joined me in this reappraisal of our cultural domain. Collectively we begin in the Middle Ages, pass through the turmoil of the Renaissance, consider the modern period and come to the post-modernist present.

This project has a name and a history, "La Formation de l'imaginaire" was proposed by Étienne Guyon, Director of École Normale Supérieure in Paris, when I first suggested that we hold a symposium on this idea in celebration of this unique institution of research and learning on the occasion of its bicentennial. In June of 1994 we once again engaged in that memorable ritual of the academy. We held a symposium, one which looked at the arts as a mediating force in the world both past and present.

I want to thank our host, Étienne Guyon, his colleague Béatrice Didier, our plenary speakers Pierre-Gilles de Gennes and Paul Ricoeur, and very special thanks to the colleagues who responded to the challenge and who have contributed to this issue. Finally, I want to extend my appreciation and gratitude to Professor Milan Dimić, editor of the *CRCL/RCLC* and the associate editor, Steven Törősy, who have given us this venue for reaching out to our colleagues.

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