



scuola di studi superiori **giacomo leopardi** università di macerata

62100 Macerata
Piazza Cesare Battisti, 1

T 0733 258 5803-5804
F 0733 258 5808

scuolastudisuperiori@unimc.it
www.scuolastudisuperiori.unimc.it

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Seminario Scienze Umanistiche

LITERATURE AND DEMOCRACY

Prof. William Marx
Université Paris Nanterre

The relationship between literature and democracy is not as easy and simple as one would have liked to think. If sometimes the literary works served as a way to promote democracy, it is also true that the power exerted by writers on the people does not necessarily fit into democratic institutions, of whatever nature this literary power might be. The seminar will thus provide a historical journey through some of the most significant episodes of this dialectical tension between literature and democracy:

1. Plato's condemnation of poetry in ancient Athens;
- 2.1. The coronation of Voltaire in Paris in 1778 as a prerevolutionary event;
- 2.2. Flaubert's and Zola's fight against the republican power of the bourgeois;
3. C. P. Snow's indictment of literary culture in modern democracies;
- 4.1. Bourdieu's sociological analysis of the antidemocratic use of literature in schools;
- 4.2. President Sarkozy's polemics against masterworks of French literature;
5. Writer Christine Angot's fight against the right-wing candidate in the last French presidential election.

The seminar will be given entirely in English. The French texts provided in the handout will be translated or summarized and commented in English.

Essential Bibliography

- Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *La riproduzione: per una teoria dei sistemi di insegnamento* (1970), Rimini: Guaraldi, 2006. A fundamental sociological study highlighting the biases introduced by literary and cultural capital in democratic education.
- Pierre Destrée and Fritz-Gregor Herrmann, ed., *Plato and the Poets*, Leyden: Brill, 2011. One of the many studies on Plato's famous condemnation of poetry.
- Frank Raymond Leavis, *Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow* (1962), with introduction by Stefan Collini, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013. The answer of the most famous British critic of the 1960s to C. P. Snow's attacks against literary culture. Useful introduction by historian Stefan Collini.



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- Adrian Marino, *Biography of "The Idea of Literature" from Antiquity to the Baroque*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. A seminal study on how literature was perceived and conceived throughout centuries.
- William Marx, "Le couronnement de Voltaire, ou Pétrarque perverti", *Histoire, Économie et Société*, 20-2, 2001, 199-210. A semiological study of Voltaire's coronation in 1778, and what it tells about the status of literature in prerevolutionary France.
- William Marx, *The Hatred of Literature* (2015), Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018. How literature was seen by its adversaries since Antiquity, their major arguments, and what this rhetorical war against literature reveals about it.
- Plato, *The Republic*, books II, III, and X, in any translation. The ground for all subsequent condemnations of poetry throughout centuries.
- Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures* (1959), with introduction by Stefan Collini, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. A famous parallel between scientific and literary cultures, and their respective use in modern democratic societies. Useful introduction by historian Stefan Collini.



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