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Gerald Graff

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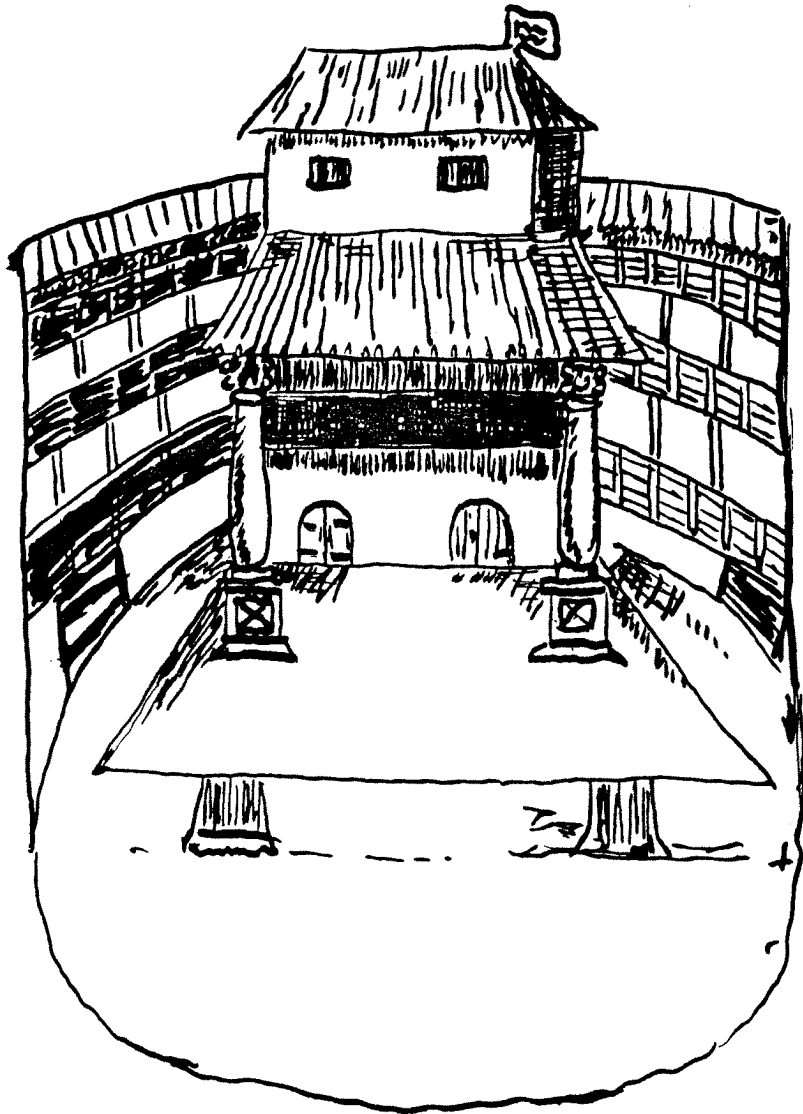
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## INTRODUCTION

Patricia Harkin

This issue of *Critical Exchange* is devoted to the work of Gerald Graff, John C. Shaffer Professor of Humanities and English at Northwestern University. The issue focuses on an interview with Mr. Graff at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, on June 15, 1985. Present at the interview were David Downing, of Eastern Illinois University, Editor of *Works and Days*, David R. Shumway, of Carnegie-Mellon University, Director of the GRIP project of the Society for Critical Exchange, James Sosnoski, of Miami University, Editor of *Critical Exchange*, and Patricia Harkin of the University of Akron. Mr. Graff visited Oxford in conjunction with a conference on "Curriculum: Tradition, Critique, and Reform" sponsored by Miami University and the Society for Critical Exchange. Mr. Graff's keynote address at that conference, "Patterned Isolation," was taken from his work-in-progress, published in 1987 as *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, by the University of Chicago Press. Mr. Graff made a draft of his talk available to the interviewers and to the other contributors to this issue of *Critical Exchange*; quotations from and references to the "typescript" should be understood as referring to that draft.



A CONVERSATION WITH GERALD GRAFF

David Downing  
Patricia Harkin  
David Shumway  
James Sosnoski

June 7, 1985

Harkin: Have there been changes in your thinking since the publication of *Literature Against Itself*?

Graff: I'm sure there have, but it is a little hard for me to be sure exactly what they are--I think I've perhaps been changing my emphasis and rhetoric more than my actual thinking and also perhaps trying to do a better job of taking on some of the complications that I avoided in *Literature Against Itself*, that is, saying some of the things I thought I could presuppose in *Literature Against Itself* but apparently couldn't. For example, I never expected that *Literature Against Itself* would be read as some kind of humanist manifesto or some kind of defense of great traditionism, and yet people who both liked and disliked my argument tended to take it that way. That was a rhetorical failure on my part which I would try to avoid, or have been trying to avoid in recent things I have been writing.

Harkin: So your changes in rhetoric are an effort to find a new audience or new allies: is that what you're saying?

Graff: Well, who is one's audience? It's hard to be exactly sure, and of course the situation shifts very rapidly. One of the problems in writing criticism now is that because of rapid changes in trends, it's hard to take for granted any particular context. A lot of *Literature Against Itself* was written as long ago as the early 70's.

Some of the essays were published in different form earlier, when the situation was somewhat different. For example, when I was writing that book, some critics were adopting a subjectivist view of reading and interpretation. Stanley Fish was saying that his method of interpretation "relieved him of the obligation to be right and obliged him only to be interesting" and so forth. Well, by the time I and others got into print attacking that kind of radical subjectivism, Fish had already abandoned it. And of course when you abandon a position in criticism, you never admit that you are abandoning it.

Others: Is that what you're doing?

Graff: I'll leave you to judge--so that Fish--though he did actually renounce this view--was very good at upstaging his critics by acting as if it would have been naive for anybody to have held the subjectivist view of interpretation that we were attacking. The situation changes so rapidly in criticism that what you may be defining your position against will have changed by the time your article or whatever it is comes out.

Sosnoski: That's an odd expression--defining one's position against . . .

Graff: I don't mean to make it necessarily antagonistic, but we don't just start talking in a vacuum; we start talking because there's a question we want to address or a situation where we think an intervention needs to be made, and if that situation is rapidly changing, then your response may be obsolete by the time it appears in print. At any rate, when I was writing that book, the great conflict between humanism and post-structuralism was beginning to take shape in a way that was changing almost day to day and had I been aware that what I was saying would be used . . . .

Downing: By neo-conservatives?

Graff: By political neo-conservatives or a certain kind of cultural or curricular neo-conservatives, I would have said it differently.

Actually I did take pains to say in the preface of the book that the fact that I was attacking post-structuralism was not an excuse to avoid reading what post-structuralists were saying. But that sort of

qualification tends to get lost. It wasn't enough, you know, so I try to take greater precautions now against being appropriated in a way that I don't like.

Sosnoski: Are you saying you're still being appropriated by neo-conservatives?

Graff: Well, specifically by political neo-conservatives or by people who are opposed to theory: for example, some readers of *Literature Against Itself* praised the book as if it was an attack on theory. Then others who had read their laudatory reviews damned the book because it was an attack on theory. Well, it never occurred to me that anybody would read the book as an attack on theory; I thought it was an attempt at a contribution to theory. But I suppose I should have been aware that this reading would be made and should have said that what I was doing was attacking a certain kind of theory but defending another kind, or defending one theory and attacking another. You know, Geoffrey Hartman referred to me in a lecture as one of the anti-theorists. Of course, Geoffrey Hartman tends to identify theory with the kind of theory he does. For deconstructionists, "theory" means "deconstruction," and so also for a lot of their enemies. In any case, I might have made misappropriation of my stuff more difficult than I did. Ultimately, I suppose you can never wholly control how you are used.

Sosnoski: I still remember a conversation with you when you mentioned that only one person in all the reviewers of *Literature Against Itself* had noticed that the book was concerned with the relationship between literature and society; you felt that in that sense also the book had been misread because readers missed the central point.

Graff: What you heard was a bit of typical professional whining. I don't want to use this session as an occasion to make the sort of complaints that authors always have about being misunderstood or misread. I do think that that book tried to say too many things about too many different subjects, so that it was easy to seize on one argument as the central one, the attack on certain strains of post-modern fiction or the attack on certain kinds of post-structuralism or new criticism or formalism, and thereby ignore other

aspects of the book. I felt that I was making a political argument which allowed for an interplay between politics and literary theory and that one of the more interesting aspects of the book was my point that literary criticism had recently been politicized in ways that were self-defeating. There was an argument there that I felt wasn't taken seriously by a lot of readers who liked or didn't like the book. But again, these are the sort of gripes authors have and I think that ultimately the writer is responsible. When your main points are missed it's usually because you didn't emphasize them properly or you let them be obscured by other points. It's just something that you learn from as you write, and you try to do better the next time.

Downing: We're talking about the shift in your thinking since the publication of *Literature Against Itself*, and I'm still looking for a specific example. I want to see if you still hold the same belief. Part of *Literature Against Itself* was arguing for a kind of objectivity which could resist certain kinds of social deformation and confusion that you saw. In other words, it was an argument against certain kinds of critical relativity when carried to an extreme. And so what you do in *Literature Against Itself* is pick up Saussure's point about the arbitrary nature of the sign, which of course is an important point in post-structuralist discourse. And you acknowledge (and I quote), "conventional, verbal meanings are generated not by nature but by the play of the difference within the linguistic system." But you resist the notion of arbitrariness at the conceptual level.

Graff: Right.

Downing: In other words, you write, "but it does not follow that because the signs are arbitrary the concepts denoted by these signs are also." My question is: how then do you account for such disparities as that pointed out, for example, by Catherine Belsey in *Critical Practice* between the color spectrum, for instance, as constituted by English and Welsh. In Welsh the color of glas blue includes elements which English would identify as green or gray. How then can the concept of "blue" be used to adjudicate a perceptual difference between an English person and a Welsh person? Or, to use another example, Eskimos use about 17 words to describe various things we would call snow, yet they have no general term for snow; what has happened to the non-arbitrary concept of snow in

their language?

Graff: Well, that's a key question. Philosophers have dealt with it under the problem of incommensurability or translatability across vocabularies. How can the concept of blue be used to adjudicate? I don't know. What happens when a Welshman and an Englishman get together? Are they able to understand the fact that they differ as regards to the concept of blue? If they do, and I would think that there would be situations in which they could, there would be presumably some kind of coordinate system in terms of which that kind of conceptual difference could be staged.

Downing: O.K., the coordinate system?

Graff: Davidson is good on this in his essay "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," arguing that just to state the problem of difference that, as you say, Belsey here has stated, one has to presuppose some notion of translatability or commensurability from one vocabulary to the other or from one paradigm or cultural system to the other. How did Belsey describe the difference between the English and the Welsh unless she herself was working within a conceptual system that could contain both?

Downing: Are you arguing that that conceptual system has a kind of neutrality?

Graff: I'm arguing that our ability to talk about such issues as this depends on our assuming the possibility of a kind of neutrality, yes. And I would say there's ultimately no standpoint from which one could challenge this neutrality. What authorizes Belsey's description of the difference between Welsh color-coding and English? It seem to me Belsey assumes that she can describe the difference and that her description is valid. I don't know what the ultimate metaphysical warrant for that assumption would be or what Belsey would say it would be. I would say she assumes it can have some kind of validity. Objectivity is a presupposition, a ground condition of discourse rather than a way of going behind discourse to shore it up with some kind of metaphysical back-up.

Downing: You mention the difficulty of challenging that ground of

neutrality, but it seems to me that the lack of specificity itself is a problem when you assume some ground of neutrality. In other words, it seems to be at such a level of generality that unless you can make it a bit more specific, I can't see it?

Graff: Yes, the issue that we're going probably to argue about is the whole question of the ground rules of discussion. There's a tendency in recent literary-philosophical-cultural theorizing to argue that the ground rules of discourse themselves are political, or are culturally biased, or reflect cultural prejudices. What you have now is a situation where it's difficult to advance in any discussion beyond debate over the ground rules themselves. That is, it is constantly said that any ground rules that we choose are going to be slanted or biased in favor of some social group. It seems to me that it's hard either to defend or to refute this notion. The philosophical dead end that you run into when you try to find some kind of foundation for your ground rules is the same sort of dead end that you run into when you try to undermine those ground rules. I suppose one way of stating it is that before you even start defending the ground rules or attacking them, you're already depending on them, you're already using them.

Downing: Are you willing to equate "ground rules" with some sort of notion of totality with which we can operate?

Graff: Well, I suppose, yes, our ground rules include the notion that it's possible for us to survey situations in some kind of totalizing way. That would be an enabling presupposition of argument: that there are notions of relevance that allow us to move from one argument to another, to say that something follows from something else, to say that some set of facts or some interpretation of a set of facts implies that something else is the case. (Habermas' "communicative pragmatics" is quite good on this, I think.) The notion that there can be facts, the notion that we can reason from specific cases to generalities, these are what I mean by ground rules. The attempt to argue that these ground rules are infused or permeated with political interests of various kinds or with hegemonic desire and so forth, may be valid, up to a point, and perhaps valuable to point out in a cultural situation long dominated by a notion of value-free objectivity and the value-free researcher who is completely above all

social interest. In the context of correcting that sort of myth of empiricism or myth of rationalism, recent attempts to politicize the ground rules are understandable and defensible. But I think we've had a vast overstatement of this kind of politicization of ground rules, and have reached the point where it is no longer fruitful, because once you try to ascribe a specific politics to a particular set of ground rules, you run into trouble. In other words, it's true in general that the ground rules of discussion are always created culturally and historically and thereby can be traced to social and historical origins.

But to attempt to pin a specific politics on something like objectivity, let's say, or empiricism or to say that there is something politically totalitarian in looking for determinate meanings in texts or reading texts in a way that imposes a certain kind of closure on them is silly. It finally leads to a universal rhetoric of suspicion in which everyone is "demystifying" everybody else so that nobody can finally advance in a debate about anything. Finally, everybody has demystified everybody else's discourse (including his own) and substantive discussions of history, social analysis, and so forth don't advance. So, I guess I'm agreeing with the pragmatists on this particular issue, that epistemology beyond a certain point becomes unfruitful, especially the politicized epistemology that is always trying to undermine everybody else's discourse.

I would also add that this competitive demystification of everybody else's discourse has become an academic game--you point out to me that I'm not sufficiently reflexive about my own discourse and then I point out to you that you're not sufficiently reflexive about your critique of my discourse, and so on. We can go on like that for a long time, but I think it becomes fruitless. My effort--although I suppose I haven't got very far in this--would be to try to move the current discussions away from what I see as an overly suspicious attitude toward ground rules, objectivity, historical method, and so forth, to a level where we could discuss the politics of criticism and literature more progressively.

Shumway: I want to pick up on your reference to the pragmatists, by which I take you to mean Knapp and Michaels and the "against theory" people.

Graff: Rorty also.

Shumway: One can describe what seems to me a movement to the right in your thinking politically, that is from Marxism to liberalism. But I perceive in your writing some movement towards what Stanley Fish has called the intellectual left, that is, it seems to me that your writing since *Literature Against Itself* is less essentialist, reflects some aspects of anti-foundationalism that I did not see in *Literature Against Itself*. Do you think that's an accurate perception?

Graff: I'm uneasy with those uses of "right" and "left" because part of what I've been trying to do is to attack the glib way those terms are applied. But I think, aside from that, that's roughly correct. And if you say that I've tried to move toward a more anti-foundationalist view, I think you're right. *Literature Against Itself* was somewhat confused on this point. I used Wittgenstein at one point and Popper at other points, and I wasn't really consistent. Certain arguments were foundationalist and others weren't. I've tried to make a more consistent argument since, one that would be more compatible with what you call the intellectual left, yes.

Shumway: Could you say a little bit more about what you don't like about this application of "right" and "left" to intellectual differences?

Graff: Yes, it seems to me that the terms are used without much respect for cultural, intellectual, and political history. Take a term like "liberalism," which has undergone a transformation in meaning since the 19th century which creates a good deal of current confusion. Today's neo-conservative is essentially a 19th-century liberal. A Reaganite conservative believes in free enterprise, rugged individualism, the unregulated laissez-faire economy, and so forth which was 19th-century liberalism. On the other side--I've said this in several articles--the heroes of the current textual left or the post-structuralist left, if it regards itself as a left, are Nietzsche and Heidegger, who of course identified themselves with the right. As Louis Hartz pointed out, "left" and "right" have always been ambiguous in the United States because we did not have a feudal stage, which explains why we've never had a classic Marxist tradition. In Europe the "right" meant royalism, but royalism has no functional meaning in the United States. As late as thinkers like T.S. Eliot or the Southern Agrarians, you could talk about something like a "right"

in feudal terms, but the "right" then meant anti-capitalist. Certain passages of Eliot, if you didn't know he wrote them, sound exactly like Lukacs, as when Eliot says that capitalism is incompatible with culture. If Orwell was correct that once the Soviet Union had turned totalitarian, Soviet Communism became the Right, what then happens to the concept of a Left? One of the things we ought to be doing as theorists and critics of culture is disentangling confusions in this political vocabulary instead of spending so much time sticking pejorative labels on each other.

Of course I did this sort of thing myself, talking about deconstructionism as being right-wing because it implicated itself in consumerism. Another way in which I would change my approach from that of *Literature Against Itself* is to try to be less absolute in throwing around that kind of political charge. Still, I would want to make the case that in a capitalist culture, oriented around stepped-up production and dissemination of consumer goods and turning ideas into consumer items, so-called traditionalist culture or conservative culture, culture in the Matthew Arnold tradition, takes on a new and in some sense "oppositional" function.

Jameson in fact argues this in his essay in *Aesthetics and Politics*, a collection in which he arbitrates between Lukacs and Brecht, by saying that in a consumer culture which undermines certain traditional coherences, traditional culture, including classic realist fiction, may acquire an oppositional force. This is the sort of thing I was trying to say in *Literature Against Itself*--that we shouldn't simply assume at the outset that we know in advance what counts as either a subversive or reactionary position. Yet in the recent explosion of explicitly politicized literary discussion, terms like this are still thrown around very loosely, so that somebody like E. D. Hirsch is regarded as a right-wing figure even though Hirsch's politics are probably more left-wing than some people you could find in the post-structuralist camp. And it's that kind of labeling without respect either to historical or logical analysis of the political situation that bothers me.

Shumway: So, you would prefer that someone like Fish find other labels than "left" and "right" to describe the anti-essentialist and essentialist distinction that he wants to make?

Graff: Well, Fish is a fairly innocuous version of what I'm talking



about because Fish isn't particularly interested in real politics.

(laughter)

But I know what you mean. He talks about right-wing and left-wing anti-professionalism, which may invite confusions, but we know what he means. I was thinking not so much of Fish but of others--the *boundary 2* people, for instance.

Sosnoski: Let me return to your earlier remarks about the rhetoric of suspicion in the context of challenges to ground rules that are operative in literary studies. You were speaking about the problem that ensues when people begin throwing around the terms we've just been talking about, the way in which this politicizes issues, and the way certain forms of argumentation are controlled by particular segments of society. But it seems to me there's another kind of problem at work there that involves many of the people in the GRIP project, though I think you think that the GRIP project over-politicizes certain kinds of issues in literary studies, especially when its members challenge the ground rules. One of the difficulties in the academy at present is that formalism has been so effectively institutionalized. I'm talking about the way in which a formalist critical framework has been institutionalized by way of M.A. exams, Ph.D. exams, texts, textbooks, anthologies, etc; I mean, the way in which certain kinds of questions have been delimited by institutional mechanism like exams, papers, journals, forums, etc. Now, in order to raise other kinds of questions, say, questions about the relationship between literature and society, which are often excluded in a purely formalist context, the difficulty is that one has to change the way literary studies has been institutionalized. It seems to me that the obstacles to change are not intellectual debates in which people are calling each other "leftists" or "rightists" or something. This is a nitty-gritty political issue which we have yet to face.

Graff: Sure. All I'm saying is that we would come closer to addressing those real institutional conflicts if we got away from these epistemological debates over ground rules. By fixating ourselves at that level, I think we prevent ourselves from getting at the real conflicts that may divide us. There are really very few political neo-conservatives within the more articulate precincts of literary

theory and literary criticism. The neo-conservatives tend to exist outside. But what you get is a situation where, since it is felt that politics has to be correlated to divisions within the discipline, there has to be a right and left wing. Hirsch or Abrams or Graff then become the right from a spurious deduction of our politics from our views on interpretation or truth. I'm saying that an argument for moving off that debate about the epistemological ground rules is that we don't need to resolve our differences on them in order to make a change on the institutional level you're talking about, which I agree is the more important one.

You and I hold different views on philosophy while evidently sharing objections to what you call formalism and how it has dominated the institution and prevented certain kinds of social, historical, political issues from even being raised at all within literature departments. I would argue that I can be a logical positivist (I'm not, but I could be) in my construal of ground rules and still support your notions of institutional reform. But if you treat me, because I'm a logical positivist in epistemology, as if I'm an outsider and an enemy and one who can't help you open up literary criticism, make it more social, more political, and so forth, you would be foreclosing a chance at cooperation and dividing the ranks of people who might otherwise act together. As long as we assume a correlation between literary or epistemological and political positions, we preserve a state of deadlock in which, as you say, the real questions won't get addressed.

Sosnoski: For me though, it's impossible to avoid the question of ground rules, in this context, for a very simple reason. If you take an institutional mechanism like an exam, it presupposes a mode of argument and the grounding of literary texts as facts in a certain way. And in order to raise questions about the value of institutionalizing formalism in our exam structure, etc., you have to raise questions about the factual nature of texts in the institution.

Graff: No matter how radically you change the structure or change the exams, I don't see how you are going to get rid of notions of fact. One of my quarrels with something you wrote in one of the introductions to the GRIP volumes, I think it was GRIP Volume 1, was your suggestion that these traditional or conventional notions of inquiry were implicated in discursive regimes or political power so

that therefore we should somehow try to discard them. Yet, (presumably) the GRIP papers that you were editing and, for that matter, your own article made overwhelmingly heavy use of the very procedures of inquiry, discussion, argument, fact-gathering that you accuse of complicity. The mistake in my mind is to suppose that any set of procedures of inquiry have necessarily to be used to support some one particular kind of institutional organization. I know what you mean at a certain level. If somebody composes an exam of entirely true and false questions and reduces the history of literature to a set of facts which can be answered in a true or false inventory, that's a mystification of the subject. But I think in such a case the objection should be to the particular type of decontextualization being practiced rather than to the notion of fact as such, not to mention the notion of truth or falsity. There are good objections to be made to such decontextualizing procedures from within traditional conventions of inquiry.

Downing: Let me pick up one point here. What I was noticing in your critique of Jim is that you were using the argument against him that has often been used against your particular position. That is, you were saying that Jim is saying that he can get outside of the particular mechanisms of institutionalization to criticize those very institutions, and in fact what some people have seen is that you are trying, with your doctrines of objectivity, to position your argument outside of those mechanisms of cultural exchange which you are criticizing.

Graff: Yes.

Downing: And it seems to me there's a difference in the two kinds of outsides. If I understand Jim, he is bringing together and forming an alternative set of ground rules by which one. . . .

Graff: The term "ground rules" may be confusing because there may be disagreement as to what counts as a ground rule and what doesn't. All I'm trying to say is that there's a tendency now, and I saw it in some of the GRIP papers, to argue as if certain conventionally received notions about writing history, if they have been used to support hegemonic social structure, are in some ways either epistemologically invalidated or politically suspect or both. To me the

more preferable tactic would be to admit that we inherit these historical procedures, notions of fact, notions of genealogy, notions of the subject, and so forth. Rather than concluding that these notions are discredited because they've been used to support various hierarchies that are undemocratic and imperialistic, and so forth, it would be preferable to try to detach the procedures from their oppressive uses rather than attacking procedures themselves which one has to use even in attacking them. In other words, a distinction between discursive systems and their uses might enable us to avoid fruitless debates over ground rules, along with all the silly epistemological one-upping and competitive demystifying that we are caught up in today, where we constantly have to prove that we are less "naive" (and therefore presumably more radical) than our colleagues.

Sosnoski: There's a key point in our disagreement because I don't believe that they can be detached except conceptually. It certainly is possible, as you often do, to develop criteria for arguments: you know, the sort of general scheme we use as criterion for evidence, or to decide what counts as a well-formulated claim. We do introduce protocols for the development of warranting assumptions and presuppositions, and we do that in our discourse independently of what actually happens in the academy. But if you're examining literary studies as it's actually conducted in the academy, then you can't separate the criteria from their social context because you'll find that someone will take the criterion that has been laid out to develop a research proposal and use it in an institutional setting to defend something that is simply not. . . .

Graff: O.K., you give the example of objective tests, but it seems to me, if I understand your example, you were referring to a procedure which essentially reduces testing students on literature to finding out certain kinds of factual information, to treating the text itself as a certain kind of object about which factual information can be gathered. Is this what you're saying?

Sosnoski: I would take as an example a committee that is formed to write an M.A. exam, and I have chaired such committees in this department. One can come to a certain amount of agreement, not technically consensus, but certain amount of agreement on asking

formal questions and very, very broad general historical questions and no more. That is to say, the common denominator is a very straight-forward formalism and a very broad historical context. It seems to me that when one of the persons on that committee then reads an exam, which of course will be on a specific text, that examiner constitutes the facts of the text on the basis of his critical framework, but you could constitute a very different series of facts which would then count as evidence. Now, it's what counts as evidence that becomes crucial in the authorization process, in the judgmental process in which it's decided that somebody does or doesn't belong to the profession.

Graff: A lot of debate, including some of your questions, gets at precisely this question--what type of thing is a literary text or any kind of text or a meaning? And I would want to maintain that at least for some literary texts, not for all, it's possible to give a true account or at least more or less true account, a defensible account, of the author's intention. I would also want to say that that account would have to be very complicated, that authorial intention is something that, as the deconstructionist would say, can differ from itself. It can be heterogeneous. It can also be inaccessible. I do still defend a propositional way of talking about meaning but I never said or would say the meaning of propositions in or out of literature could be unambiguously determined in every case. I think, in fact, in many cases, they can't be or haven't been or maybe aren't likely to be. But I'm willing to adopt a notion of meaning which holds that it is possible to give an account of an author's meaning that gets at roughly what the author intended. Such an account would have to be context-dependent, but it would privilege the contexts that were arguably most important to the author and which the author privileged in writing the text.

Now does such an account saddle me with the notion that the text is an object? I would tend to think of it more as an action than an object, but whether you use an action vocabulary or an object vocabulary I think you could defend an account of meaning as determinate that would give you a warrant for asking students on an exam to be able to come up with the kind of interpretation or information that you wanted. But I would also want to argue that I can adopt this sort of interpretative model--seeing the text as potentially subject to determinate description--without excluding the

kinds of questions you are raising, questions like, "what happened to this text when it was inserted within the political, cultural environment that it was written in?" or "to what extent were the author's intentions divided in a way that reflected a certain political or social division within his culture?" Here again, it becomes important to distinguish between a concept or critical method and the way it gets used. I would argue that there's no reason why an objectivist procedure of interpretation such as the one I've just described has to be used to discourage the sort of political question that you want to raise. On the other hand, I'd agree with you that the objectivist treatment of texts has functioned to block out these political questions. But it's one thing to attack the way a methodology has been used and another to say that it has to be used that way, that it necessarily prevents certain questions from arising.

Downing: Isn't it a question of "who" is authorizing those determinate meanings?

Sosnoski: And how willing he is to make explicit the ground rules?

Graff: Certain methods encourage some questions and discourage others and when they're discouraging important questions that have to be raised, objections are in order. But that doesn't necessarily mean that the methods are wrong or bad or have to be thrown out.

Harkin: Well, that leads to this notion of panoptic surveillance that you accuse us of focusing on. And I grant it: we do. I can agree when you say that some members of the GRIP project see literary study as a instrument of social control whose effect is to disseminate ideology to the masses and impose panoptic surveillance. And I can agree as well that we don't have panoptic surveillance in the United States the way one does, let's say, in France. We don't have an Academie Francaise; American school superintendents, unlike French ones, cannot know that at ten-thirty in the morning every third grader is conjugating the verb "to be." But it doesn't follow, for me, that because we don't have the same disciplinarity in the United States as one has in France, or that we don't have the same disciplinarity in literary studies as one has in chemistry, let's say, that notions of disciplinarity are not used to control people's behavior.

Graff: Well, I grant you that they're used. I think I would be less resistant if it didn't strike me that at times you're using this model too simplistically so that, and this just seems to be the danger of Foucauldian analysis, that what American culture becomes or what the American university or educational system becomes is a panoptic prison. If you started making distinctions and said, for example, that certain high schools or grammar schools operate this way, especially in certain regions, I would be more convinced. What I'm reacting against is a what somebody in the GRIP papers themselves called a kind of "*ressentiment*" mode of thinking about institutions, a mode which adopts the accusatory tone that is so pervasive in Foucault. This Foucauldian condemnation of disciplinary institutions never seems to say what it is we are comparing them with--unless it is the carnivalesque (presumably) conditions of pre-Enlightenment societies.

I think something can be said in defense of American educational institutions in contrast with European ones. The sense in which they're more democratic than European ones may not satisfy a certain kind of Marxist for whom the term "democracy" is just a hypocritical ideology of liberalism, but when compared to the still privileged system in Europe the American system doesn't look too bad. I doubt that non-patricians like us would be sitting around in nice genteel rooms like this one if it weren't for this more democratic or more egalitarian system. We all know that and in fact presuppose it when we talk informally, but in our formal discourse, as critics and theorists, it's not respectable to talk this way. You have to act as if you're more fiercely and uncompromisingly radical than the next person and have more penetratingly seen through this hideous totalitarian system that has subjugated us to these discursive regimes. But that's bullshit, as we know, I think, when we step outside our own discursive regimes and go to, say, a Cubs game.<sup>1</sup> What I'm trying to say is it would be easier for me to accept the Foucauldian model of disciplinarity if it were qualified by a more comprehensive and fuller discussion (yes, I haven't provided the comprehensive discussion either), one that was less paranoid.

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<sup>1</sup>This was surely an absurd thing to say, wasn't it? The Cubs, by the way, seem now to be playing (1986) as if they'd been in a Foucauldian prison. [Gerald Graff's note]

Downing: You're claiming we're too essentialistic in our disciplinarity (laughter). May I pick up here because most of my questions are about your interpretation of Foucault? I agree that if you used disciplinarity in a simplistic sense as an apparatus of power which is monolithic (one group controls another) then that wouldn't be very useful. But it seems to me that you are relying on a very negative conception of power that Foucault had conceived in his earlier work. Later on, Foucault revised his conceptions of both power and disciplinarity so as to allow for the potentially positive dimensions of critical practice within local contexts and institutional settings.

Graff: Right, but he rejected the repressive hypothesis, the repressive notion of power.

Downing: As essentially repressive. . . .

Graff: But he hasn't rejected the panoptic model and even in the later work, specifically *History of Sexuality*, the panoptic model, or at least the social control model, is still in the background. And you still have Foucauldians like Spanos and others at *boundary 2* who have a discipline and control model of literary studies which borders on a kind of Big-Brother view of authority, even though it's big brotherism without the subject--as it was for that matter in 1984 where we never find out if Big Brother exists.

Downing: Now you are granting me certain things. What you're saying is that, on the one hand, you have been attacking a reductive use of post-structuralist doctrines, Foucauldian and others, but, on the other hand, a more sophisticated version of this particular model of social criticism might be very helpful.

Graff: A less paranoid version, I would want to say. One that's less accusatory and, as I say, less filled with resentment coming out of our 60's experience and our. . . .

Shumway: That's very interesting because it goes along with what Ken Johnston says in his paper "Gripping or Gripping." [In the Grip Report: Second Draft, Volume II.] He points out that a lot of these papers seem to come out of the experience of pain, and I have to say

that that's quite an accurate perception. In fact, pain and resentment are real. They're not fantasies; they come out of struggles against people who have power and who use it to limit discourse in ways that are really repressive. It's not just simply a borrowed analogy; these situations occur.

Graff: Do you want to give an example?

Downing: Well, Jim's analysis of the token professional, for instance. Token professionals are often unhappy people.

Graff: You mean part-time faculty or people like that?

Shumway: Or, let's talk about the situation of a theorist who finds himself in a department that tends to be anti-theoretical. That person is not in a situation to compete in a fair-play situation of publishing enough stuff or convincing other people of the validity of his views; in fact, that person has to do far more than another person would in order to keep his job. So the theorist in that context experiences repression.

Graff: That's true, but do some comparison. I mean, if you read William Lyon Phelps's autobiography, you learn that in the 1890's, when he got up a course on modern novelists at Yale, the senior faculty threatened to fire him. Even then, Phelps got his way. He wasn't fired but might easily have been, and elsewhere teachers were fired for unorthodox opinions and conduct. Yet, even in those days the intellectual professions were opening up, so that there were beginning to be ways you could fight back against that kind of repression and set up your own alternative. As somebody in the GRIP papers pointed out, the Foucauldian analysis of power presents itself as an uncompromising critique but is really, in many instances, a handbook for seizing power.

Shumway: If what you're saying is that we shouldn't describe the situation in the academy as a kind of impervious hegemony, as a wall that can't be attacked, then I think. . . .

Graff: Yes, but not just that. I think we should consider that, by comparison with other American institutions, the university is one of

the more "liberal" in the good sense. It's the only institution in American culture in which you can raise in a serious way questions about Marxism and the more radical kinds of feminism. Where else do you see this kind of discussion taking place and even having a certain conspicuous force?<sup>2</sup>

Downing: You could turn the question around, however, because from a certain perspective, the intellectual disciplines are now more exclusionary than other disciplines. In other words, it's harder to get a job and it's. . . .

Graff: It's harder to get a job but not necessarily harder to practice a certain ideology. It may be easier to get a job if you're a feminist than a non-feminist. So that the exclusion doesn't necessarily follow a predictable ideological. . . .

Downing: I think we will all grant diversity on the surface of the whole American system of production and exchange at the very broadest level. And I think that when we are talking about either hegemony or disciplinarity it must be, in order to be useful in our own analyses, a sophisticated model in which there is something beneath the appearance of diversity to account for the continuity of particular structures and practices. Using a Foucauldian model, those practices are broadly hegemonic to the extent that they help to enforce those who are in power. And unless we understand it at a deeper level, it would be very difficult to change any of these practices. While I would grant to you that, for instance, Marxism gets discussed in intellectual spheres more than at General Motors, at the same time, what's significant in any change within the apparatus of our discipline is understanding as well the similarities between General Motors and the university.

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<sup>2</sup>On the other hand, as I read the ms. of this interview, I have just learned that Northwestern University has fired a Marxist English professor, Barbara Foley, for largely political reasons. I have resisted the conclusion so far, but such an event gives credibility to those who fear we are moving back to the McCarthy era very quickly. [Gerald Graff's note]

Graff: I guess I really don't believe that there's such a thing as a hegemonic "dominant discourse" in the university, at least in any bad sense; of course there are pervasive patterns in talk, but I don't like calling them "hegemonic" with the accusatory political implication that it implies. I don't think that there's a dominant hegemonic discourse either in the university or even in American culture in the way there certainly was, say, in the 19th-century college which was dominated by genteel WASP idealism whose tenets you could clearly formulate: a Matthew Arnold notion of culture; the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon or Celtic racial strain; the natural right of cultured classes to run America. This was a pervasive view which persisted in American culture up to 1915 and beyond. You can still find traces of it, but I think it was shot to pieces by professionalism itself, which has been subversive of any single dominant discourse except perhaps the very diffuse and self-divided discourses of professionalism itself.

Downing: It is truly a different kind of mode of production.

Graff: And there's no one dominant discourse of professionalism. There's a very pluralized, very confused. . . .

Harkin: Yes, there's one at Yale, there's one at Chicago, there's one at Berkeley, but they all have a lot of power, don't they?

Graff: That not a discourse, you're talking about, they don't have a discourse. What they have is. . . .

Downing: Power. . . .

Graff: Yeah, they have power.

Downing: A connection of their discourse to power which is a term. . . .

Graff: But I'm saying there is no one dominant discourse. Just as in the American culture at large, mass culture has scrambled the notion. Now in American culture at large there are exclusions. For example, in American culture at large the notion of socialism is not a real question, it's not a real issue in American journalism.

Downing: But I think here's what we'd say. . . .

Graff: So that certain things are excluded. I think the academic discourse is less exclusionary, though this may not be true across the board. In American culture the exclusions are more severe.

Sosnoski: But there are two completely different phenomena. On the one hand you have a surface diversity that David just alluded to, and you can read about it in the journals and papers at conferences. On the other hand, there are all the institutional mechanisms that produce students in remarkably homogeneous ways. Let's say, we could talk about the conversation in this room at one level where there's a lot of diversity, but if we examine what is happening to Miami University English majors, it would be a lot more homogeneous. That is to say, the diversity begins to disappear when the institutional mechanisms start to operate: syllabi, curricula, textbooks. It's the connections between a particular discourse and power and mode of dissemination that gives us a much more homogeneous discourse than, let's say, students. The kind of student that is produced. . . .

Graff: That's an interesting observation, but how can we really test the argument that American culture or this American college student body is homogeneous rather than heterogeneous?

Sosnoski: Well, I would start at the level of introduction to literature textbooks and look at the way they've been marketed and at the ones that have been successful. I'm not capable of doing it, but we could do a statistical analysis of that sort that would establish that most American college graduate students in the last 20 years going through literature departments have been led to believe in formal analysis of texts.

Graff: You seem to forget however that most undergraduate students have been remarkably impervious to these textbooks. In my view, the mediation of high culture has been largely ineffective. It doesn't seem to me obvious on the face of it that the student body in American colleges is homogeneous, but if it is I doubt that literature textbooks have anything to do with the homogeneity or far less to do with it than TV, say. But one of the great difficulties of having a

politics in American culture is that there's such a great deal of heterogeneity and evasion of the conflicts it represents that it's difficult to even dramatize or stage political issues. Now you might say it's a superficial heterogeneity, but I don't know.

Shumway: I would say that it's the opposite. My experience of Miami, for example, which I take not to be atypical of American universities in this sense, is that to stage a political event here wouldn't meet with repression; it would meet with indifference. Not because of tolerance, but because everybody basically has a kind of politics, a politics which is essentially a politics of self-interest; and to even raise a political issue is to contradict the reigning political ideology.

Graff: Yes, and there's a politics of fun, too, of having fun. I mean, one reason why politics loses out is that it's either not as much fun as other things you can do or to be made fun it has to be depoliticized. That to me is a very different sort of thing from a hegemonic kind of high cultural, intellectual discourse. You see, my real quarrel with you is you talk as if--test me if this is not right--the universities and the humanities divisions of the universities are tied in with the bosses of American culture. You uncritically apply something like an Althusserian model of "ideological state apparatus" to the humanities in the university with no real empirical analysis of how effectively the humanities function. You assume that somehow the humanities are really crucial to running things, that the humanities are preservers of this cultural discourse which functions to socialize the student body into its ruling cultural values and domesticate them for training in jobs, and so forth.

Now if that's your assumption, it strikes me as a kind of wishful thinking. I mean, if you look over its history, literary studies has been a kind of internal emigre from American culture, until the point where it lost any real identity after the New Criticism became assimilated. Again, I think that literary studies, far from programming students into a hegemonic discourse has been largely ineffective. Patty, in your article, ["Institutionalizing the Literacy Crisis 1975--1985," The GRIP Report, Volume IV] you talked about the current tendency to crack down on the literacy crisis, I mean, first to invent a literacy crisis and then to crack down on it. I think something like what you describe is happening, but the question is how to

describe that. Perhaps businesses are finally saying we're not going to tolerate our inefficiency and failure in the teaching of writing any more, that universities are really going to have to teach students to write in a way that will process them into the vocational system. But that itself assumes that universities have up to now disastrously failed to indoctrinate students in these methods and techniques.

Harkin: I can agree with the position that you've just taken with respect to composition as it's taught in the university system now, and also I recognize that what you've just said GRIP thinks is what Ohmann thought ten years ago. But it seems to me now that when GRIP addresses questions of literary studies, it addresses the ways in which literary studies are separated from the process of composing and the mastery of semicolon conventions. Literary studies, per se, are in fact moved into the background of our culture in the United States, made into a very unthreatening apolitical way of doing things in the world precisely because the university systems are dominated by the formalists who compose M.A. exams with questions about the way Wordsworth uses nature imagery but not questions about what the study of Wordsworth can teach us about culture at the turn of the 19th century.

Graff: But are you saying that the formalists who compose exam questions on the use of nature imagery in Wordsworth have a real social function? I'm saying they don't--that they constitute an anomalous entity, an institution without a social function. GRIP on the contrary is inclined to say they must have an important social function, must be needed to mediate to the students the hegemonic discourses, to produce them as subjects, etc. You see, to me that's crap. Granted, Ohmann is partly right about how composition has worked, but I think he exaggerates. Literature in the 19th-century college had a social function at least among the gentry who went to college. I think it lost that and has since been an institution looking for social function.

Of course it's now said that it's useful to have a literature degree, that you can get a good job in a corporation because people with literature degrees are glib or perhaps can write in certain kinds of ways. So one has to admit that there's some truth in the argument that literary education is tied in with the vocational system. But I think it's still not clear what is socially necessary

about a literary education, what literary education trains which isn't supplied elsewhere in the university. And if there is something, you can bet it is subject to change very rapidly, what with computer technology and so forth. Then, too, there is another kind of problem with the complaint that the English major programs students into the social system. What's the alternative? Are we supposed to start deschooling students in a way that would make them unfit to get any kind of job at all?

Harkin: So that they couldn't read the instructions for making nuclear weapons?

Graff: I think there's a problem here. If you're teaching black students and go in and say, "Look, far be it from me to indoctrinate you into this nasty enlightenment Cartesian hegemonic discourse," what would they say? Well, either they'll report you to the principal of the school, or they should report you because their interest is in doing what will pull them up to the economic level of others in this society. Here is another kind of dead end about this whole "hegemonic discourse" way of talking. Even if you concede the sense in which it's true, what do you hope to do about it? If the university refused to train people for jobs, it would be closed down and you wouldn't help anyone in any way.

To me, we would do better to step back and take a position something like this. We exist within a capitalist society that has certain liberal elements, even certain socialist elements, some of them progressive, some regressive; there are progressive elements in this society even within the vocational structures. It's not necessarily terrible if people who study in English get jobs with corporations, because there really are, in terms of the vocational ladder, no other alternatives. Rather than envisage a utopian university which would be a model of some kind of profoundly radical sort of transformative education, I think it would be more effective and more realistic if the university could simply first of all try to dramatize political issues, make them exist in a real way as they tend not to in American culture--dramatize them in a way so that different opposing groups finally have a voice and are forced to confront one another. And secondly, try to move things in a somewhat more liberal or at least less illiberal, less totally repressive direction. In other words, we do have a political function that we could be performing, but

grandiose talk about hegemonic discourses and radical transformation is fantasy. It's the kind of fantasy that seemed real in the 60's, but one we should stop living, it seems to me.

Downing: Well, the grand scheme is given up, for instance, by Foucault's discussion of the specific intellectual.

Graff: Well, that is true, the local, yeah. . . .

Downing: So the local works. Let me talk about ground rules and suggest ways in which they might be significant. In other words, we began talking about formalism. There's no reason, as you suggested, that a particular formal or objective method might not be used in institutional ways for all kinds of diversity in terms of subject matter, etc.

Graff: Right.

Downing: Granting that, it seems to me that at the deeper level, your particular version of ground rules authorizes a model of knowledge which in some sense presupposes a kind of passivity and dissemination on the. . . .

Graff: Apparently, you haven't been hearing what I've been saying, or you couldn't use the work "authorizes" so facilely. You've missed my whole point, that the connections between thought and its uses has to be critically viewed.

You conflated two things there--models and ground rules. I don't accept that. Ground rules are one thing, the institutional model that we use to organize education is another. The ground rules are simply the assumptions, the conventions, the operative. . . .

Downing: By which we construct models.

Graff: Models imply ground rules, but you can have a lot of different kinds of models without having ground rules. Yes. I mean, I would agree with you that a certain narrow construal of ground rules tends to encourage a certain model. The notion that there's literariness, or the aesthetic experience, or the literary experience,



the poetic experience,--once you adopt that as your central principle, then it follows that you will probably have a department that just teaches that and tries to isolate that literary experience from everything else. But that, to me, is not ground rules. That's a fallacy.

Downing: Let me put it on the level of pedagogy. It seems that the kind of homogeneity that I expect in the class room is not necessarily that the students share exact values except at this level: they assume a model of how they're going to learn in the classroom. Which is to say that I'm an authority and they will get from me certain things, and in return they will accept those things primarily so that they can give them back to me on an exam which is more or less programmed. And so, I find that that particular model of learning has been fairly effectively institutionalized.

Graff: All I was trying to say is you don't have to get rid of enlightenment notions of truth in order to develop better models. And I think of institutional models for teaching culture, not just literature.

Downing: Let me focus on the question of hegemony. In your talk, "Patterned Isolation," what I began to notice was your own reliance on a somewhat more sophisticated model of the operation of hegemony. I think that, particularly in his later work, Foucault offers a useful model of hegemony, but my point here is to switch to your own vocabulary. Can't we say that the word "pattern" in your analysis of patterned isolation points to the very level at which hegemony operates? Similarly the very process of innovation on the surface which you describe in this chapter as the model of professional productivity seems to operate in ways quite analogous to Foucault's analysis of the process of individuation. To be specific, professionalism operates so as to reward with symbolic and material capital those individuals who distinguish themselves in innovative ways. Fieldspeak, also known as Newspeak, is one way of conceptually naming the operation of hegemonic linguistic practices--again, not just words but broader practices in professional organizations. So that, in your own account, Fieldspeak generates an endless series of artificially stimulated problems. The question is, what would count as a naturally stimulated one?

Graff: The word "artificial" is a bit misleading because I don't necessarily want to defend the nature versus artifice distinction. All I meant by "artificially stimulated problems" were problems that wouldn't arise unless there were a professional handy to keep them alive, problems that we really don't need to address but which are stimulated by the "need" for a field to keep itself going by posing problems. In other words, we might not need to have 56 interpretations of one of Milton's sonnets, but the 56 interpretations arise because of the need for the field to have them. That's what I meant by artificial.

Downing: Isn't that an operation which a detailed analysis of hegemony would in some way get at? Why that happens within an institution?

Graff: Yes, I suppose. I guess I'm reluctant to use a word like "hegemony" because I feel instinctively that the American situation is so different from the European one that we ought to use a more native vocabulary. But my feeling is that we spend too much time trying to reduce our problems in literary studies to problems of power, whereas this is a relatively open system. The terms imply that if it's hegemonic, it's bad because somebody is coercing somebody else to do something. I tend to see our problems more in terms of lack of focus on specific conflicts. And this bothers me more than any fear that in American culture people are pervasively being dominated by a culture of elite. I don't like the way the dominance and control model is becoming the one in which we talk about everything. It expresses a paranoid view of politics which ultimately isn't even political: in Foucault, as many of his critics have pointed out, power is so pervasive that it finally isn't anywhere. It so infuses all our relationships that it finally ends up being rather harmless.

Downing: I'm arguing for hegemony as a specification of certain operations of power because you can begin to talk about counter-hegemonic, anti-hegemonic kinds of practice in various ways so that you can then make qualitative distinctions. Because I still keep hearing hegemonic. . . .

Graff: If hegemonic means the dominant trend or something like that, then of course I would be obliged to use it. . . .

Shumway: Gramsci uses hegemony to mean the ways in which a culture reproduces or supports itself by non-repressive means. And in fact hegemony for Gramsci is not to be opposed in itself so much as to be captured by the working-class party. Now, Foucault, I think, and Foucauldians use hegemony as something to be opposed in itself, and I suppose that maybe the word hegemony is taken on a more Foucauldian task in literary studies than Gramscian; I don't know.

Downing: Well, according to Gramsci, it can be either repressive or liberating, depending upon a qualitative analysis of how hegemony operates.

Graff: Maybe I'm getting too hung up on the word, and perhaps there's more Foucauldianism in my work than I have been willing to acknowledge. But I've given some of my reasons for resisting that trend.

Sosnoski: What's the nature of your new book?

Graff: O.K., it's a book entitled *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*. By an institutional history I mean, not a history based on the work of the major figures, the major names. What interests me is what happened to the major theories, the major approaches to literature, the major methods of studying literature once they became institutionalized. In a way, it's an attempt at imagining the history of the institution as an outsider might see it. I see myself as a sort of insider-outsider, writing partly from the point of view of the student or the lay person who's trying to figure out what the institution stands for. The narrative starts in the 19th century before literature was really taught "as literature," as we now say, when literature, when it was taught at all, was largely instrumental to teaching language, specifically Greek and Latin, and students translated literary texts but didn't really talk about what anyone could construe to be their literary qualities, or when it was taught as an adjunct to rhetoric or oratory. I use a long discussion of the 19th-century college to set up a discussion of what profes-

sionalization entailed and what its consequences have been. I have included some references to the current scene, but I'm more interested in how we got to where we are now than in particularizing where we are now, so the history, in effect, comes up to the 60's or so, with no attempt comprehensively to discuss the recent scene in criticism.

My other project is a collection of essays, some of which have already appeared, on the politics of criticism, and it will be an attempt to assess and criticize the way in which criticism has been politicized over the last ten or fifteen years. To an extent the two projects are related because both the history of the profession and the book on the politics of theory reflect my view that we have been governed too much by a myth of, if not a hegemonic (let's avoid that word), a myth of logocentric or "centered" institution with a coherent dominant ideology that we are supposed either to fight or defend. That is, I argue that both the traditional humanists and their opponents in recent debates share this same myth. The traditionalists believe that what literary studies have stood for is humanism in the Matthew Arnold sense, and the radicals, accepting the traditionalists' argument at face value, then attack this humanism in the Matthew Arnold sense as if it had been truly effective, as it has not. What I want to show is how professionalism has thoroughly undermined humanism in the Matthew Arnold sense. I argue that once philology became institutionalized as a field in the 80's and 90's, in the States really before England, the earlier 19th-century idea of cultural synthesis (which had a lot of Anglo-Saxon racism in it) was undermined by the fragmentation and the positivist orientation of the profession, as the Arnoldians of that day were all quick to see and protest.

This is one of the themes of the history--how professionalism itself undermines humanism, or at least conflicts with it to an extent that neither traditional humanists nor radicals have noticed. The radicals tend to be too busy attacking humanism to see that it ceased to exist institutionally in any meaningful way a long time ago. If you ask the average student what "humanism" is he won't know what you're talking about, and though I don't know what a test of humanism would be, I don't think most students would be able to pass it. On the other hand, by assuming that a humanistic tradition has been intact, the traditionalists have thereby not had to think through what they're doing. They can go ahead and teach, as Jim

points out, texts in a vacuum on the assumption that the sum total of teaching all these texts adds up to some kind of humanist education. Anyway, it's in this way that the two books are part of the same project, tied together by my interest in the politics of the profession.

Sosnoski: In "Patterned Isolation," your account of theoretical change is almost entirely in the form of conceptual change. Let's take for instance a significant change in literary studies you identify--that literary theory has recently become a field in the sense that job descriptions call for scholars whose specialty is literary theory. In that chapter, you seem to offer no other reason for this significant change other than the circumstance that new theories came along in the 60's as conceptual innovations. But what about the social and political events that led to dissatisfaction with new criticism and opened the door for such innovations? After all, theories of some conceptual power have not been institutionalized to the nearly overwhelming extent that new criticism was. For instance, Kenneth Burke's theory of symbolic action. . . .

Graff: Well, as I saw what I was doing, in "Patterned Isolation," I wasn't trying to give an account of theoretical change in the profession at all. What I was trying to say was that when changes do take place, when innovations occur, for whatever reason, they tend to get institutionalized in a way that prevents them from achieving the educational and cultural effects that they might have otherwise achieved in other circumstances. The essay was not about why theoretical change occurs but about what happens when change gets institutionalized.

On the other hand, in the book itself I do suggest certain reasons why change always gets institutionalized in a way that effaces conflict. But these reasons have for me more to do with poorly thought-through organizational structure than with conservative ideology, though I agree that it comes to the same thing at the end, and you will no doubt say that this is no coincidence. Maybe you're right.

*Literature Against Itself* Briefly Revisited

William Cain

When Gerald Graff's *Literature Against Itself* was published in 1979, it was attacked by critics on both the Right and the Left, and this double-barreled political critique has always seemed to me one of the most interesting aspects of the response to the book. The Right, while it valued Graff's stringent commentary on structuralism and its offshoots, disputed his linkage of the sorry condition of criticism to the demands of capitalism. "One of my central arguments," Graff notes early in his opening chapter, "is that the real 'avant-gard' is advanced capitalism, with its built-in need to destroy all vestiges of tradition, all orthodox ideologies, all continuous and stable forms of reality in order to stimulate higher levels of consumption" (8). Sentences like this made the Right uncomfortable with the prospect of Graff as an ally; he seemed to be saying that the ultimate source for the ailments of contemporary culture is not a band of irresponsible academic theorists but, rather, a "free enterprise" system that, in literary criticism as in the fashion industry, devotes its energy to concocting trends to keep the market moving and profits high.

Such a diagnosis, one might have thought, would have rallied men and women of the Left to stand alongside Graff. But, interestingly enough, Graff instead became, along with E. D. Hirsch, one of the literary Left's favorite villains, a cherished target of opportunity who was assailed as a political reactionary, an authoritarian, an intellectual ambassador of neo-conservatism from the court of Ronald Reagan. Some of the Left's assaults on *Literature Against Itself* were indeed quite remarkable in their intensity. One reviewer began by decrying the wave of reaction that had crested with the election of Reagan and, as though the bonds between Graff's book and New

Right pronouncements were unmistakable, identified *Literature Against Itself* as a rigidly conservative call for order and control. Graff, it seems, had not only found fault with Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and other writers known for their Leftist politics but, even more egregiously, had challenged vanguard theories that, breaking with norms of objectivity, stressed the liberating "undecidability" and "indeterminacy" of meaning. By criticizing these theories, and by arguing for a counter-theory that embraced "referential value" and the knowability of "the real," Graff struck a good many persons on the Left as a foe of insurgent pedagogy and criticism and a backer of panoptic scrutiny of wayward thought and speech. Surely he was a point-man in the academy for the Reagan revolution.

What accounts for this response? In part, I think, it results from an unsteadiness in the rhetoric of the book itself. Graff was trying to mount an argument that was directed against practices in departments of literature and in the culture at large, and he did not make his own point of view consistently clear. Just where did he stand politically within the institution and as a member of American society? You can readily see why many on the Left were upset. If Graff was opposed to capitalism, as his polemic indicated, then shouldn't he be openly committed to developing political and economic arguments that would change the nature of capitalism and its institutions? Wasn't it awkward to locate problems in English studies within the context of society and culture IN GENERAL yet then refrain from really addressing that context? You can also see why some on the Right became angry. If Graff judged that capitalism had in some sense spawned excesses and errors in literary criticism, then wasn't he in fact really an enemy of the American way? Wasn't he less a protector of humanism, tradition, and order than a threat to them?

To raise these questions is, from one perspective, to mark a weakness of Graff's book. But there is another, more generous, and finally more accurate way of stating the point, and that is to remark that Graff did not identify himself in a manner that either the Left or the Right could comfortably bring into focus, and hence they made him over in the image they were determined to perceive. Graff was attempting to be something for which we do not have a familiar category in either literary or political terms. I don't think that "liberal" is quite the word I'm looking for--a liberal would not be inclined to endorse Graff's sharp strictures on capitalist society.

Possibly we could describe this category, if we had to do so, as "Left-conservative," or maybe we would do better by calling Graff a "radical" and leaving out any potentially misleading Left or Right designation. On the one hand, Graff is claiming, in *Literature Against Itself* and in a number of subsequent essays, that the forces that propel capitalism also influence the kinds of discussions we have (and the decisions we make) about literature and criticism. But he is also urging us to avoid the simple-minded, if energizing, view that the best weapon for a literary person to wield against the State is post-structuralism. It's not at all obvious, Graff insists, that by assailing "reality" and "reference" and by brandishing "indeterminacy," a person will be doing good work for the Left. He or she might well be eliminating the validity, power, and precision that any Leftist criticism requires in order to resist its enemies.

This is a hard position to articulate successfully, but not because the position itself is naive or wrongheaded. Graff is charting a new direction for cultural criticism, and, in my view, he has received less credit for his very valuable enterprise than he deserves. It's not easy these days to criticize capitalism and, at the same time, to defend lucidity and rigor in writing and speech, posit the existence of "the real," believe in the worth of historical knowledge and the accessibility of truth, and counsel respect for certain customary procedures in critical analysis and method. Neither the Left nor the Right will like what you have to say, and both will seize on those aspects of your argument that enable them to fit you into their habitual vision of things.

"Frustration" sometimes seems to be the dominant political mood of our time, and this leads many readers to settle for impatient scannings of, and severe but unreflective judgments upon, Graff's work: they pick out of the work what they know in advance are signs of bad political loyalties. Today's literary, cultural, and political situation is, however, not only frustrating, but also very confused (and confusing). It's difficult, for one thing, to appraise arguments when neither the Right or the Left can even agree on exactly "what" is to be argued about. Take, for example, the politics of the university. The Right contends that the academy is a haven for liberals and Leftists who, out-of-phase with and hostile to conservatism, preach opposition to American values and traditions. The Left replies by labelling the university as the training-ground for corporate capitalism and the institutional guardian of race, class, and

gender privilege. There's no agreement about what the university "is": the Left (e.g., Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson, Edward Said) and the Right (e.g., Hilton Kramer, Peter Shaw, Robert Nisbet) seem to be describing completely different institutions and have in common only the fervor of their indictments.

Both sides ignore facts that are inconvenient to them. The Right does not acknowledge that all of those feared battalions of liberals and Leftists seem to be extremely ineffective in getting across their message. Poll after poll has shown that college graduates are politically conservative; and the percentage of young people who voted for Reagan's re-election was greater than that of any other group. One might have assumed that this evidence would diminish the Right's conviction that the Left is engaged in the academy in crippling America and its institutions; at the least, it should have led the Right to consider whether the academic Left, however numerous its legions, has much real strength.

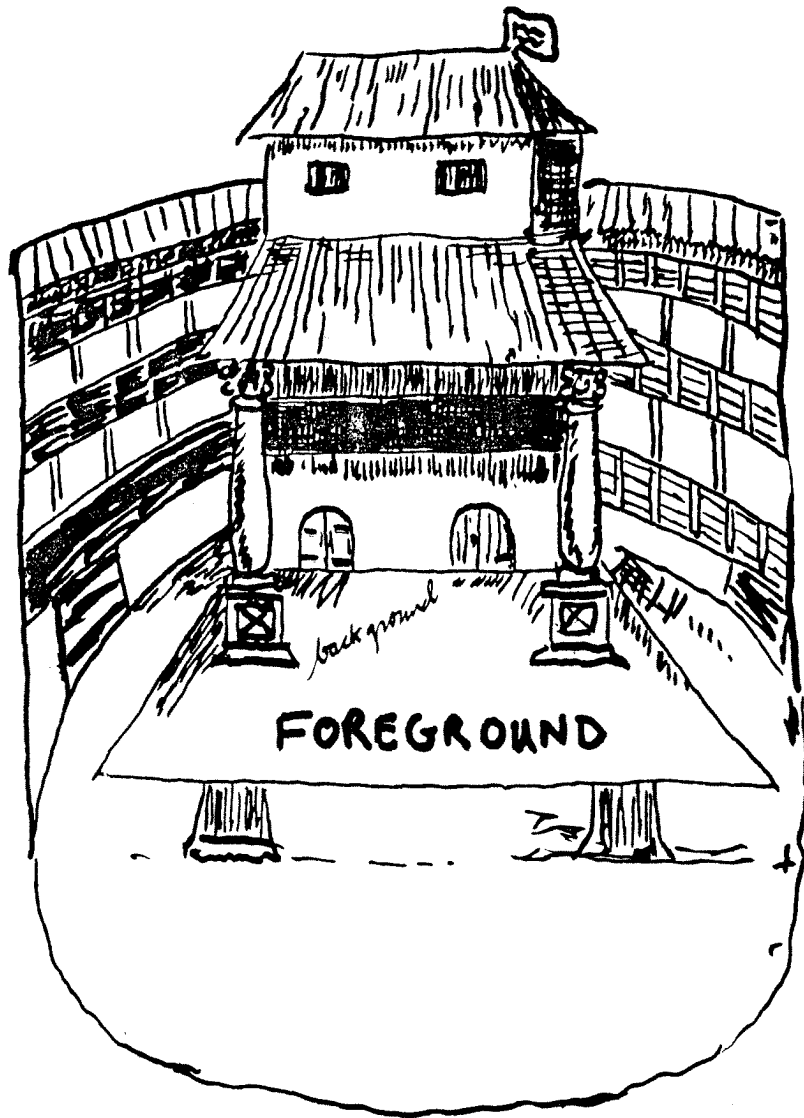
For its part, the Left is too eager to denounce the corporate mind-set on campus and does not appreciate fully the range of voices and views that the academy makes possible. To say this is not to idealize academic freedom, which still has its limits. But it's important to recognize that women, blacks, gays, and other marginalized and oppressed minorities have opportunities within the academy to express themselves that the general culture denies them. The Left loves to rail against the Modern Language Association, but there is more freedom of expression, tolerance, heterogeneity, and pluralism at the MLA convention--as the topics on race, class, and gender treated at Special Sessions prove--than there is in nearly any other sector of society.

I think that Graff aimed in *Literature Against Itself* to depict the university as an institution that is more complex, and harder to define, than either the Left or the Right would like to believe. The university is not, in its essence, a bastion of conservatism and corporate ideology, nor is it an encampment for socialists and revolutionaries. This kind of strident political characterization, while exciting to deploy in literary-critical warfare, fails to represent the complicated and sometimes highly contradictory work that occurs in American universities. In appealing in *Literature Against Itself* for collective discussion, historical analysis, and inter-disciplinary collaboration (124-27), Graff was, in effect, saying: "Look, it's not possible for all of us to agree that the university is a Right-wing or

a Left-wing institution--the evidence suggests that our institutional lives are more complex and confusing than that. And it's also not possible for us to transform this diverse institution--nor should we wish that we could--into something that serves only the interests of the Right or the Left. Let's instead consider why the university lends itself to such conflicting interpretations; let's take these conflicts as issues that we can explore and argue about in our classrooms and symposia; and let's thereby make the university openly and expressly what it is--'political' through and through, but not, fortunately, single-mindedly 'politicized.'"

Graff's proposal did not satisfy many of his readers, yet it is, in many respects, the only type of proposal that could conceivably speak to (and make room for) BOTH the Right and the Left. Graff does not mandate that everybody should agree about what the university "is"; nor does he insist that all departments and faculty members within it should do one particular thing. Instead, he takes the fact of disagreement as a given, as something to articulate further and to build upon. Critics and teachers are not obliged, as Graff sees things, to grow more conservative or more left-leaning, but, instead, should express their disparate (and discordant) views in institutional settings where "politics" (as well as other kinds of motivating and empowering assumptions) might be openly examined, tested, debated. This notion, however impure and mixed it may seem to some, is more humane and respectful of diversity than anything the Right recommends, and--I will risk saying this from my own position on the Left--it is also more progressive than anything the Left ordinarily offers.

Wellesley College



## Criticism and Liberal Reason

Nick Visser

Constraints on available space make it impossible to produce anything like a full overview of Gerald Graff's contribution to literary studies. Since an overview is out of the question, and since the interview and commentaries printed in this volume cover a variety of issues foregrounded by Graff's work, I shall do the rare thing and take no more than the space allotted to me in order to focus very briefly on a single, but absolutely crucial, aspect of his work: its politics.

In the interview, Graff identifies as one of the "main points" of *Literature Against Itself* something that was overlooked or ignored by most readers of the book: "I felt that I was making a political argument which allowed for an interplay between politics and literary theory." From the outset of his career, in fact, Graff has been engaged in an increasingly explicit political enterprise. Of course, it hardly any longer requires arguing that all critical and theoretical discourse is inescapably political. Graff's work, however, seeks to be political in a more direct and immediate way.

From his graduate-school days when the material for *Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma* was first developed, right up to the interview printed in this volume, Graff's work has been marked by a consistent commitment to what we might call liberal reason on the one hand and to a corresponding form of politics on the other.<sup>1</sup> These have from the outset been intertwined parts of a single project; for Graff the former seems always to have entailed the latter. Over time, however, the latter component has become increasingly visible. There have been, as Graff makes clear in the interview, shifts in his work in emphasis and in detail; and certainly, given changes in some of his philosophical allegiances, he would not

express himself now as he did in his earlier work. Nevertheless, Graff's thinking has been remarkably stable over some twenty years. We can glimpse the stable center of his position in the role he has constructed for himself in his writings. He has throughout projected himself as the reformer, as one who would correct the methodological and ideological errors of his colleagues, and as one who would return literature and literary studies to a more public arena.

That reformist position is not without complications and contradictions. The role involves Graff in something of a split rhetorical self: a self who would enter into debate as an active participant; and a self who seeks to adopt a position above the fray, speaking, in the guise of mediator to all right-thinking people, with the voice of reason itself. That rhetorical disjunction is by no means peculiar to Graff; it emerges wherever commitment to the codes of rational discourse gets linked to a larger program of critical, theoretical, institutional, or social reform. A further complication lies in the irony of Graff's position. For all his suspicion of post-structuralist notions of the political dimensions of discourse (see the interview), Graff's own position sites discourse at the very center of political action. Indeed, he virtually substitutes discourse *for* political action. Another complication derives from the sort of liberal corrective or liberal meliorist position that Graff occupies: as he comes close to acknowledging when he speaks at the outset of the interview about criticizing positions that people had already begun to abandon, the role of mediator in theoretical debate is always just out of date. Such attempts to accommodate, consolidate, synthesize, to map out a wise *via media* between competing paradigms, invariably go to work on the state of affairs that has just passed.

I must make it clear at the outset that in writing of Graff's commitment to liberal reason I am not engaging in what he objects to in the interview; that is, tacking ready-made political labels on to what he calls "the ground rules of discussion." For present purposes I am not concerned with arguments that "the ground rules of discourse themselves are political," though I am dubious about the ease with which Graff skirts that issue. What I do want to emphasize is that Graff himself, despite his assurances that acceptance of rationalist ground rules is a purely pragmatic matter--unavoidable, and largely ideologically innocent--clearly sees commitment to the conventional codes of rational discourse as having political import and political efficacy. His commitment to liberal reason is for him a decisive

ethical and political commitment.

We can glimpse the political implications as Graff sees them, of a commitment to liberal reason in any number of statements in *Literature Against Itself*. When he calls the "technique of methodological neutrality, of 'getting the facts right' before leaping in with our value judgments . . . one of the progressive achievements of civilization" (86), he is deliberately using "progressive" to cover a wide range of potential meanings, including, centrally, political meanings. The word appears elsewhere (including as recently as the interview) with similar implications. Writing about the role of the university in modern society, he says:

To make sense of history against the flow of an anti-historical society, yet one that is ahistorical for historically intelligible reasons--this seems to me the most "progressive" function that the university could perform at the moment. (*Literature Against Itself* 124)

Placing scare-quotes around the word here hedges the statement in interesting ways. No more concretely political role for the university, or for academics, is entertained; only an analytical, corrective participation in rational discourse, a participation which, we should note, is nevertheless projected as being inherently--and commendably--political. It is with this sense of a circumscribed but, in Graff's view, urgent political role that he speaks of the "critical potential latent in traditional humanistic education" (126). I shall return to that political role, but I want in passing to remark that it is hard to know what to make of a critic who wishes to restore historical inquiry when he adopts such an ahistorical view both of education and of rationality and its underpinning language of reference. "Traditional" gestures towards some vague historical realm, some organic moment in an unspecified past, when language was fixed, reason reigned, words safely referred, humanists were agreed and had genuine effect on society.

To be sure, Graff's more recent thinking, reflected in "Patterned Isolation," sketches an institutional history that shows how little humanists have ever been in agreement. But even here, a note of nostalgia is sounded as Graff laments that "literature and criticism were already [in the 1880s and 1890s] being isolated from their constituency . . ." (typescript 23). That that constituency was never

more than a "genteel upper middle class" (23) bothers Graff only a little.

The project he sketches in "Patterned Isolation" remains of a piece with the anxieties he expressed in *Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma* regarding "the current cultural plight of the humanities" (xiv), however much he has shifted from attempting to establish a pluralist happy medium among competing poetic theories in the earlier text to accepting theoretical diversity and making it a central "part of the substance of humanities education" in the more recent work (61). Throughout he has been uneasy with the failure of professional work in the humanities to engage in "ulterior contexts that might give it a justification beyond careerism or promoting the interests of the field" ("Patterned Isolation" 40).

To what extent, and in precisely what ways, engagement in "ulterior contexts" is envisaged in Graff's work constitute what I see as the central unresolved and unresolvable dilemma in his career-long project. In an effort to carry out my promise of brevity, I shall confine my remarks on that dilemma to three issues.

First there is the issue of liberal reason, or rationality, itself. Rationality for Graff on close inspection turns out to be primarily an attempt to provide a kind of re-theorized common sense. The re-theorizing takes the form of highly selective tactical appeals to what are for the most part eclectically cited philosophers and philosophical schools. What is in fact grounded in these appeals is a personal empiricism not far removed from Dr. Johnson's kicking the stone in refutation of Berkeley.

Rationality becomes reason; reason shades into reasonableness. (In his voice we can often pick up the tones of a fellow Chicagoan: "I am responsible," muses Bellow's Moses Herzog late in the novel, "responsible to reason.") Hence rationality is not for Graff simply a set of rhetorical and logical codes governing intellectual discourse; it is also, and equally, a code of behavior, a commitment to certain assumed proprieties. Commitment to liberal reason involves avoidance of "extreme" positions, justified by an assumption that a middle way is *always* desirable. The upshot is a rhetorical strategy of "Yes, but." Thus Marxism, while it can be accorded some value, is apparently *always* "vulgar" (see for instance *Literature Against Itself* 141); post-structuralists, though correct in important respects, invariably overstate their case, and so on.

My second concern is with the "ulterior contexts" Graff would

wish humanistic disciplines to address, for this facet of his thinking raises yet another difficulty. Graff is inconsistent about just how the purported isolation of humanists from the wider culture came about. On the one hand he seems to suggest that humanists ceased at some point to have effect outside the confines of their professions because society, or as he puts it in "Patterned Isolation," "cultural forces," changed in such a way as to exclude them (40). At other points he charges that "humanistic culture has so often deprived itself of the critical perspective it might well contribute to the larger society" (*Literature Against Itself* 101). It is uncertain, in other words, whether society abandoned humanists or humanists abandoned society. In any event, he repeatedly insists that universities in general and the humanities in particular continue to have a role to play in society, if they would just take it up.

The very possibility of such a role depends on a social context that Graff himself partly suspects no longer exists. That vanished context has been explored by Habermas in his work on the "public sphere," which Terry Eagleton has fruitfully deployed in his recent study of the changing social contexts of literary studies, *The Function of Criticism*. With the disintegration of the public sphere in the nineteenth century, criticism, Eagleton argues, increasingly came to lack any substantive social function. Graff similarly recognizes that "non-academic literary culture" was disappearing by the end of the last century; moreover, he recognizes that such a "culture" was largely if not exclusively the preserve of "the genteel upper middle class" ("Patterned Isolation" 23). Nevertheless, he continues to imagine some sort of potentially vital social role for academics (albeit in an abstractly conceived "society"), some sort of significant--and justificatory--connection with those "ulterior contexts" (40). However laudable it may be for literary studies to seek a wider audience and a more comprehensive social function, in the absence of an adequate analysis of the structure of American society, such desiderata are little more than vague rhetorical gestures. "Society" cannot be addressed because there is simply no such undifferentiated, homogeneous social totality available for the intervention of intellectuals.

And finally, there is Graff's notion of politics in the more conventional sense of the word. If Graff has come to believe that conflicts among competing intellectual paradigms are potentially a "source of strength" in education ("Patterned Isolation" 61), he is less sanguine about other forms of conflict. In keeping with the ethical



humanism that underpins so much of his thinking, he projects a politics without social contradiction or conflict, and without social power. In a central passage in *Literature Against Itself* he writes:

The real question is the *basis* on which the community chooses its beliefs. To refer the determination to some abstract concept of community is to ignore the fact that such determinations are rationally debatable and to turn the question into one of power and manipulation. Perhaps power and manipulation have always decided such conflicts, but if we deny any scope to rational argument, we leave the field open to them. (189)

In this and similar passages we can see the extent to which for Graff the discourse of liberal reason *is* politics; ultimately the only kind of social intervention he can imagine is a commitment to rational suasion, as if social conflicts are founded purely on misconceptions, disputes about values or meanings of words, or "failures of communication," which humanists are capable of mediating through rational debate. It is in this spirit that he writes:

One of the most useful functions that literature and the humanities could serve right now would be to shore up the sense of reality, to preserve the distinction between the real and the fictive, and to help us resist those influences, both material and intellectual, that would turn lying into a universal principle. (*Literature Against Itself* 12)

A conception of society of "community" based on the sorts of political premises with which Graff operates is no less abstract than the one he attacks. More importantly, no genuine social function for humanistic disciplines in general or literary criticism in particular, no "interplay between politics and literary theory," is possible within such a conception.

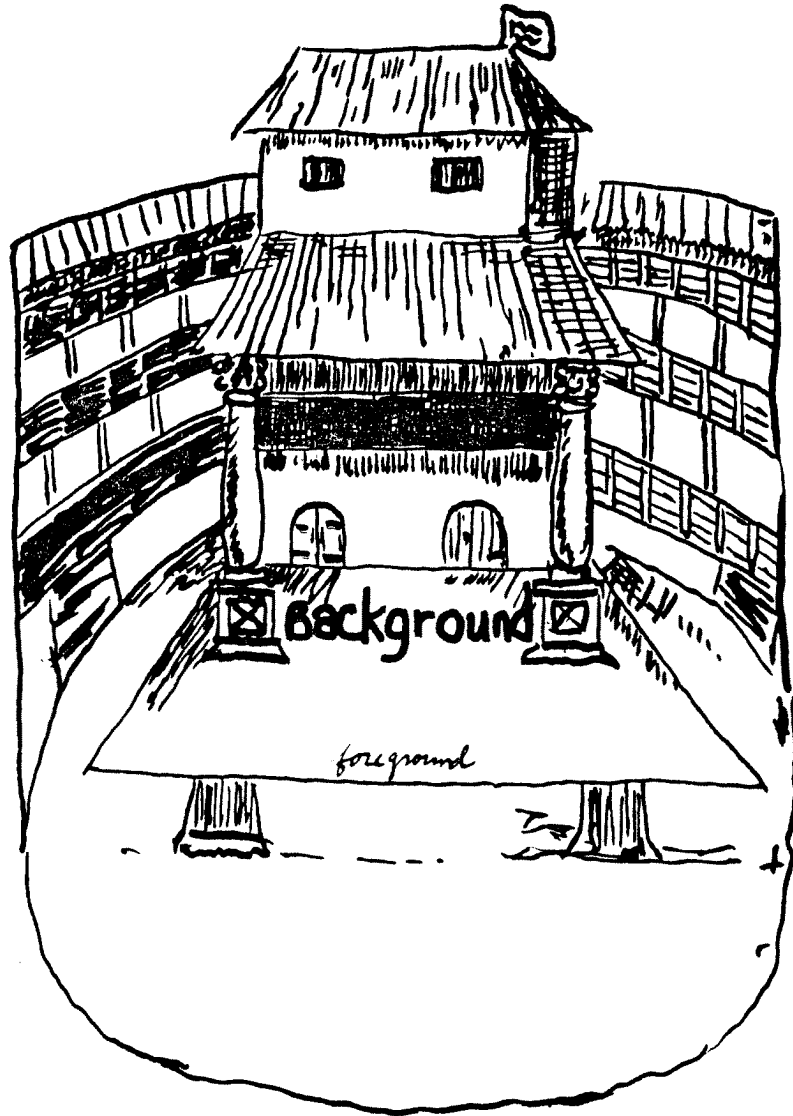
University of Cape Town

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>It will be sufficiently clear as my argument develops that by "liberal reason" I mean something substantially different from the non-ethical scientific reason which Thomas Spragens explores in his *The Irony of Liberal Reason*. My own sense of the term bears more on the valorization of reason/reasonableness in the tradition of philosophical humanism.

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The Cultural Politics  
of Graff's History of Literary Studies

David B. Downing

I. Theory vs. Politics

My emphasis in the title of this paper on "cultural politics" may seem to some readers as a kind of redundancy: politics is of course cultural. The broader term simply reiterates a dimension of politics when the latter is more narrowly conceived as the use and abuse of power and ideology within various institutional settings. But the relations between the political dimensions of institutional practices and broader cultural beliefs, ideologies, and class structures need to be carefully theorized rather than merely assumed or asserted. Thus, despite my real sympathy with Gerald Graff's recent assertions about the need for "an overriding cultural concern" within the intellectual community, I find that in his own writing on the politics of critical theory, and even in his recent work on the history of the discipline of literary studies, there remains an untheorized dimension of his articulation of the relations between literary institutions and broader cultural practices even in those texts where he is ostensibly addressing just those relations.

Ever since the 1979 publication of *Literature Against Itself*, Graff has often been critical of those post-structuralist doctrines that in his view uncritically blur the distinctions between theory and politics, "the procedures of inquiry" and the organization of institutions. His resistance has been based on his contention that such theorists often re-enact the very modes of advanced capitalism in their efforts to critique the means of capitalistic exploitation. As Paul Bové has described it, one of the beliefs central to Graff's critical position in

1979 was that "the decentered, pluralistic, non-referential literary critical theory and practice of Modernity and Post-modernity is itself a product of advanced capitalism" (78). According to Graff, then, "the real 'avante-garde' is advanced capitalism, with its built-in need to destroy all vestiges of tradition, all orthodox ideologies, all continuous and stable forms of reality in order to stimulate higher levels of consumption" (*Literature Against Itself* 8). Of course, without a well-developed analysis and theory of advanced capitalism it is difficult to see how his own or anyone else's canons of reason and rationality can transcend those contaminating forces of consumption and production. But on the basis of this somewhat glib challenge, it has been too easy for some of his critics to see Graff here lamenting the demise of coherent bourgeois social order. Graff has insisted that his own intention has been, rather, to seek a form of critique of both advanced capitalism and bourgeois complacency, the latter having but fostered the latent conditions for the practices which have materialized in our post-industrial "advance."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, he has all along accepted many beliefs inimical to bourgeois rationality and coherence as when he acknowledges that "it is indeed true, as recent structuralists insist, that meanings are paradigm-bound and system-constituted, that perceptions are mediated by interpretations, that perceptual reality is in a sense our construction" (*Literature Against Itself* 194).<sup>2</sup>

The problem, I will argue, lies in the untheorized dimension of his argument which resurfaces in the preceding sentence only in his qualifying phrase "in a sense." Graff's resistance to the uneasy relativism he acknowledges in the "profoundly cultural" modes of literary interpretation, institutional politics, and "overexcited" ("Textual Leftism" 567) theorizing, depends on his simultaneous defense of "canons of reason and evidence assumed to be independent of ideological considerations" ("Pseudo-Politics" 601). In his discussions of the political dimensions of theory he expends considerable effort to distinguish epistemology from politics, rationality and reason from cultural distortions and dogmas, and to advocate a critical practice with "objectivity as an enabling assumption that makes intellectual activity possible, not a guarantee of infallibility" ("Textual Leftism" 575). Once again, the tenor of such objectivist assertions have led many of his critics to unfairly characterize him as a spokesman for a right-wing conservative moralism, but Graff is more accurately seen as trying to create a space for resistance to either

the deformations of late industrial capitalism or the oppressive legacy of bourgeois humanism.<sup>3</sup> In other words, he wants to include politics in any discussion of theory while at the same time he argues for their inevitable difference.

It is in his more recent work in the history of the profession of literary studies that Graff has made a concerted effort to redress the liabilities of this separation of literary theory and institutional practice, professional hierarchies and cultural ideology. In fact, Graff acknowledges that his own theoretical position now lies even closer to Marxist, post-structuralist, and feminist critiques of the literary establishment than some of his earlier writings such as *Literature Against Itself* would have suggested. Nevertheless, his endorsement of various left-wing intellectual and political doctrines still carries with it some strong reservations. I would characterize these reservations as an ambivalence which takes the form of, on the one hand, a critique of the inadequate separation of theory and politics, art and society, which have characterized our profession, and on the other, unwillingness to give up the dualism as a necessary dimension of critical practice. We can see this ambivalence more specifically in Graff's study of the profession to which I now turn.

## II. Conflict and Ambivalence in Historiography

In a recent essay, "The University and the Prevention of Culture," Graff concludes his synoptic critique of current institutional practices with an appeal to the "cultural studies" advocated by Raymond Williams. Since such an appeal lies close to my own interests in a willfully post-disciplinary cultural studies, I find his criticism of the departmental constraints of traditional literary departments an important and worthwhile project. Indeed, in the polemical preface to the collection of essays (including his own referred to above), *Criticism in the University*, which Graff co-edited with Reginald Gibbons, he states his position forcefully and clearly. He rejects the traditional assumption that status of the literary object is unproblematic; he acknowledges the appropriative dimension of any critical practice insofar as we constitute the objects we interpret within the constraints of our own historical and disciplinary procedures; and he proposes to transform some of the constraints which have prevented a more open exchange of conflicting interpretations, beliefs, and ideologies. Again, I welcome nearly all of these

goals to the extent that they would undoubtedly ameliorate the kinds of critical exchange that might then become possible in our profession. Graff arrives at this position in part as a consequence of his recent work on the history of the discipline of literary studies, and it is precisely within his narrative account of the discipline that I will locate my own reservations, primarily because I am less sanguine about the possibility of achieving the kind of goals Graff proposes for the profession if we rely only on the kind of disciplinary analysis he offers.<sup>4</sup>

We can begin by recounting some of the terms Graff has developed and defined as central to his own historiographical method. In particular, his description of the institutionalization of "patterned isolation" (which he borrows from Lawrence Veysey) operating through the "field coverage principle," allows him to narrate an almost comic series of recursive historical cycles which have characterized the rise of professional English studies since the 1880's. Briefly summarized, each cycle consists of a battle between traditionalists and radicals, and the poles of the debate usually involve versions of history/society/politics at one end and art/literature/aesthetics at the other. The comic feature of these strenuous debates is that, 1) depending on which cycle you look at, traditionalists and radicals may occupy either pole, and 2) the corollary point that the only progression in the cycles is an inversion in the poles: when the radical historical critics win, they then in turn become the traditional defenders against the art/aesthetics position, and vice versa. The ostensible differences in rhetoric in each of the various positions distracts from a more underlying pattern. In Graff's words: "The terms by which traditionalists have defined treason don't change, even though the activities the terms denote change every generation. In an amnesic culture, today's tradition tends to be only yesterday's revolutionary innovation, and those who oppose it without awareness of the fact only hasten the next innovation" ("The University" 64). The professional cycle begins with the formation of English departments when the once radical philologists become the conservative traditionalists who are attacked by the Arnoldian humanists, who are in turn attacked by the positivistic literary historians, who are in turn attacked by the New Critical explicators, who are in turn attacked by the New New Critical Theorists.

To the extent that I agree with Graff that these cycles of institutional stalemating have for too long dominated the profession,

I find Graff's goal of breaking from this repetition compulsion commendable. So far as it goes, his analysis of the method by which the institution perpetuates the pattern seems accurate: the proliferation of isolated but expanding fields enables the institution to "cover" the new area of dispute by absorbing it within the institutional structure. Fields of specialization become self-enclosed enclaves which mute and prevent open conflict so that the departmental structure of the university can proceed with business as usual. Graff proposes as a positive goal for literary/cultural theory to resist this institutional fact and set its sights for reform "on abridging the structural isolation of individuals, groups and departments that now prevents the possibility of an intellectual community of debate" ("The University" 79).

I have no trouble with such a goal, but I do question Graff's articulation of the forces which might resist such proposed changes. As I read Graff, I detect in these arguments the recurrence of a kind of liberal humanist rationalism, the force of which suggests that it is almost silly for us, now that we so clearly recognize these tiresome cycles, not to open up the conflicts, begin frequent interdisciplinary discussions, reshape humanities programs into cultural studies programs, so that, finally, we can "dramatize exemplary conflicts" and re-create the contexts and conflicts we have lost in the production and consumption of literary texts. The key word (and weakness) in these formulations is the word "lost": we have not only lost the cultural consensus of a more traditionally "holistic" society, but we have also lost the history of cultural conflict which "forms no part of the context for teaching the discipline" (70); we have lost the political weight of aesthetic arguments; we have lost the reciprocity of community in our isolation. The point of the emphasis on "lost" suggests the kind of critical exchange we can recover. But my point is that there is no such ground to recover that would redress the institutional malaise Graff seeks to ameliorate. In other words, despite the great value of changing the institution into a site for the open engagement with otherwise repressed conflicts, such changes will require greater changes in the underlying beliefs and ideology which indeed prevent just such exchanges.<sup>5</sup>

Graff makes it clear that he is not simply advocating an impossible recovery of "the broad consensus that underlay traditional liberal education," which "no longer exists" so "that re-establishing coherence is not necessarily a matter of dramatizing exemplary

conflicts and controversies rather than expounding the received great books, ideas and traditions" ("The University" 80). Coherence will be built around dramatized conflicts, but such coherence of course depends on establishing a degree of consensus, even though articulated in new terms. Moreover, Graff's own terminology seems to allow for the return in his own historiography of just that which he is manifestly criticizing.

Perhaps I can make my point here a bit more specific by referring to Graff's description of the failure of New Criticism. Graff's main point (and this goes back to his discussion in *Literature Against Itself*) is that however much we criticize the lack of social concern in the New Critics' myopic exegesis of textual ambiguity, Graff wishes us to recall and recover the context in which the arguments for the "disinterested nature of aesthetic experience," insofar as they entailed a rejection of utilitarian values, was itself a "powerfully utilitarian gesture" ("The University" 68). For example, despite the ultimate failure of Richards' practical criticism, Graff argues that it was "a therapeutic for ideological conflict and misunderstanding, aimed at neutralizing the destructive potential of science and nationalism" (67-68). Graff's point is that "the cultural context of first generation New Criticism fell away," and that to be fair to New Criticism we should recover those lost political contexts. However valuable it may be to reconstruct these cultural contexts, and I agree that they are essential, my point is that it is simply not sufficient to recover the "cultural rationale" which was left behind when New Criticism became a narrowly conceived academic methodology. Rather, the doctrine itself was neither as "powerfully utilitarian" as Graff claims nor could talking in classes about the history we seem to have forgotten ever be as therapeutic as to sustain the recovery he hopes for. One cannot, that is, simply recover what is lost, like a neglected piece of furniture, from the otherwise neutral ground of our seminar rooms. There is nothing quite so neutral about our seminar rooms, and we cannot recover anything without first theoretically constituting the objects we seek to reconstruct. Graff acknowledges these points,<sup>6</sup> but in such a general way that in actual practice it appears that simply the effort to preserve the cultural context "would have meant tying literature to society." But in that case, "we" would have to theorize that relationship: there is an untheorized dimension of New Critical doctrine itself, an ambivalence at the heart of its own conception of the relation between

literature and society which proved disabling even in its original first generation cultural context, and indeed fostered its own inevitable reproduction which it sought to resist in science and industry. In other words, the very production of the oppositions between "disinterested" art and vested politics was precisely the mode of incorporation by which literature departments could be institutionalized as a separate discipline. But such a reading requires a more rigorous theoretical intervention in our own historiography than a simple recovery of some lost issues and intentions. Moreover, all that we can "recover" is an articulation of the ambivalence rather than a therapeutic healing of our own professional aphasia. New Critical ambivalence tends to reassert itself in a different yet paradoxically similar ambivalence in Graff's historiography. Theory then might help us reconstruct the sources of that ambivalence in the cultural politics of race, class, and gender struggles for power within the society.

I have run the risk in these formulations of having the articulation of ambivalence seem like no more than a quibbling semantic difference from Graff's description of the recovery of conflict, but I would like to make these distinctions clear. By ambivalence, I refer to a theoretical failure to interrogate fully the terms of the cultural conflict the New Critics were themselves actually engaged in. The "cultural rationale" by which the New Critics hoped, among other things, to avoid crass philistinism and industrial materialism (examples of what Graff says we have forgotten when we criticize them) was paradoxically proposed in a doctrinal defense of the "acultural." In other words, New Critical doctrine tended to exclude from the literary realms issues of race, class, and gender so crucial to the criticism of the culture in which the doctrine took hold just as science and industry excluded such considerations from their own self-serving rationales. At the same time that literature was to stand apart from history, these claims were intended to sustain the tremendous role and significance of literature in history and culture. New Critical resistance seems a less "powerfully utilitarian" in this light, unless "utilitarian" means that the operation of such ambivalence enabled the masking of class interests, a mask which fostered their rise as a professional class. Consequently, to "recover" these issues we must actively theorize how they are to be inserted in a discourse which has so often excluded them. The consequences of failing to adequately theorize these socio-historical relations between theory and practice is that the ambivalence unwittingly recurs in

Graff's own historiography, and that is where it most needs to be excised if his history is to fulfill the promise of his intended goals.

To suggest more specifically how this can be done and what it might involve, I will turn briefly to Evan Watkins' argument for a revisionist history of the discipline where he addresses precisely this ambivalence. As he argues, "The point is that literary criticism in its modern forms in England and the United States evidences a peculiar tension between such often extravagant claims for direct consequences on the one hand, and on the other a certain reserve which marks the distinction between 'other discourse' and 'literature' as the difference between consequences which belong to the very nature of the activity and those which don't" (13). Watkins' argument for cultural studies differs from Graff's in his call for a study of the sources of this ambivalence not in the cycles of recurring theories at the major post-graduate institutions, but rather "at the boundaries of ambivalence, at the consequences of how literary studies are organized within the conflicting directions of cultural production" (14). What such a revisionist history calls for is not just a search for institutional practices in old issues of *PMLA*, Presidential addresses, and major theoretical texts; rather, we need to include in such a history a concern for the broader social and institutional hierarchies, especially those which have been excluded from yet inevitably bear upon our professional history. In other words, as Tony Davies puts it, "it is in the humdrum, everyday and generally quite 'untheoretical' activity of English teaching that the real effectivity of 'Literature' is to be found" ("Common Sense" 34). The most effective theory will therefore need to conceptualize the material practices which often remain otherwise untheorized.

In these terms, Graff's sense of cultural conflict is somewhat short-circuited in its explanatory power. On the one hand, his goal is to recover the contexts of cultural conflict which have fallen away from literary discussions, but he presupposes, as it were, that the participants in the conflicting arguments today are relatively equal competitors in a debate who, for some unfortunately short-sighted reasons which now appear rather useless, are simply unable to talk to each other. But as Watkins, Foucault, and others have argued, conflict is embedded in hierarchies of power and class where inequities reinforce a complex network of institutional rewards and punishments ranging from the social privileges of professionals at elite institutions, to the plight of part-time instructors at junior

colleges, to the status of literature versus composition teachers, to the relations between, as in Watkins' example, the plumber and the professor. Graff's articulation of the "field coverage principle" may suffice as a theoretical explanation of a range of university practices which serve to incorporate and mute open conflict between competing scholarly positions. But it will unlikely suffice to explain the hierarchies that remain in place in each passing phase of the cycles of patterned isolation. Thus, whereas Watkins claims that what we need is "a revisionist history" of the discipline itself, the consequences of which materialize "as a narrative of class consciousness which locates the ambivalence of literary criticism within the antagonisms of class struggle," Graff tends to write as if class structure and hierarchy had for practical purposes dissolved, just like the traditional bourgeois liberal consensus had dissolved, into the heterogenous cluster of diverse, complex, but above all isolated academic enclaves.<sup>7</sup>

The problem, in other words, is that the open ground of mutual debate where conflicts can be exchanged is not as readily open and available as Graff's history would lead us to believe. Diversity works within the constraints of hierarchy so that some are privileged and some are marginalized.<sup>8</sup> And until the terms of our own theory and historiography allow us to account equally well for the sources of those inequities, we will be unlikely to transform the cycles of repetition. Our histories of the profession must actively engage such a wide range of cultural politics if we hope to ameliorate the political conditions in which we live our professional lives.

### III. Theorizing Alternatives

If I have been unfair to Graff in belaboring an untheorized dimension of his critical practice, it may be because he has recently stated his alliance with "speech-act theory, pragmatics and various forms of reader-response criticism" because they "agree in emphasizing" that "interpreting the meaning of any text" (and thus, I presume, of any institution) "involves making inferences about the kind of situation to which it refers or which it presupposes" ("The University" 78). But the general appeal to the broad ranges of pragmatism and speech-act theory still leaves entirely problematic how we are to constitute a dimension of critical practice that Graff himself claims is crucial to his own work: the ability to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of rhetorical and institutional power. In this

final section I shall briefly sketch the theoretical proposals for construing the problematic situation in literary studies according to the critical theory of Jurgen Habermas. My rationale for invoking Habermas is that, in his concern for the procedures and powers of legitimation, he theorizes just that which I'm arguing remains ambivalently untheorized in Graff's work. By assimilating Habermas to Graff's project we may get a glimpse of the kind of work that might need to be done in writing an institutional history and how it might look different from what Graff has proposed. At the same time, Habermas's procedures remain fundamentally sympathetic to Graff's concern for legitimation and resistance to the uneven "winds of cultural relativism."

Beginning with the 1968 publication of *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas's development of his theory of communicative action has been especially attentive to the ways theory may uncritically abdicate its connection with human interests and practical action.<sup>9</sup> But his critique of the risk of such speculatively "pure theory" reconceives theory as the practice of constructing explanatory hypotheses with respect to the pragmatics of social inquiry. Habermas thus attempts more rigorously to theorize precisely the goal proposed by Graff of "a fusing of cultural inquiry and the most scrupulous textual attention" which "would begin to restore to criticism a constructive role in the literary culture" (*Criticism* 11). In assimilating Charles Sanders Peirce's social pragmatics with Frankfurt School Critical Theory, Habermas proposes a three-fold analysis of the categories of cognitive interests: technical, practical, and emancipatory. The socio-cultural rather than metaphysical basis of these epistemological distinctions depends on an historical account of the rise of different disciplinary practices, but, as I will argue, the usefulness of Habermas's theoretical proposals is that they can be turned against the conventional separation of the disciplines.

Initially, then, the distinction between technical and practical/hermeneutic interests evokes the broad distinctions between the sciences and the humanities. The empirical/analytic sciences exemplify "cognitive interest in technical control over objectifiable processes" (*Knowledge* 309). The value of Habermas's formulation is that he avoids the illusions of objectivism and positivism often attendant upon discussions of the "hard" sciences, while explaining how cognitive interest in the control and manipulation of the environment constitutes reality in terms of "an *a priori* organization

of our experience in the behavioral system of instrumental action" (309). In other words, success or failure in the manipulations of rules, objects, and events secures knowledge, not as a simple representation of facts (the objectivist illusion), but as a descriptive apprehension of those observable rules which make predictions of control possible. That Habermas's description here might seem to echo New Critical/Formalist concern for "observable rules" by which to distinguish "literariness" or "textual ambiguity" and to interpret individual texts with a predictable degree of uniformity and control suggests the significant collusion of interests and motives. In this case, the motive to establish disciplinary rationales, collective ideals, and uniform criteria of adequacy which characterizes "normal practice" in the sciences may be inappropriately adopted to justify "normal practice" in literary studies when, as James Sosnoski and others have argued, we might be better off abdicating the disciplinary paradigm altogether in favor of post-disciplinary projects which actively acknowledge their participation in the fabrication and evaluation of the various discursive fragments of contemporary cultural life.

In contrast, "the historical-hermeneutical sciences gain knowledge in a different methodological framework" (309). History, meaning, and language, rather than the observation of the success of operations, constitute a practical interest in gaining knowledge as a mediated form of understanding. It is in this category of inquiry that community and consensus play an even more significant role, in part because they are harder to achieve. In Habermas's words:

Hermeneutic inquiry discloses reality subject to a constitutive interest in the preservation and expansion of the intersubjectivity of possible action-orienting mutual understanding. The understanding of meaning is directed in its very structure toward the attainment of possible consensus among actors in the framework of a self-understanding derived from tradition. (310)

Tradition here means not a monolithic code but simply reliance on the forms and structures rendered relatively stable, even when contradictory, within social history. Likewise, Habermas's notion of consensus is considerably more sophisticated than those neo-pragmatist views of consensus which have the practical political consequences of sustaining the reproduction of the status quo.<sup>10</sup> Even

though consensus may rarely be achieved in any general sense in the literary disciplines, Habermas's description of hermeneutic procedures is broad enough to encompass what Graff proposes as the opening up of the discussion of characteristic cultural conflicts. Indeed, such discussions would seem to operate as a kind of expanded hermeneutic discussion of the pragmatic situation of current literature departments: the characteristic or exemplary nature of the conflicts suggests the hermeneutic engagement with tradition; that consensus plays a significant role in Graff's proposals is suggested by his concern to break down the fragmented isolation of separate fields so as to achieve a more open, consensual, or dialogic exchange of ideas with respect to those conflicts.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Graff's proposals appear to advocate a shift from the mode of "technical manipulation" characteristic of any more historically self-effacing and mechanical explication of texts to a hermeneutic encounter with the repressed conflicts which originally created and sustained the texts we now teach. As Graff remarks, "In the absence of intellectual community, there ceases to be a context for literary criticism, which has little choice but to become--when homogenized for institutional use as it inevitably must be--one or another form of technical manipulation" ("The University" 81).

Where Habermas presses his analysis further is in his hypothesis of a third approach of a critically oriented social science which refuses satisfaction in a consensus or in a tradition of hermeneutic understanding of recurring conflicts as Graff suggests. In this domain of emancipatory ideological critique, Habermas now turns self-consciously upon the forms of unreflected consciousness in the desire to transform social structures, institutional hierarchies, and communal patterns of behavior, especially insofar as they involve issues of race, class, and gender. In the broadest sense, the critiques of ideology, psychoanalysis, and, for a more specific example, Foucault's genealogical studies of disciplinarity,<sup>12</sup> exemplify the emancipatory cognitive interest when they attempt "to determine when theoretical statements grasp invariant regularities of social action as such and when they express ideologically frozen relations of dependence that can in principle be transformed" (*Knowledge* 310). In these terms, Graff's analysis of "patterned isolation" appears to be a theoretical statement which grasps the "invariant regularities" of scholarly production and disciplinary cycles of repetition, but to the extent that a less adequately theorized relation between rationality

and politics, disciplinary practice and cultural ideology recurs in Graff's historiography, it thereby remains, as it were, "ideologically frozen": it fails to grasp the larger dimensions of "social action" that need to be transformed. Habermas understands more fully than Graff that the system will not itself participate in self-interrogation nor will it allow an open-ended quest where the end is not already precontained in and by the beginning. In Graff's view the systematic forgetting of historical and ideological conflicts which characterizes the "patterned isolation" of university life is "curious" and oddly debilitating. Habermas's theory acknowledges that the powers reinforcing the systematic forgetting are not just curious but serve vested interests which are powerfully able to sustain social hierarchies despite the ostensible appearance of diversity within the disciplines. The positing of the emancipatory critique thus allows for the theoretical inclusion of the voices of the marginalized which have been relatively excluded from the structures of the hermeneutic system.

Even with this brief summary of Habermas's hypothesis of the pragmatics of the three modes of social inquiry, we can begin to see that Habermas's proposal to break the "patterned isolation" is to invoke a forcefully post-disciplinary inquiry into the discipline itself.<sup>13</sup> Such a project, that is, advocates the interaction of the three specific viewpoints of technical control, hermeneutic interest, and emancipatory critique rather than restriction to one viewpoint. Indeed, interaction among the three modes of inquiry involves exchange between scientific and humanist communities in ways that Graff proposes as a goal but which his own theoretical ambivalence renders inaccessible in practice because he sustains while simultaneously trying to critique the inevitable distinction between theory and politics. In light of the emancipatory critique, Graff's fear seems to be that to collapse the distinctions between theory and politics leads to a "social control" model which sees "power" and "surveillance" everywhere in such general ways as to empty them of any precise cognitive content. But according to Habermas the emancipatory critique is resistant to such conceptual totalizing precisely to the extent that it is only one of three models of social inquiry. Conversely, Habermas's social pragmatics also provides a self-reflexive check for those moments "when critique uncritically abdicates its own connection with the emancipatory knowledge-constitutive interest in favor of pure theory" (*Knowledge* 316). If we are to achieve "real



and practical changes in university curriculum, the profession of teaching, the study of literature and the writing of criticism," then we will need, I believe, to flush out the traces of theoretical (and social) ambivalence in our own work. I could here only briefly suggest some examples of what Habermas's post-disciplinary history of the discipline might include, but Foucault's genealogical practice and Watkins' sense of revisionist history of the discipline might be examples of the emancipatory cognitive interest; the construction of various post-disciplinary projects of inquiry such as proposed by James Sosnoski would engage the technical controls and methods developed by the current disciplines, but with a different end in view as informed by the emancipatory critique, and sustaining the hermeneutic concern for community within the various interests of the participants of any project. Graff's hermeneutic account of the discussion of conflict might then be included within any of these projects. The difference would be that Graff's untheorized ambivalence would become subject to critique and modification insofar as it recreated the patterns it ostensibly means to criticize. Legitimacy of the history could be more rigorously assessed by the voices of the marginalized who have been, even if inadvertently, excluded from Graff's history. The practical effects of such theorizing might help to achieve precisely Graff's goal of admitting "into academic criticism the presence of the cultural conflicts of the age" ("The University" 11).

Eastern Illinois University

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>As Graff contends, *Literature Against Itself* "was praised and damned by some as a neoconservative tract, but its political orientation is basically old Left." He goes on to say "no doubt my being misread also stemmed from my failure to articulate a clear socialist view" ("Teaching the Humanities" 852).

<sup>2</sup>Graff recognizes that the dilemma of theory and politics inevitably invokes the basic Kantian dilemma of subject/object: "Of course the problem here is the fundamental one posed long ago by Kant: reality is not simply something we discover, something that

waits for us to read its label, but something we ourselves bring into being by an active process of interpretation....This process of active interpretation, closer to creation than to discovery, is profoundly cultural" (*Literature Against Itself* 194). When he subsequently asks "What follows from these assumptions?", it remains hard to see that he has worked out any theoretical reconception of the "profoundly cultural" dimension adequate for the kind of goals he proposes for literary studies.

<sup>3</sup>As Graff explains in the article "Teaching the Humanities," he "had become a convert to the new Left" by the time he had "moved to Northwestern University in 1966 . . . . My new leftism was more theoretical than activist, though I took part in the usual teach-ins and demonstrations and signed the usual protest petitions. I read Marx, Lukacs, and Noam Chomsky's articles in the *New York Review of Books*, and I started calling myself--when anybody asked--a democratic socialist" (851). But then his "new leftism stopped abruptly at the portals of the counter-culture and its new sensibility." Thus, he goes on to work out "a kind of Left-conservative position . . . as a corrective to the prevailing literary and cultural radicalisms (852). He concludes this brief intellectual autobiography by asserting: "If I've developed any credo in the twenty years since I started having 'literary, political, or cultural views,' it is that the first of these terms is inseparable from the other two" (854). Again, though the credo is commendable, the assertion does not constitute a fully articulate theory which might more adequately dispel the lingering ambivalence in practice.

<sup>4</sup>I have had the advantage of reading the nearly completed draft of the book (*Professing Literature: An Institutional History*) which Professor Graff kindly sent to me as I was preparing this paper. I thank him for this opportunity. In the comments that follow, I have referred only to the article in the recent anthology and other published material, but having read the draft, I feel reasonably confident that in most respects what I have to say may apply nearly as well to the book. There are some points of distinction, and I've tried to indicate them in further notes.

<sup>5</sup>See Patricia Harkin's article, "For Its Own Sake," for a study of the need to theorize the interdependent relations between institutions

and ideology as part of a post-modern critique of the practice of separating literature and composition studies.

<sup>6</sup>In his forthcoming book, Graff acknowledges the point as follows: "'History' implies 'theory' in a culture in which the past is not received as tradition but is an object of interpretive controversy, when it is recognized at all. What has been lost as an inherited sense of continuity can only be recovered as theory--a tenuous kind of 'recovery' which reinstates the past not as an assured heritage but as an object of interpretation and debate." Again, my point is that Graff recognizes the problem of theory but does not go on to offer the theory he knows we need.

<sup>7</sup>In the early chapters of his forthcoming book, Graff will consider many of the mundane dimensions of institutional life that Davies and Watkins call for. These early chapters focus on the period in the old college life from the 1820's to about 1900. Here he considers the clear influence of race and class in demographic considerations of college enrollment, the shaping of the curriculum, the carousing, systematic cheating, and other moral behavior typical of college men of the day, the literary societies, and the detachment of methods from the original ideals that established them. But once Graff turns to the professional era with established departments of English, his analysis isolates more on the professional debates at the elite institutions such as Johns Hopkins, Columbia, Princeton, Harvard, and Yale. Graff acknowledges in the introduction that these choices were for convenience in order to narrow the scope of his project, but the working assumption seems to be that bureaucratic standardization meant a uniformity in which the lesser universities and the lower ranks within the elite universities simply followed the leader.

<sup>8</sup>With respect to the exclusion of older non-academic forms of cultural criticism, Graff resorts, even if somewhat grudgingly in tone, to the "deconstructive lingo": "In other words, without falling prey to useless nostalgia, there may be something to be said for certain older conceptions of criticism that tend now to be generally ignored or, to use the deconstructive lingo once more, 'marginalized' by the concerns of academic critics" (*Criticism* 9).

<sup>9</sup>As Thomas McCarthy explains in the "Translator's Introduction" to *Legitimation Crisis*, "One of the defining characteristics of critical social theory is precisely its attempt to overcome the empirical/normative split and the separation of theory from practice that follows from it" (x). In *Legitimation Crisis* and elsewhere, Habermas develops his theory of communicative action, his consensus theory of truth in discourse, and his propositions regarding the ideal speech situation. In this context, he also offers a descriptive model of advanced capitalism where he attempts in particular to avoid the theory/politics dualism. As it is beyond the scope of this article to debate the complexity of some of these controversial issues, I have drawn my summary of Habermas primarily from *Knowledge and Human Interests*.

<sup>10</sup>The most often cited example in this context is the work of Stanley Fish whose notions of consensus and interpretive communities have been criticized by members of the GRIP Project and many others, including Graff (see "Culler and Deconstruction," and "Keep off the Grass" where he addresses some of these issues).

<sup>11</sup>Graff invokes the term "dialectical" as follows: "We need rather to create a structure in which the sum of what academic critics do can add up to a dialectical whole instead of an inconsequential series of isolated activities" (*Criticism* 10).

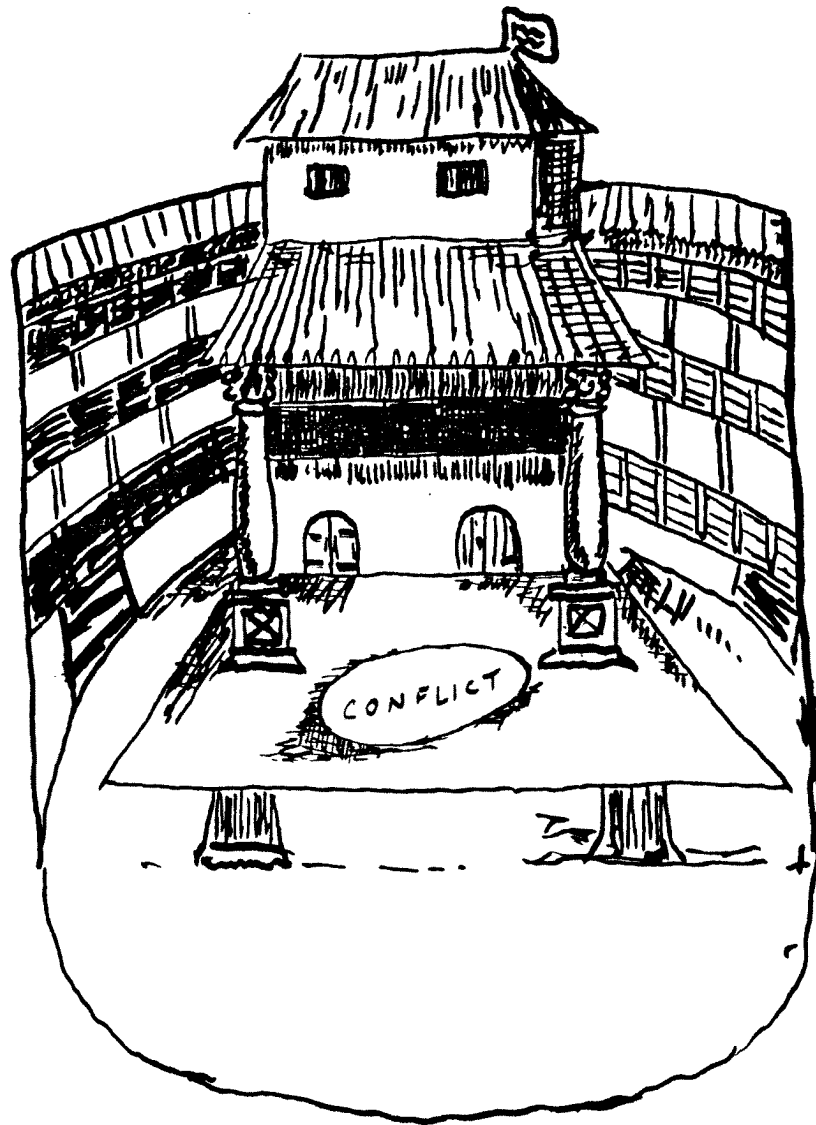
<sup>12</sup>Foucault's efforts in *The History of Sexuality* to move beyond the "repressive hypothesis" might initially seem to involve a move beyond the emancipatory critique if we conceive the latter in a narrow sense to mean liberation from various forms of repression and denial, despite the obvious importance of that phase of the project. But Habermas does not define it so narrowly, and Foucault's hypothesis of the tremendous proliferation and expansion of the discourse on sexuality more adequately explains the social practices we may wish to transform than the "repressive hypothesis" which may tend to reproduce the patterns of discourse it is intended to criticize.

<sup>13</sup>See James Sosnoski's article, "Literary Study in a Post-Modern Era: Rereading Its History," for a description of a post-disciplinary inquiry.

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## The Gap in the Humanities

Karlis Rachevskis

In his most recent book, *Homo academicus*, Pierre Bourdieu characterizes the professional existence of university professors by suggesting that

there are probably few domains that provide as much freedom, as many institutional supports even, for the games of dissimulation from oneself and for the gap between the representation and the truth of the position occupied in the social field or space; the tolerance enjoyed by this gap is probably the most profound truth of an environment that authorizes all forms of ego splitting, that is, all the different ways of making a vaguely perceived objective truth coexist with the denial of this truth.<sup>1</sup>

The existence of this discrepancy between the image we like to cultivate and the status we have in society is today an open secret. It was, for example, recently acknowledged by Frank Rhodes, the president of Cornell University, who noted that "there is an alarming gap between the pretensions of the liberal arts and their performance, between the profession of those who teach the liberal arts and their contribution."<sup>2</sup> The awareness of this gap does offer one important advantage: because the rationales that make up the pretense of the liberal arts are apparently disintegrating, they become available for theoretical analysis. Therefore this may well be a most opportune time for reevaluating the ideology of the humanities.

Indeed, this is what Gerald Graff has already been doing for some time. He has been most adept at debunking the myths and at dispelling the illusions that sustain some of the currently fashionable critical commitments by demonstrating that the humanities hardly function according to the presuppositions that sustain some radical

critiques. One of Graff's more telling strategies is what could be called a strategy of familiarization: in contrast with the well known tactic of defamiliarization made famous by the structuralists, Graff's approach dissipates the aura of radical originality that seemed to surround some of our favorite critical stances and thus invalidates claims of innovation or radical transformation. Reviewing the history of our profession, he uncovers a cyclical recurrence of the sort of oppositions or antagonisms that might at one time have appeared to hold out the promise of new beginnings. It turns out that what we thought was a sign of the dawning of a new era of criticism was but "a classical instance" of a familiar pattern--of a time-worn conflict opposing "two prominent types of professional humanists": the defenders of traditional literary studies and the ever-present radical critics of the tradition.<sup>3</sup> These conflicts, it seems, normally work themselves out through a process of reintegration; at the present moment, however, we have come to a standstill and remain in an unproductive mode that Graff characterizes as an armed truce.

The principal reason for the current impasse, according to Graff, is a basic misunderstanding concerning the nature of the university--of the humanities in general and of the discipline of literary studies in particular. The subject of Graff's essay is therefore what the French call a *décalage*, that is--a discrepancy, a gap, a distance that can variously be explained in terms of a misunderstanding, an alienation, an illusion, or a hope. Specifically, it is the distance between an institutional or disciplinary reality and the perception--idealized or realistic--of this same reality. As Graff shows very convincingly, the history of such misperceptions is as old as the profession. In 1911, for example, Lewis Freeman Mott, the president of the Modern Language Association, was calling for the restoration of the old humanistic values, claiming they were needed to counteract the confusion caused by the zeal of would-be innovators. In 1948 the president was Douglas Bush and the complaint was similar. This time, it was New Criticism being blamed for having had a dehumanizing influence on literary studies.

Our current delusion is characterized by the assumption "that somehow the humanities are really crucial to running things, that the humanities are preservers of this cultural discourse which functions to socialize the student body into its ruling cultural values and domesticate them for training in jobs, and so forth." In reality, the humanities have lost much of the importance critics--as well as

defenders--still grant them; thus, to speak of some hegemonic purpose to be uncovered behind the institution of the humanities--or the university--is to indulge in paranoid fantasies.

To counteract this tendency to overrate the cultural impact of the humanities, Graff suggests that we restore a "coherence of conflict and debate" to the humanities in general and to the area of literary studies in particular. This will be accomplished on the condition we abandon the futile, unproductive, and divisive attempts to establish "a correlation between literary or epistemological and political positions." To do this, we must forego the fruitless debates on "ground rules," we must avoid all these arguments that are predicated on the assumption of an organic link between a theoretical or epistemological strategy and a political commitment. In a sense then, Graff's recommendation is to eliminate the gap or the discrepancy created by an incorrect perception of the role the humanities and the university play in today's society.

Yet, there is still another gap to be considered: it is the contradiction that characterizes the rationales currently used to promote the humanities. The arguments in question generally take two main--seemingly divergent--tacks. One seeks to legitimate the humanities by referring them to some golden age of humanistic values that needs only to be revived or rediscovered. According to this particular viewpoint, the humanities have everything to do with an essence of humanity, with moral and civic virtues, with the noblest achievements of great men. "Intellectual refinement and spiritual elevation are the traditional goals of the humanities and should remain so."<sup>4</sup> Such is the view of William Bennett, our present Secretary of Education and, quite appropriately, the principal promoter of this particular version of the humanities.

The other kind of argument is a pragmatic one and is formulated in terms of one single major overriding concern--the marketplace. It is currently the most powerful and active strain, judging by the effect it has had on curricula across the country. It promotes an unabashed selling of the humanities--to our present and future students, to our colleagues, to businessmen and politicians. We know the arguments: liberal arts graduates are eminently flexible and broad-minded, they are very trainable, are good communicators, know how to deal with people, and can be as ambitious as anyone. We have heard the success stories. For example, of the thirteen top executives at IBM, nine have liberal arts degrees--including the

Chairman of the Board, who has a B.S. in political sciences. Liberal arts majors also constitute a majority in Reagan's cabinet. One of the principal defenders of this approach to the humanities is, again, William Bennett who told a group of business leaders that "if we want our students to learn the high costs of rashness and the value of sticking to strategy, we should have them read Plutarch's account of the Roman consul Fabius. . . . Do we want our future business leaders to learn the dangers of an overly active ambition? Have them read *Macbeth*. . . . Do we want our children to know the pitfalls of playing on the job? Teach them *Anthony and Cleopatra*."<sup>5</sup>

Bennett's thinking represents a pedagogical and philosophical mode that brings to mind *McGuffey Readers*, and his arguments on behalf of the humanities are aimed at achieving the sort of ideal blend of edifying moral lessons and practical advice the *McGuffey Readers* strove to teach. According to this ideal, the students would turn out to be both virtuous and useful: they would be morally upright and marketable at the same time. The fact that these two qualities can be officially considered as perfectly compatible can only mean that, from a cultural standpoint, what is good for humanity is to be considered good for the marketplace and vice versa. A recent confirmation of this view's legitimacy is provided by the current chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Lynne Cheney, who justifies the importance and usefulness of a liberal arts degree by citing a study made by AT&T, which "showed social-science and humanities graduates moving into middle management faster than engineers and doing at least as well as their business and engineering counterparts in reaching top management levels." Obviously, in some circles, it is no longer even necessary to pretend that the humanities serve a purpose other than that of capitalism; what might once have been considered a discrepancy appears perfectly normal and natural in the present socio-historical context.

If the humanities and their claim to universality have indeed been coopted by the American socio-economic system, then Graff's recommendation that we stop looking for political implications in the practice of the humanities can only appear misguided. Indeed, this is precisely what is called for: we must find out how the humanities have become a commodity in the service sector and why it has become perfectly natural to consider them as a handmaiden to business and industry. The fact that the ideal subject of the humanities has changed from *l'honnête homme* to *homo oeconomicus*,

for example, points to a fundamental cultural transformation. Obviously, a shift has taken place in the understanding of what constitutes the ideal fulfillment of one's human potential: the cultural enrichment and edification provided by a humanistic education has simply become an enhancement of one's marketability.

According to one theory, such a change fits into the general pattern characterizing the strategy of capitalism. To make the self-interest of the individual coincide with the interests of the system of production, aimless passions must be given specific direction that will help make individuals into productive and manageable participants in the socio-economic order.<sup>6</sup> Of course, the fundamental purpose of the order is never brought into question: the focus is maintained on the individual and on all the familiar themes of self-fulfillment, growth, and gratification. Schools become very important in this process, and individualization is a fundamental principle of pedagogical procedures: "The acquisition of knowledge is not seen as the result of a collectively-owned or share enterprise, but 'belongs' to the individual . . . it is the individual--his skills, knowledge, ability, etc.--and not the collectivity that stands at the center of the pedagogic process. In the inculcation of classroom norms--in mastery, competition, ranking, assessment and evaluation--it is the individualistic mode that dominates."<sup>7</sup> This pedagogical strategy can be seen to belong to a more general strategy of individualization--to a process whose purpose is to make the individual believe in the naturalness of the relation he or she maintains with the material conditions of existence: the relation is natural in the sense that the individual is asked to assume the greatest share of the responsibility for his or her socio-economic condition, and the naturalness of this link legitimates the belief that "people generally get what they deserve; and what they deserve is purely and simply a consequence of their own individual character and actions, nothing else."<sup>8</sup> The necessary catalyst that makes such processes of rationalization credible is the notion of freedom--a notion that frequently takes the form of "equality of opportunity" and according to which any serious limitations on a person's ability to achieve success can be attributed to a moral deficiency within that person.

The legitimacy of such assumptions is vulnerable to criticism, however, and behind the pretense of the official representations of "productivity" and "free enterprise," the more lucid critic discovers "a brutal Darwinian picture of self-help and self-promotion."<sup>9</sup> Even the

selfishness promoted by a system of "free enterprise" is not really what it appears because it is based on a deluded notion of freedom: an individual's freedom to act and to affect his or her environment is increasingly limited by an environment in which individual rights are being gradually displaced by corporate rights and which is increasingly being dominated by corporate speech and power. It is becoming evident that "the common-sense view that persons are the fundamental elements of which a social system is composed has a serious defect." The reality is that "the rise of the modern corporation has overwhelmed the citizen in civil society and in political action."<sup>10</sup> The corporation, as a legal person, is also a member of society and its role and importance is gradually surpassing those of natural persons. This change has given rise to an asymmetric society, in which the conditions governing relations between the two kinds of members--the corporate actor and the natural person--are almost always controlled by the corporate actor. The new social structure brings with it two important consequences. The operation of a free marketplace system means that inequality is created in society, inequality not due to differences in skill or in effort but to one's particular location. Just as some persons in the old social structure have had the good fortune to be born into wealthy or powerful families, some persons in the new social structure have the good fortune to be at a node which, larger than those which surround it, can extract a greater fraction of the value from the transactions it engages in than can those with which it deals. The second consequence is that persons are indeed free, but they are also "irrelevant in a fundamental sense. The person is merely an occupant of a position in the structure and can at any time be replaced."<sup>11</sup>

It is in the light of these circumstances that the role and responsibility of the professor-critic needs to be reevaluated in terms of some unavoidable questions. For example, are we the unwitting instruments of a system that requires the myth of humanistic liberalism and, while preparing candidates for a work place that has no concern for humanistic values, are we, as one critic suggests, too blind to see that "what humanists do may in the end turn out to be a quasi-religious concealment of this peculiarly unhumanistic process"?<sup>12</sup> Or are we perhaps too interested in perpetuating the system ourselves and teaching our students the hypocritical double-speak we ourselves live by, not willing to admit that "our students find it easy and even pleasurable to reject capitalism with us in discourse while going on,

like us, to benefit from it in practice"?<sup>13</sup> More than twenty years ago, Paul Goodman explained why the professor would never become an effective critic of the system: "The satisfied senior worker, with tenure, adequate salary, and rational rules of promotion, is unlikely to complain that the whole enterprise is useless. He can be privately vocal; and on all matters that are not essential to the essential business, the prestige and growth of the college, considerable authority of tinkering is granted to the faculties, so that it is easy to gain their consent to everything else."<sup>14</sup> Has anything changed since then to make these observations less valid today?

Arguments for developing "a coherence of debate," appeals for respecting the pluralistic and disinterested modes of searching for truth can only contribute to speed up the critical entropy Goodman was concerned about. Althusser has pointed out that one of the characteristic traits of the dominant ideology in Western civilization is the representation of the School as the one neutral ground that is devoid of ideology; everyone seriously committed to education is committed to "maintaining and sustaining this ideological representation of the School, which makes School today just as 'natural' and indispensable--useful, and even salutary for our contemporaries, as the Church was 'natural,' indispensable and generous to our ancestors several centuries ago."<sup>15</sup> The trouble with Graff's argument is that it can be seen as an integral component of precisely such an ideological purpose. He is of course right in asserting that to see the university as a mediating agency between some hegemonic discourse and the students is a delusion that verges on paranoia; but even if we consider the university as destined to have a perfectly innocuous, passive function in society, it is conceivable that it serves a strategic purpose while remaining perfectly passive and innocuous: it could function to keep everyone convinced that the humanizing, civilizing process of education is indeed carried out--thus permitting and legitimizing the unrestrained operation of those forces and conditions that go counter to the values being promoted officially. The question is how effectively the university is able to carry out this role, given the increasingly insistent questioning and criticism of its purpose. Another question to be raised in this regard concerns the motives behind the current campaign to rehabilitate the humanities: it may well be that these attempts to shore up the old rationales as well as to find new, pragmatic ones are simply due to the realization that the collusion between the humanities and the socio-economic arran-

gement is unraveling.

Attempts to cover up, to smooth over existing discrepancies are possible in terms of an ideological commitment to the particular strain of liberalism that has long been a characteristic of American academe. It is a doctrine whose practitioners have been categorized as the "beautiful souls" by the political scientist William Connolly. Its followers are individuals who "strive to find space in the current order where the ideals of virtuous action, freedom, and justice can be preserved." To do this, however, they must draw "a veil of ignorance across the most disturbing features of contemporary life." As a result, "this principled liberalism is neither at home in the civilization of productivity nor prepared to challenge its hegemony."<sup>16</sup> The liberal strategy has become particularly ineffective in the face of the challenge posed by all the right-wing think tanks, government sponsored foundations and scholars who are actively and openly promoting corporate interests and thus helping to extend their global hegemony. Arguments calling for a separation of the academic from the political ignore this reality and recall a traditional view that, for example, was put forth some twenty years ago by yet another president of the MLA--Sidney Hook.

In his 1968 presidential address, Hook argued for a clear separation between scholarship and politics. The scholar, according to Hook, incorporates two essences--thus two obligations: "as a citizen he is inescapably limited by duties to the nation that bestows citizenship upon him, but as a scholar he is a citizen of the world." This last obligation is the noblest because "in serving truth one is serving all mankind . . . our scholarship helps liberate humanity and prevents its exploitation." Understandably then, "the university as a corporate entity must not take sides in the clash of social goals"; furthermore, "to call corporate decisions on these matters political" is to make the term political meaningless: "to argue in this connection that the refusal of a university or professional association to take a position on a political issue is, in virtue of that very refusal, taking a political position is completely without merit, for it in effect says that the distinction between the scholar and citizen is a political distinction."<sup>17</sup> Hook's logic is impeccable: the refusal to be considered political is not political and the only political distinctions are the ones Sidney Hook calls political.

We also have a contrasting view, expressed three years later by president Louis Kampf. The view is strikingly different:

Our departments of language and literature, our institutions, have become enclaves of the comfortable, around which scurry the hopeful, looking for that opening which will allow them to creep inside the walls. Nothing strange here. Aren't our departments, after all, merely images of the larger society? Our cities, as Jules Feiffer reminds us in *Little Murders*, present the spectacle of the well-to-do living in strategically fortified neighborhoods or apartments, fighting off the forays of those who would like to . . . attain the comforts of those inside. Or think of fortress North America, bulging from overproduction, protecting itself from the covetous with all the scientific armor billions of dollars will buy.<sup>18</sup>

If one of the principal roles of the humanities today has indeed become the buttressing of Fortress America, then their claim to represent something inherently valuable for humanity in general is on shaky grounds indeed and rationales defending the traditional view of the humanities are alibis that seek to divert critical attention away from the gap between such claims and contemporary reality. Because its net effect is to render ineffective the critical strategies that are aimed at dramatizing this gap, Graff's argument for the need to depoliticize criticism seems to align itself with the forces that work to cover up the discrepancy between traditional rationales promoting the humanities and the actual role the humanities are called to play in our society.

Wright State University

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo academicus* (Paris: Minuit, 1984), p. 32.

<sup>2</sup>*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 22 May 1985, p. 80.

<sup>3</sup>I quote Gerald Graff from the manuscript "Patterned Isolation."

<sup>4</sup>William Bennett, "The Shattered Humanities," *Wall Street Journal*, 31 December 1982, p. 10.



<sup>5</sup>*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 22 May 1985, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup>Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>7</sup>H. Svi Shapiro, "Ideology, Class, and the Autonomy of the Capitalist State: The Petit-Bourgeois World-View and Schooling," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 10 (Summer 1984): 48.

<sup>8</sup>Philip Green, *The Pursuit of Inequality* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 85.

<sup>9</sup>Edward Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (September 1982): 3.

<sup>10</sup>James S. Coleman, *The Asymmetric Society* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982). pp. 2 & 6.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 24 & 26.

<sup>12</sup>Said, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup>John Kucich, Book Review of Frank Lentricchia's *Criticism and Social Change*, in *Southern Humanities Review* 19 (Spring 1985): 172.

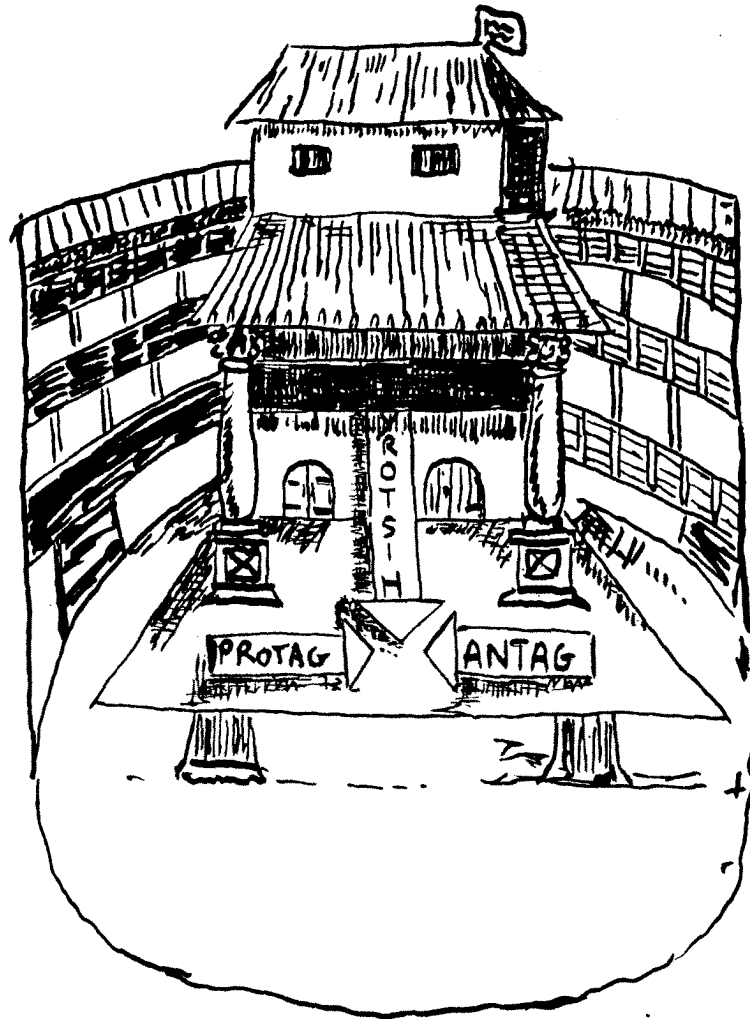
<sup>14</sup>Paul Goodman, *Compulsory Miseducation and the Community of Scholars* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), p. 234.

<sup>15</sup>Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1970), pp. 121-73.

<sup>16</sup>William E. Connolly, "The Dilemma of Legitimacy," in John S. Nelson ed., *What Should Political Theory Be Now?* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983). pp. 319-320.

<sup>17</sup>Sidney Hook, "The Barbarism of Virtue," *PMLA* 8 (March 1984): 466, 469.

<sup>18</sup>Louis Kampf, "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)': Literature and Language in the Academy," *PMLA* 87 (May 1972): 377.



Arguing a History:  
Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature*

Patricia Harkin

Recently, several authors have offered criticism of English Studies in the form of histories of the institution. Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism*, William Cain's *The Crisis in Criticism*, Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory*, Paul Bové's *Intellectuals in Power*, Jonathan Arac's *Critical Genealogies*, and now Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature* have sought to compile inventories of those traces which, they believe, mark and illuminate academic literary studies in this century.

These histories may usefully be examined as narratives. Hayden White articulates the problem this way: "it is not enough that [an] account represents events . . . according to the chronological sequence in which they originally occurred. The events must be . . . narrated as well as . . . revealed as possessing a structure, an order of meaning, that they do not possess as mere sequence" (*Content* 5). That meaning, in turn, can be examined and explained. "Historical narration without analysis," Peter Gay asserts, "is trivial, historical analysis without narration is incomplete" (189). Graff's book presents a narrative about how the profession came to be the way it is, an analysis of what is wrong with it, and a proposal for correcting these problems through curricular reform.

*Professing Literature* is therefore a mixture of genres in which the narrative is offered as grounds for the argument. Graff argues that the question "what do we do when we 'profess' literature?" has been buried in a bureaucratic system he calls "the field coverage principle." In an essay in *Profession* 86, Graff explains that "according to the field coverage model, a department considers itself adequately staffed when it has acquired the personnel to 'cover' an

adequate number of designated fields of literature" (42). Graff points out that in most departments these "fields" exist in no coherent relationship beyond the merely administrative name "English Studies." A teacher's field, for example, can be an historical period, a genre, or an "approach." The problem is particularly troublesome when a department construes an innovative conception of what it is to "do literary studies," not as a proposal for changing the institution, but merely as a new "field" to be added on to the eighteenth century, the lyric, and myth criticism. Thus, Graff explains, the field coverage "model enabled the department to assimilate new subjects, ideas, and methodologies without risking the conflicts that would otherwise have to be debated and worked through" (42). *Professing Literature* narrates processes by which differing methods have been institutionalized as fields. Graff concludes by arguing that each of these methodological conceptions is "theory" (as discourse about a problematic area in literary study). He asserts that departments should adjust their curricula to foreground conflict between them (rather than ignoring it) so that students can be empowered to raise and answer questions about their culture.

This generic mix places Graff and his readers in a complex rhetorical situation. First, he must assume that we share his warrants that argument can be constitutive of knowledge and that fostering constructive disagreement is a proper function of the academy. Next, we must agree to emplot and comprehend the history as Gerald Graff has. In order to accept Graff's proposals for curricular reform, that is to say, we must believe that his narrative about the situations that have made the reform necessary is an adequate and accurate account of the last century of literary studies. Then, since Graff argues his claims about reform against other claims which arise from different histories, emplotted and comprehended differently, we are asked to believe that those other histories are inadequate or inaccurate narratives. Thus, Graff is rhetorically bound to refute, not merely single assertions in the discourses of his interlocutors, but the entire histories that give those assertions voice.

The narrative/argument in *Professing Literature* is a valuable one. Its chief value, for me, lies in Graff's rhetoric. The "field coverage principle" has the kind of persuasive force that I associate with Fish's conception of "interpretive communities." It describes and explains us to ourselves with clarity and power. Graff examines a set of circumstances that we all know and gives them a local habitation

and a name. Anyone who has participated in the job market recently will recognize the field coverage principle in rejection letters in which the chair explains that the candidate's "field" does not quite fit departmental needs. A Shakespearean who proposes a course in popular culture will recognize the field coverage principle in an administrator's reminder that she was hired to cover something else. Assistant Professors coming up for tenure will see it in committees' requirements that publications should advance the "field." Graduate students preparing for Ph.D. prelims can feel it in their confusion about whether they should be "mastering" the *Norton Anthology*, reading literary history, practicing formal criticism, or trying to figure out what Althusser means by structural causality. Graff makes the problems of the field coverage principle vivid (again rhetorically) in the mode of emplotment he has chosen for his history. His narrative encourages readers to see the changes in the assumptions which govern their enterprise as part of an "oft-repeated cycle" in which each new way of doing literary studies is first scorned as either anti-intellectual or *recherché*, then accepted but marginalized, then finally assimilated in a weakened, institutionalized version. As a consequence of reading his history, American academics can see themselves differently and understand themselves better. It will be harder for Graff's readers to claim immutable value for their traditional notions of the profession of literary studies, of departmental structure, of curriculum, of hiring practices, and even of their own value as "professors of literature." This is his rhetorical success and it is considerable.

### I. The History

It is appropriate therefore to analyze Graff's rhetoric by making explicit the ways in which he has constituted the "events" of his history and made them into a "plot" (White, *Tropics* 81-100). Most of the events of Gerald Graff's history are discursive. I do not here intend the level at which virtually any event is discursively constituted. Rather, I mean that most of these events are utterances--predications about literary studies made by authoritative practitioners who have exerted an influence on the profession. These predications have the force of "theory" which Graff defines as "what inevitably arises when literary conventions and critical definitions once taken for granted have become objects of generalized discussion and

dispute" (252). The book, then, is a history of theory which is composed of quotations from men such as Randolph Bourne, James McCosh, Fred Patee, Norman Foerster, John Crowe Ransom, and Lionel Trilling about philology, positivist literary history, generalism, humanism, new criticism, and other ways of "professing literature." It is a history of the ways in which the men who have made up the profession of literary studies have proceeded discursively with that making.

When a reader has attended to all of these *sentences*, she shall have a *sense* of the American academic *Zeitgeist* of the last century. And that sense is given to us by Graff (following Laurence Veysey) as a trope, a figure: the academy in this century has been "like" a patterned isolation (60). The trope is ironic. To be isolated is to be without a context. But a pattern presupposes a force that patterns-- a power without a name that, according to the logic of Graff's figure, keeps us apart, but gives us a context.

What is that force? Our sense of the genre of history-writing generates expectations that the historian will explain to us how his events came about. Graff offers what Hayden White calls a contextual mode of comprehension, which, "as a theory of truth and explanation represents a 'functional' conception of the meaning or significance of events discerned in the historical field" (*Metahistory* 17). This move enables him to avoid positing either a *telos* or a first cause and to devote himself rather to describing, in "anecdotes," the situation he wishes to examine. As a consequence, Graff finds himself writing sentences about "How *circumstances conspired* to force the generalists to conform to the research model" (emphasis mine). Graff offers an anecdote which presents the precept system at Princeton as Woodrow Wilson's way of fighting "a plan for a new graduate school that would be separate from the college and in Wilson's view would threaten its unity." Wilson's hopes were frustrated, however, when a ten-million-dollar bequest from an alumnus was made contingent on the establishment of a separate graduate school. "This means defeat," Wilson said. "We can never overcome ten millions" (92 n.). A second anecdote is from the career of Fred Lewis Pattee at Penn State. The land grant institution, Pattee wrote, "tended to measure all subjects by vocational yardsticks" and therefore required a practicum of its undergraduates. "Struggling with the problem [of deciding on subject matter for the practicum in English], Pattee . . . at length thought of research as a solution . . . [and] introduced . . . research

courses in English" (93 n.).

Graff appropriately avoids the simplistic assertion that this state of affairs is "caused" by capitalism's commodification of learning as part of a continuing desire for new things to consume. The reductive application of effective causality would be ludicrous here: changes in the ways of "professing literature" have arisen from interconnected reasons as disparate as impatience with grading papers, a desire to dignify the study of English by making it as hard as Greek, an Arnoldian belief in the humanizing value of the canon, an effort to establish a science of aesthetics, and a will to continue the conversation of the great books. Graff therefore asks us to see these two anecdotes and many others as parts of an "oft-repeated cycle" (4) in which new "controversies echo old ones as far back as the beginnings of the profession" (2). "In an institution with a short memory, evidently, yesterday's revolutionary innovation is today's humanistic tradition. It is as if charges of anti-humanism, cerebralism, elitism, and coming between literature and students are a kind of initiation rite through which professional modes must pass before they become certified as traditionally humanistic" (249). Graff's mode of narration, then, like the trope "patterned isolation," is ironic.

To emphasize my sense of the implications of Graff's narration, it will be useful to compare it to other possible ways of "historicizing" academic events. One could, for example, imagine a narrative about uniting literary studies and composition which presents itself self-consciously as comedy. A young, virile, and thriving writing program (which, in spite of its apparent lack of breeding, turns out to be the long-lost heir of The Rhetorical Tradition) dares to desire the always already elusive beauty of Literary Studies, who is alas, imprisoned in a repressive institutional castle. In the liaison of Randy Rhetoric with Pretty Polly Semous is the potential for a new society to be built upon the ashes of the old humanism, ushered in, as Frye suggests, with the rustle of bridal gowns and bank notes (44).

Other, more radical narrative/arguments might be emplotted as romance: a questor sallies forth and uncovers a grail-like secret-- beautiful and simple and true--"all theorizing is political"; "the canon is patriarchal." On the basis of this new truth, we achieve a new consciousness, and a new curriculum, but one that is likely to seem anarchical to traditionalists.

Many conservative members of the profession would narrate the current curricular state of affairs as tragic: because we have

forgotten the primordial experience of awe before the monuments of cultural literacy, the American Mind, proudly closed to the joys of intellection, is exiled from the happy valley blooming with fruitful federal grants.

It is in this context that Gerald Graff's account is ironic. His history bears an unnerving resemblance to the genre of domestic quarrel we find in the drama of Albee, Pinter, Beckett, and Williams. The interlocutors know all each other's moves, and defend against them in advance. Generalists charge specialists with failure to educate "good men." Researchers accuse humanists of failing to prepare students to take their places in the economy. If you say my post-structuralism is nihilistic, I say your formalism is oppressive. But, according to Graff, we never acknowledge and expose to our students the conflict in our notions of literary study.

## II. The Argument

Graff proposes that we do so as an integral part of the curriculum in English Studies. He urges that we "foreground conflict" in the Department of English, using argument as an academic *lingua franca*. He is careful, in the interview printed in this issue of *Critical Exchange*, to stipulate that he values reason specifically as the language of argument (the ground rules of professional discourse) rather than as an instrument for arriving at "truth." In the book, Graff constructs a binary opposition between those persons in the academy (like him) who would seek meaningful argument and those who would preclude it by co-opting disagreement into an "I'm OK-You're-OK" hodge-podge. In the interview, he opposes himself to those who believe that argument is (or can be) an instrument of oppression. If, he implies, meaningful argument were allowed to occur, then academic literary studies could indeed "produce" knowledge about literature and its relationship to non-literary culture. For Graff, argument is not the only way of foregrounding conflict, though it is the one he seems to prefer, the one in which he excels. His concern is primarily with the ethical end of foregrounding conflict than with the discursive means. Thus, he recommends that "In addition to reviewing the periods, genres, and approaches it covers, a department might ask itself what potential conflicts and correlations it harbors and then consider what curricular adjustments might exploit them" (251).

As an example, he offers an actual conflict between women's studies and the canon. In a review of Gilbert and Gubar's *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* Gail Godwin writes that an "apprentice student of literature in a course that adopted this book" would "come away" judging Jane Austen not on the basis of *Emma*, but of "Love and Friendship," [sic] which Gilbert and Gubar have selected because of its position against a tradition of sentimental literature. Graff's suggestion is that a course might employ both the Gilbert and Gubar *Norton* and a conventional anthology in order to "foreground major conflicts and relations of ideology and method" (260-61).

Although I read Graff's proposal with real sympathy, I see two problems arising as a consequence of the generic linking of argument and history:

1. Argument is binary. History is not.
2. Arguing histories is extraordinary difficult because to argue successfully--to win--an interlocutor must refute, not single assertions in the histories of his interrogators (for example, that an event occurred), but the entire narrative that constitutes the event as event.

For example, the two positions about the canon in the example Graff offers are, I would say, understandable (hence, arguable) only as parts of a history written for the purposes of the argument. That is, the question to be raised in the course Graff envisions is not whether *Emma* is "better" than "Love and Freindship" but how is it that *Emma* has been canonized and "Love and Freindship" has not. That question is historical, a question about the kinds of institutional decisions that make up Graff's narrative. To foreground a conflict between the belief that we should profess traditional notions of the canon and the belief that we should teach newer feminist versions, we need to realize that the opposing beliefs arise from differing histories of the profession. Moreover, these relationships are dialectical: histories make beliefs; beliefs make histories. One narrative in Graff's proposed course would be "about" the process of examining and transmitting the cultural value of the great books. The other story would center on the ways in which the writings of women had been systematically excluded from the list. For the latter,

the history would be a romance in which the feminist critic as heroine slays the patriarchal monster. In the former, the narrative might be a tragedy in which the old values are seen as declining. A given "event" in each history would be constituted and explained in terms of the narrative. In order to examine the canonical question carefully, one would need to deal with the entire narratives of which they form a part. Single propositions (or accounts of events) cannot be refuted or even examined outside the histories in which they are contextualized. The canonical question cannot, therefore, usefully be raised in the binary terms of humanist/feminist argument. To follow Graff's advice we would have to argue in a number of institutional domains because any binary opposition is inevitably constellated with several others. The poles of the opposition do not stay constant.

Let me take the Princeton and Penn State anecdotes as a representative example of my notion that we should do what Gerald Graff does (write history) rather than what he advocates (conduct arguments) if we wish to foreground conflict so as to promote criticism of culture. Graff presents the two anecdotes as basically similar, revealing the research model taking over the place left by liberalism. But I would think that these two anecdotes reveal three disparate notions of the function of the university; Lawrence Veysey names them the service function, the research function, and "liberal culture" function. The Princeton example shows an opposition between liberal culture and research in which research wins because Princeton's "fund raising machine" needs to commodify excellence, and excellence is more easily measured in terms of faculty publication than in the good lives of graduates. The Penn State example, on the other hand, shows an opposition between service and research in which research is made into an instrument through which the university can serve the taxpayers of Pennsylvania by disseminating information and offering training in skills. The research function of the university requires that it "produce" knowledge on the frontiers of thought; the service function requires that the university train larger and larger numbers of students to use that knowledge in practical ways in order to meet the needs of the economy. The "liberal culture" function calls on the university to transmit cultural values. No one binary opposition (like the humanities and the sciences, or service and research) can ever solve the problems of institutionalized bureaucracy. One binary opposition entails another, and another, infinitely. Conflict is the result of differing narratives.

Because Graff believes that "the most formidable obstacle to change is structural rather than ideological" (262), he recommends focussing on the "field coverage" structure by foregrounding conflict instead of ignoring it. Conflict itself, he would seem to assert, is anti-bureaucratic. If difference is polarized into binary opposition and then foregrounded as argument, then that argument will provide, promote, and even produce knowledge for students, even if the knowledge is only that the argument itself exists. Here is the meaning and the motive of his history.

This notion, I think, forms a part of the "liberal" ideology that, White reminds us, often forms the basis for ironic, contextualized histories (*Tropics* 70-75). Foucault helps us to understand this liberalism: "Humanism," he writes in "Revolutionary Action: 'Until Now,'" is based on the desire to change the ideological system without changing the institutions; and reformers wish to change the the institution without touching the ideological system. Revolutionary action, on the contrary, is defined as "the simultaneous agitation of consciousness and institutions; this implies that we attack the relationships of power through the notions and institutions that function as their instruments, armature, and armor" (228).

Graff, I think, is liberal in precisely Foucault's sense: he wishes to change the institutions of literary study, like field coverage, while retaining belief in the liberating value of literature and the constructive value of argument--the ideology of literary studies. This ideology is required by its own logic to construe connections between reason and power as "value neutral." This issue divides Graff from many of his Foucauldian critics and promotes what he calls their "lifter-than-thou condescension."

For many members of the profession, words like "conflict" and "argument" are not positively marked. Women, for example, are painfully aware of the uses to which "reason" has been put in arguments (for example) about the natural law and the patriarchy. Persons who are "lifter" and less powerful than Graff note that arguments must (by their own rules) assume agreement on some issue against which disagreement can be thematized. Power and agreement exist in frequent correlation. You have to accept the premises or you can't argue. Premises entail logically prior premises, the grounds of which are lost in some half-understood (and hence inarguable) "belief" like (for example) the definitions of value that warrant patriarchal conceptions of the canon. Arguments are won and lost. Words like

"opponent" and "attack" are prominent in a system which privileges aggression.

Because I share the reservations of these critics, I note with genuine relief that, in his most recent writing and speaking, Graff is beginning to use words like "dramatize" and "foreground" rather than "argue." He is, it seems, prepared to grant that one can examine and deal with conflict in the English Department without necessarily privileging argument. Change almost always involves conflict. But Graff's readers for whom conflict and argument are not positively marked will want to know what's "in" this conflict for them. If they risk arguing--if they risk once again the imposition of premises with which they do not agree as the price of admission to the forum--then they will want a carrot. Graff's carrot is the promise that significant cultural critique will occur and the (slightly more distant but tantalizing) hope that the constricting bureaucracy might be dismantled.

It is not clear to me that foregrounding conflict can be efficacious in eliminating the bureaucracy. What Graff's history so successfully "proves" is that the profession has imposed binary oppositions on situations far too complex to be solved by any one of them, and that, like the State Farm umbrella, the bureaucracy has covered them all. If there is something to be learned from this ironic history, isn't it that the institution always wins? What, for example, is to prevent a new "field"--the "foregrounding conflict specialist"--from becoming institutionalized in the *MLA Job Information List* for 1990? "Candidates should have a dissertation in a major conflict (e.g. 'marxism-deconstruction') and teaching experience in at least two others (e.g. the 'providentialist-antiprovidentialist' or 'foundationalist-anti-foundationalist')." Graff himself writes that the conflict between the sciences and the humanities is now either not offered because it's nobody's field or else it is offered because it is somebody's field. I think he does seek to change our beliefs about the profession, not just our institutional practices. But then is he really very far from his letter than thou critics?

Moreover, it seems probable that the arguments most likely to be foregrounded, in Graff's scheme, would be those whose conclusions are most "demonstrable" in terms of some already institutionalized system--logic, empirical studies of behavior, etc. Thus, arguments which are most "scientific" in Stephen Toulmin's sense of possessing a lexicon, a set of representation techniques, and a system of applica-

tion procedures (161) would probably be construed as most meaningful. An argument, that is to say, is only as meaningful as its representation techniques are powerful and prestigious within the discursive system at issue. Arguments about chemistry are more "powerful" than arguments about sociology, for example, because the language, representation techniques, and application systems of physical science are more rigidly enforced (or more fully agreed upon) than are those of social science.

Another problem arises when Graff "argues" his history, that is, when he uses it to refute other histories. Because utterances are the stuff of Gerald Graff's narrative, he cannot refute other histories merely by applying truth value criteria to *some* of the utterances in differing narratives. This point is important because Graff's critique of Foucauldian analyses of education rests on the assumption that these analyses are inaccurate: for Graff, in other words, the claim that "panoptic surveillance" imposes the values of "humanism" can be refuted by demonstrating that these values do not obtain among undergraduate students. For example, he quotes Paul Bové's assertion that Richards' practical criticism is an extension of the "hegemonic discourse and practices of western disciplinary capitalism" and that "the effect of practical criticism has been to obscure criticism's own position within the empowered network of knowledge production and its relation to the dominant forces in American culture" (177, n.). These critiques are erroneous, Graff believes, because there is, *in actuality*, no such control. He points out that American culture is not normalized: our students are often astonishingly ignorant of the things that they would know if they were being successfully normalized. There is, as Nick Visser suggests, a modified Johnsonian flavor to the argument: if normalization were there we could kick it (and we should!).

But utterances are available which assert that it is the duty of the university to pass on the ideology of liberal culture. William Bennett writes in "To Reclaim a Legacy" that

the core of the American college curriculum--its heart and soul--should be the civilization of the West, source of the most powerful and pervasive influences on America and all of its people. It is simply not possible for students to understand their society without understanding its intellectual legacy. If their past is hidden from them, they will become aliens in their own

culture, strangers in their own land. (21)

By the contextual principles of Gerald Graff's own narrative logic, these utterances of Bennett must have the same discursive status as James Conan Bryant's assertion that

A set of common beliefs is essential for the health and vigor of a free society. And it is through education that these beliefs are developed in the young and carried forward in later life. This is the social aspect of general education, one might say. (167, n.)

Thus, Graff does not refute other histories merely by applying "truth value" criteria to their utterances. It does not follow that because normalization cannot be demonstrated as having been successfully achieved, there is therefore no institutionalized notion of the humanities in the United States. Bennett's discourse proves otherwise. His thinking is an example of an attempt to remove the diversity of belief in the academy that makes such imposition technologically impossible. So Graff's history does not refute the "silly argument that identifies consensus with repressive politics" (258); it merely registers difference.

Nor of course do "lefter-than-thou" histories refute Graff's. His witty, incisive, and scholarly narrative about an oft-repeated cycle will find many sympathetic readers (myself among them), readers who (long ago) had hoped that someday they or someone would be able to piece together all the "approaches" of their teachers--a bibliographer who seeks authorial intention positivistically through textual evidence; a new critic who denies that intention is knowable or interesting; an Arnoldian humanist who sees good poems as the work of good men; a literary historian who sees poems as documents in the history of ideas--and move forward toward *Professing Literature* with certainty and power. To enable us to look with irony on our pain at this lost or unattainable wholeness is, I think, Gerald Graff's most important achievement in this book. He has urged us to believe again that professing literature is important enough to "argue" about. We should be grateful enough to "disagree" constructively.

## NOTE

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The University of Akron

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## RESPONSE TO HIS CRITICS

Gerald Graff

In my view, the more negative essays simply don't bother to address the kinds of problems I have been trying to point out in the Left critique of culture, but assume instead that since I point them out my own politics must be suspect.

In her argument about my overprivileging of "argument," Patricia Harkin might have seen more clearly that *Professing Literature* is fundamentally student-centered. To me, the bottom line in analyzing the institutional processes I discuss in *Professing Literature* is the results these processes produce at the student's end, not whether a culture of "argument" is or isn't maintained. More specifically, what matters to me is the extent to which educational institutions help students to see what is at issue in the political and cultural conflicts that they have a stake in.

Whether this result comes about by exposing students to argumentation, or comes about by some other means, is not a crucial question to me. Of course in the intellectual occupations, argumentation and reasoning do tend to be a primary medium through which such conflicts are objectified and negotiated. Much of the story told in my book is indeed an account of arguments, though always related to the material and institutional pressures on arguments at a given moment. In any case, argument is not the issue. Clarifying conflicts for students is.

Harkin recognizes much of this but does not emphasize it. At one point she notes, quite correctly, that my predominant model is a theatrical one of "staging," not a model of disputation, that for me the basic concern is that conflicts be staged, and whether this be through argument or some other means is secondary.