The academy debates the canon
by Roger Kimball

On Literary Theory & the Curriculum, a symposium at Yale.

Everywhere across the country students and professors are returning to their cloistered groves, eager after a restful summer to put behind them “vain deluding joys” and devote themselves anew to the pursuit of liberal learning. Everywhere the lecture halls are humming, the libraries echoing, the quads and courtyards bustling with a new term’s academic traffic. Yet there are numerous signs that all is not well in shady academe. It is not just that the image of our colleges and universities as “cloistered groves” has become quaintly ludicrous in the face of a widespread debasement of manners and decorum. There is also an uneasy sense that American higher education, especially in the humanities, has lost its way; Milton’s “vain deluding joys” seem at home as much in the university as anywhere, and the very notion that a traditional humanistic education could be spiritually enriching and intellectually liberating is typically greeted with a mixture of irony and disdain.

Neither the irony nor the disdain has dulled the sense of crisis, however, and the last year or two have been witness to a proliferation of books, articles, conferences, symposia, and reports that ponder the current state and prospects of American education. Much attention in particular has been devoted to the question of the literary canon: its origins, its composition, and the desirability of preserving the values and traditions it embodies. It was to such matters, for example, that Yale University’s Whitney Humanities Center lately devoted a remarkable public symposium called “Literary Theory and the Curriculum”—an event so representative of the current crisis that it is worth examining in some detail.

But before turning to that event, certain other developments need to be considered. Perhaps the most widely noticed contributions to this debate in recent years are also among the most reviled in the academy: E. D. Hirsch’s Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know[1] and Allan Bloom’s The Closing of the American Mind.[2] They are very different sorts of books. Professor Hirsch’s study is a cross between a report and a primer; Professor Bloom’s is more in the way of a philosophical meditation on the fate of liberal education in contemporary American society. But
both books are highly critical of the current situation in the academy. And both have garnered
extraordinary public attention: The Closing of the American Mind was number one on The New York
Times best-seller list for many weeks this summer, while Cultural Literacy followed close behind at
number two. Whether all or even most of those who bought the books also took the trouble to read
them—especially Professor Bloom’s book, which is not exactly what is usually meant by summer
reading—is of course a good question. One hazards not. Nevertheless, their commercial success
suggests how widespread, if inchoate, is the concern about the state of American education.

Much of this concern originally crystallized around Secretary of Education William J. Bennett’s
now-notorious monograph, To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education,
published by the National Endowment for the Humanities in November, 1984, when Secretary
Bennett was chairman of the Endowment. Retailing the recent tribulations of the humanities in the
academy—ignorance and apathy on the one hand, over politicization on the other —the report
insisted that “the nation’s colleges and universities must reshape their curricula based on a clear
vision of what constitutes an educated person.” The goal was “a common culture rooted in
civilization’s lasting vision, its highest shared ideals and aspirations, and its heritage,” and
Secretary Bennett did not hesitate to name Western civilization as the repository of these “ideals
and aspirations,” or to provide a list of books that help define the “lasting vision” of that common
culture.

Naturally, Secretary Bennett’s report occasioned paroxysms of rage in the academy.[3] The vision
of a common culture, the notion that the West’s achievements have a special claim on our
attention and allegiance, the criticism of importing politics into the humanities, the effrontery of
suggesting that a particular list of books should be considered canonical: all this drew sharp
denunciations from bien-pensant academics across the country.

Nor have the denunciations ceased. In a recent issue of the humanities quarterly Salmagundi, for
example, we find a lengthy exchange entitled “On Cultural Literacy: Canon, Class, Curriculum.”[4]
Professor Robert Scholes of Brown University set the tone and agenda of the exchange with an
eSSay coyly entitled “Aiming a Canon at the Curriculum.” Several academics, including Professor
Hirsch, Marjorie Perloff of the University of Southern California, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese of
Emory University, and John P. Sisk of Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, responded.

Professor Scholes began with some rather silly etymological speculations on the relation between
the terms “canon” and “cannon,” concluding ominously that “Where the Empire went, the cannon
and the Canon went too.” But the real focus of his essay was Secretary Bennett’s report, especially
its advocacy of a literary canon, and Professor Hirsch’s miscellaneous writings on “cultural
literacy” (the book had not yet appeared). About To Reclaim a Legacy, Professor Scholes wrote that
“I am opposed to the establishment of a canon in humanistic studies because I believe such a move
to be fundamentally undemocratic: a usurpation of curricular power by the federal government.”
He then proceeded to invoke Adolf Hitler, telling us that “William Bennett’s cry for strong
leadership from those on top combined with the charge that the loss of our legacy is the fault of a
‘failure of nerve and faith’ strongly suggests that the first move of an educational leader should be a purge of those lacking in nerve and faith.”

There is a good deal that could be said about Professor Scholes’s observations. The allusion to Hitler gives a fair indication of the level on which his thinking about these issues proceeds. But more troubling—because more likely to be taken seriously—is the suggestion that “the establishment of a canon in humanistic studies” is “fundamentally undemocratic.” This idea is as pernicious as it is common, implying as it does that democracy is essentially inimical to authority, tradition, and rigor. It might also be noted that Professor Scholes’s description of To Reclaim a Legacy descends to the crudest caricature. For one thing, as John Sisk points out in his response, though the document appears over Secretary Bennett’s name, it is in fact the report of a committee. Its substance, moreover, is not the result of Secretary Bennett’s private whims but a reflection of the deliberations of a distinguished panel of professors and university administrators whose numbers included figures as diverse as William Arrowsmith, William M. Banks, Hannah H. Gray, and Paul Oskar Kristeller. One wonders what they would think about the allusion to Hitler. Then, too, Professor Scholes acts as if Secretary Bennett had wanted the list of books included in the report to be dogmatically imposed on the nation’s colleges and universities. The truth is precisely the opposite. “In providing a list of these works and authors,” we read in To Reclaim a Legacy, “it is not my intention (nor is it my right) to dictate anyone’s curriculum. My purpose is not to prescribe a course of studies but to answer, as candidly as I can, an oft-asked question.”

The responses to Professor Scholes’s essay covered a fair range of opinion but may be described as generally sympathetic—no one, at any rate, felt inclined to defend To Reclaim a Legacy. Marjorie Perloff, for one, praised Professor Scholes’s “eloquent, humane” critique of the report’s defense of the canon, agreeing that “educational philosophy always masks political ideology.” To her credit, however, she did point out that there is an unacknowledged, yet nonetheless rigidly adhered to, alternative canon already in place in the academy. This is the canon whose founders are Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, and whose contemporary representatives champion a motley variety of “avant-garde” criticism based on a combination of liberal political pieties and the half-digested tenets of the latest intellectual fads. As if in illustration of Professor Perloff’s claim, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese began her response with an admiring reference to Frantz Fanon’s ideal of a “purging violence” and observed that the notions of “imperialism and colonialization . . . nicely capture the relations between many students and the official culture that is taken to constitute a liberal education.” “The canon,” she concluded, “can best be taught if it is recognized at least in part as a kind of political spoil.”

Professor Hirsch’s response took the form of an apologia explaining why Professor Scholes’s attack on his work has been misplaced. Of course, the chief reason Professor Scholes troubled to criticize Professor Hirsch in the first place is that his work on cultural literacy has been widely described as “conservative”—a tag earned in part because it was endorsed early on by Secretary Bennett (Professor Hirsch was even cited in To Reclaim a Legacy), in part because it scrupled to
point out what a shambles our country’s educational system is in. The wide attention his book has received has made the litany of horrors familiar. Quoting the preliminary findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, for example, Professor Hirsch reveals that “two-thirds of the seventeen-year-old students tested could not place the Civil War in the correct half century; a third did not know that the Declaration of Independence was signed between 1750 and 1800; half could not locate the half century in which the First World War occurred; a third did not know that Columbus sailed for the New World ‘before 1750’; three-fourths could not identify Walt Whitman or Thoreau or E. E. Cummings or Carl Sandburg. And one-half of our high school seniors did not recognize the names of Winston Churchill or Joseph Stalin.”

All this is indeed shocking. And Professor Hirsch is to be commended for bringing it so forcefully to public notice. But it must be said that his defense against Professor Scholes’s attack was really a capitulation. The truth is that though Professor Hirsch’s writing on cultural literacy has been widely associated with the spirit of To Reclaim a Legacy, his response in the pages of Salmagundi was little more than an attempt to distance himself from Secretary Bennett, the report, and everything they stand for. Replying to one of Professor Scholes’s main charges, Professor Hirsch insisted that in his view “The common background knowledge required for literacy does not depend upon specific texts. ... To be culturally literate, one does not need to know any specific texts.” It follows naturally, he continued, that “it’s acceptable to take one’s entire knowledge of Romeo and Juliet from Cliff Notes.”

This disregard for the substance and texture of humanistic knowledge points to the crippling weakness of Cultural Literacy: its thoroughgoing philistinism and superficiality. These defects are writ large in what is at once the most questionable and the most controversial part of Professor Hirsch’s book—I mean The List: the sixty-odd-page, alphabetically ordered confection appended to the main text. Entitled “What Literate Americans Know,” it is a startling hodgepodge of dates (1066, 1492, 1776, etc.), names, phrases, acronyms, titles, and technical terms. Toward the end of the B’s, for example, we encounter:

Bryan, William Jennings
bubble chamber
bubble (economic)
Bucharest
buck stops here, The
Budapest
Buddha
Buddhism
Buenos Aires
Buffalo, New York
Buffalo Bill
buffer (chemistry)
build castles in the air

What does this random inventory of cultural trivia have to do with genuine education or cultural literacy? Well, about as much as Cliff Notes has to do with Shakespeare. It is—to use a phrase that Professor Hirsch favors—simply a promiscuous blend of general “background knowledge,” mastery of which might help one excel in crossword puzzles or quiz games, but which is totally alien to the spirit of serious humanistic education. As it happens, Professor Hirsch has been quite frank about the rudimentary nature of his enterprise. Thus in the preface to his book he tells us that “to be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world”—which is to say that in his terms being culturally literate is more or less like having a plumber’s license. Nevertheless, many people have continued to assume that a book entitled “Cultural Literacy” must have something to do with high culture. It is perhaps another measure of our cultural illiteracy that it doesn’t.

Lest it be thought that the attitudes expressed by Professor Scholes and his respondents are unrepresentative of elite opinion in the academy these days, let us turn our attention to the proceedings in New Haven one Saturday early this past May, when Yale’s Whitney Humanities Center sponsored a day-long public symposium to examine the subject of “Literary Theory and the Curriculum.” That the topic was of more than casual interest was clear from the enthusiastic audience of some three hundred students, teachers (from Yale and elsewhere), and curious outsiders that crowded the Center’s modest lecture hall to overflowing. In a notice announcing the symposium, Sheila Murnaghan, assistant director of the Center and associate professor of classics at Yale, explained that “after two decades of intense debate sparked by structuralism, post-structuralism, feminism, Afro-American, and Third World Studies, and a resurgence of Marxism, teachers of literature find themselves in a bewildering situation.” The symposium, Professor Murnaghan promised, “will bring together some of the most thoughtful members of the profession to compare notes on the current state of literary study and to assess the possibility of finding a common ground from which to respond to these challenges.”

It is difficult to quarrel with the accuracy of Professor Murnaghan’s list of “challenges” or her diagnosis of bewilderment. Yet whether what we have witnessed in literary studies in the past two decades is properly termed an “intense debate” is itself highly debatable; a more plausible term might be “usurpation,” motivated partly by intellectual fashion (structuralism, post-structuralism), partly by politics (feminism and the rest). And looking back on the event, one would also have to quibble with Professor Murnaghan’s description of what the majority of those “most thoughtful” members of the profession had to contribute to the discussion: “compare”? “assess”? “respond”? As it happened, “proselytize” was much closer to the truth.

Peter Brooks, who in addition to being the director of the Whitney Humanities Center is the Chester D. Tripp Professor of the Humanities and chairman of the Department of French at Yale, opened the festivities with a few words about the way in which recent literary theory has called
into question traditional approaches to literature and “what we do as teachers of literature.” Do we, he asked, still have any fixed point of reference or any common ground in the teaching of English? Has anything like a new consensus emerged from “challenges” of the sort that Professor Murnaghan rehearsed? Or have literary studies become caught up in the logic of the “post-, post-, post-structuralist, post-modernist, post-disciplinary”? Without attempting to answer these questions, Professor Brooks did suggest something of a common project when he observed at the end of his remarks that the task he and his colleagues now faced was that of “rewriting” tradition “in a more suspicious manner.” Once again, however, one found oneself quibbling over niceties; for while it soon became clear that those “most thoughtful” members of the profession were in wholehearted agreement with Professor Brooks, what one witnessed as the event proceeded were sundry attempts to “rewrite” the tradition in a manner that, far from being simply “suspicious,” was blatantly tendentious and ideological.

Though lamenting the loss of consensus in the humanities, the participants that day nonetheless shared a number of important assumptions about what was and wasn’t wrong with the academy, the ends of education, and the tasks currently facing literary criticism. A superficial diversity masked a considerable unity of purpose. Taken together, the contributions more or less summarized the range and style of mainstream opinion in the academy on these issues, and so it is worth reviewing the proceedings in some detail.

The symposium was divided into three sessions. The morning session was devoted to “The State of the Curriculum in the Wake of Two Decades of Literary Theory.” J. Hillis Miller, for many years professor of English at Yale but recently lured to the University of California at Irvine, and Michael Riffaterre, professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia University, each presented papers that purported to deal with the announced subject. They were followed by Professors Paul Fry of Yale and Barbara Johnson, lately of Yale but now installed at Harvard, who responded to the papers.
Professor Miller’s contribution was entitled “From the Theory of Reading to the Example Read.” In fact, he explained, what he was presenting was only an excerpt from a much longer essay; I seem to recall him mentioning the figure of ninety-six pages, so apparently the portion he read us only felt like ninety-six pages. Professor Miller began by describing the “spectacular proliferation of powerful and incompatible theories” that have swept contemporary literary criticism and have fundamentally changed the way the subject is taught. In his view, perhaps the most important change wrought by these “spectacular” theories is in the relationship between theory and example. Where in traditional literary criticism the “example”—that is, particular works of literature—clearly took precedence over “theory,” today the relationship is reversed; now, as Professor Miller cheerfully explained, the example is “arbitrarily chosen.” That is to say, it is chosen not for its historical importance, not for its literary value, not for any truth or moral clarity it might be supposed to communicate, but solely for its aptness in illustrating the current pet theory of the critic.

Professor Miller went on to point out that this reversal in the relationship between example and theory has had profound implications for the way in which we read; fortunately, that “we” is still far from universal; but the heralded reversal certainly has had profound implications for the way in which books—or, to use the preferred term, “texts”—are read in the academy. There, as Professor Miller noted, it is widely held that a “resistance to theory is in fact a resistance to reading.” This slogan, which Professor Miller took care to repeat two or three times in the course of his presentation, may be said to summarize the burden of his paper. It comes from the late Paul de Man, who, along with Jacques Derrida, was among those chiefly responsible for institutionalizing the tenets of deconstruction in literary studies. By the time he died in 1983, de Man’s reputation as a literary theorist was stratospheric: his death catapulted it into orbit. To invoke the authority of Paul de Man is to confer an unimpeachable aura of critical sophistication upon one’s words, so naturally he is alluded to continuously in the books and articles—and symposia—of his acolytes.

“The resistance to theory is in fact a resistance to reading”—a prize de Manian specimen, that. And whatever “theory” might mean in this context—it is bad form to indulge in anything so pedestrian as a definition in these intellectual precincts—the rest of Professor Miller’s presentation clearly showed that his own resistance to theory is approximately nil. He proceeded to exemplify the triumph of theory over example with a prolix and convoluted meditation on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story, “The Minister’s Black Veil.” Among much else, his presentation featured a turgid discussion of the notion of personification, a good deal of solemn talk about “the act of reading,” and the enlightening revelation that “the story is the unveiling of the possibility of the impossibility of the unveiling.” So much for Hawthorne.

What, it may be asked, does all this have to do with “The State of the Curriculum in the Wake of Two Decades of Literary Theory”? The answer of course is nothing. But unlike many of the participants in the symposium, Professor Miller at least made a gesture toward addressing the
announced topic. In outlining what he described as the “practical implications” of his paper, he warned that the rejection of theory is “reactionary or stupid or both” and suggested that universities ought to arrange their curricula in such a way as “to make possible the teaching of reading in its uneasy relation to theory.”

Professor Miller didn’t specify exactly what he meant by this uneasy relation; but he was clearly concerned that his colleagues were backsliding on their commitment to the priority of theory. Indulging in a gloomy pun, he even wondered if we weren’t witnessing the “wake of literary theory” in a sense quite different from that intended by the title of the session. His concern seemed misplaced, it must be said, for, as he also noted, deconstruction—the ne plus ultra of “theoretical” approaches to literature—has by now firmly established itself not only in literary studies but throughout the humanities and even in certain social sciences. Nevertheless, he lamented that Yale no longer deserved its reputation as a bastion of advanced theoretical criticism. Now, anyone who is at all familiar with the faculties of the departments of English, French, and Comparative Literature there would find the notion that Yale suffers from a dearth of deconstructionists simply laughable. But who knows: perhaps Professor Miller felt that his own departure deprived the university of its place on the frontiers of advanced thought? In any case, it was his view that if Yale were to recapture its former glory it must not only appoint more senior professors who are sympathetic to the cause of theory—he mentioned several possible candidates—but it must also give tenure to more of their younger disciples—again, he favored us with suggestions of several names. As things stand, Professor Miller concluded darkly, it might already be too late to stop what he described as the “Harvardization” of Yale.

We may review the next two installments of this session briefly. Michael Riffaterre’s paper, “Relevance of Theory/Theory of Relevance,” probably must take the palm for being at once the most pedantic and the most banal presentation of the entire symposium; and this, you understand, was against stiff competition. Professor Riffaterre is obviously someone who delights in his professorial mantle, and he plays the professorial role to the hilt. He treated us to an extraordinary congeries of categories and distinctions, all delivered in a manner and a French-accented English that must have taken years to perfect. “What we must be after is the je ne sais quoi that makes literature literary,” he intoned, and then proceeded to deduce the six “necessary properties” of “literariness” and apply them to a reading of Madame Bovary.

For his part, Paul Fry concentrated on elaborating the theme of the “undecidability of language” that he found expressed in different ways in both Professors Miller and Riffaterre’s papers. His delivery was very rapid and often hard to follow, but one caught various fragments, such as his blithe call for an “onto-poetic” theory that would “revise Miller and impose a little specificity on Heidegger” by viewing personification as a “relay station” between being and language. His response was full of pretentious nonsense such as this. But my favorite moments were when he dropped phrases like “from Aristotle to [Jonathan] Culler” and “from Schleiermacher to de Man,” as if it were only natural that such illustrious names should be so linked. If nothing else, Professor
Fry’s response ought to have reassured Professor Miller about the state of the Yale English department.

And indeed, Barbara Johnson’s response also made one wonder what Professor Miller had to fear from the “Harvardiztion” of Yale; for if her views are at all typical of her colleagues’, he needn’t worry that books will be read as literary documents or that theory will get short shrift in Cambridge. Taking as her epigraph “Theory is quicker,” Professor Johnson delivered herself of an exceedingly arch feminist reflection on the morning’s presentations. After the usual introductory filigree, she turned to consider Professor Riffaterre’s discussion of Madame Bovary more closely. That the book deals with adultery was a great boon, of course, because that opened up an unlimited field for pronouncements about the baleful condition of women. Nor was Professor Johnson lax in capitalizing on this wonderful opportunity. Blending a deconstructionist’s obsession with language and a feminist’s obsession with male dominance, she summed up Professor Riffaterre’s paper as a “masterful demonstration” of “the fact” that “gynophobia is structured like a language” and, conversely, that “language is structured like gynophobia.” Women themselves conspire in this dread process, she told us, for “the collective linguistic psyche exists in symbiotic relation to the fallen woman.”

We also learned, by a similarly elusive logic, that the “literary canon is a defense against its own femininity,” a defense “against the woman within.” What any of this could possibly mean was never revealed, but no one seemed to mind: it all sounded so exquisitely chic. The assertion that “gynophobia is structured like a language,” for example, echoes the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s equally absurd statement that the unconscious is structured like a language; and in this company such a pedigree was warrant enough to present even patent drivel as fact.

The brief question-and-answer period proceeded along more or less the same lines: What, it was asked, is the state of the curriculum in the age of the fallen woman? And so on. But perhaps the most revealing statement came from Professor Miller, who told us that in his view history and literature are “exactly the same thing”—a statement that did not, however, seem to lead anyone to confuse what we might call the historical desire for lunch with a merely literary longing, or prevent the audience from quitting the auditorium directly the session was ended.

The second session, “The Literary Canon and Anti-Canonical Criticism,” unfolded as a more explicitly politicized version of the first. Elaine Showalter of Princeton University and Houston Baker of the University of Pennsylvania each presented papers—Professor Baker’s seemed largely ex tempore—and Professors Geoffrey Hartman and J. Michael Holquist of Yale responded.

Professor Showalter, widely known and admired in feminist circles, read a paper entitled “The Other Bostonians: Gender and Literary Study.” It was, quite simply, a call for “a transformation of the curriculum” that would accept “gender as a fundamental category of literary analysis.” Professor Showalter is obviously nothing if not ambitious. She hopes that “literary knowledge itself will be redefined” by the feminist crusade. What she wants is not merely “main-streaming,”
not merely the inclusion of many more female authors in the standard college curriculum—though that, certainly, is a prerequisite for the kinds of change she has in mind. She also wants to enshrine the recognition of “sexual difference” as a “crucial element in the way we all read and write.” Only thus could she realize the dream of a “female vernacular” out of which “women can name their own experience.” And despite multifarious setbacks, which Professor Showalter was careful to enumerate, progress was being made. Already there was daring “new research” under way that promises to result in “new curricular experiments” and “genuine knowledge” of a field. Like what? Well, like the proliferation of current feminist studies of eating disorders that, among other wonderful things, “creates new interest in the binge/purge syndrome” as it relates to Sylvia Plath’s development. Yes, we have a lot to look forward to.

Nor can feminism rest content with championing female (one could hardly call it feminine) experience. Male experience must also be scrutinized. Professor Showalter named “the defamiliarization of masculinity” “one of the most important tasks facing feminist criticism in the next decade.” If “male experience” has hitherto been understood to be “natural” and “unproblematic,” a mode of experience that represents “humanity in general,” it must now be exposed as a biased, ideologically laden construction. Men, too—perhaps especially men—must be enlisted in this attempt to “open up the discourse of masculinity.” And good news: For those men who have abandoned “the myth of objectivity and transcendence,” who have “the courage to become vulnerable” and “realize that they are embodied,” this new recognition of masculinity “will be a transformation of volcanic force.” “Simply to think about masculinity is to become less masculine oneself,” we were assured, and, after all, what could be better than that?

As Professor Showalter enthusiastically proclaimed, her envisioned program implies a “complete revolution” in the teaching of our literary heritage, a revolution that would also establish “gay criticism,” “black criticism,” “post-colonial criticism,” and so on as equal partners in the academy. For if gender is a “crucial element in the way we all read and write,” then why not sexual orientation, race, and class—why not any political interest? Presumably, the only criticism that would not be nurtured in this feminist Utopia is literary criticism, tainted as it is by an allegiance to the “myth” of disinterested inquiry and a notion of scholarship that deliberately strives to exclude political differences.

Houston Baker’s presentation, entitled “The Promised Body,” provided us with a further application of the principles at work in Professor Showalter’s paper, except that this time the privileged category was race, not gender. Professor Baker began with a bit of ideological throat-clearing, invoking Marx to the effect that the canon is determined to some extent by class interests and reminding us that the past is always an “ideologically conditioned version of events gone by.” In the American academy today, he told us, the entire fabric of literary study, including the determination of the literary canon, is the function of a biased reading of the recent and the distant past, especially our own past. In his view, the “most penetrating and reverberant” sound in canon formation in the last three decades in the United States is the sound of civil-rights marchers
chanting—and here Professor Baker began to chant—“we shall not be moved, we shall not be moved.”

This brought Professor Baker to his main point: that the black-power and black-art movements of the Sixties and early Seventies challenged dominant “white Western” cultural values in a uniquely productive and promising way. It was then, he told us, that the black experience “found its way onto the stage of the American academy and the black initiative became a reality for every man, woman, or student, every administrator, professor, resident advisor, security guard, or secretary.” It is impossible to reproduce Professor Baker’s oratorical stage effects, but be assured that he is an extremely able performer. And he gave us the full repertoire that afternoon. There were quotations from Washington and Jefferson meant to portray them as racists, charges that the Constitution of the United States is a racist document (a “Gothic romance,” as Professor Baker memorably put it), readings from the writings of former slaves to show what terrific literature we’ve missed, and abundant references to what Professor Baker referred to as “the African diaspora.”

Though delivered with unusual pathos, all this was in fact the most predictable fare imaginable. But Professor Baker concluded with a twist that was new to me, comparing the black experience in this country to the Roman Catholic Mass. Central to both, he told us, is the notion of a sacrifice and also the “materialization and engorgement of the body as a manifested covenant of a new order.” He also liked to describe black Americans as “the African Body,” noting, among much else, that the African Body and its history contain an alternative story of the founding of the United States and that “the African Body emerges as a canonical announcement of a promised or covenanted body.” It need hardly be said that the audience was spellbound by Professor Baker’s performance, especially by his concluding litany of recent outbreaks of violence and racial prejudice against “the African Body” on several campuses around the country; it has become rare in these quiet days in the academy that your average white, middle-class audience can indulge in such ecstasies of intellectualized liberal shame.

Of course, presentations like those of Professors Showalter and Baker put any respondent at a tremendous rhetorical disadvantage. Anything resembling dissent risked being excoriated as a sexist or racist attack on the voices of freedom. This Professor Holquist must have realized, for when it came time for him to respond he contented himself with a few apologetic mumblings about how “political considerations” had kept black studies from becoming institutionalized as successfully as gender studies. But Professor Hartman did venture a few tentative criticisms. Noting that both presentations exhibited a strong Utopian element, he began by remarking the high pitch of his colleagues’ rhetoric; he even made bold to ask whether their rhetoric wasn’t sometimes “stronger than their concepts.” The end they envisioned was “generous;” he hastily added; but he had to admit that on the “conceptual level” he was “perplexed, even disconcerted.”

Though he would seem to have long since given up serious criticism for modish intellectual esoterica, Professor Hartman’s remarks reminded one that he has done lasting, even brilliant, work; and one was reminded, too, that he was without doubt the most distinguished scholar to
participate in the symposium. What worried him was that the essentially political programs outlined by his colleagues would compromise the freedom and independence of the university, jeopardizing disinterested scholarship. Recognizing that the university is in many respects a place apart, he gently urged caution lest overt political imperatives be allowed to determine the character of university life. What he seems to have underestimated, alas, was the extent to which the political infiltration of intellectual life was the frankly acknowledged goal of his more radical colleagues.

Although it began quietly, the third session, “The Institution of Criticism: What Should We Be Teaching, and Teaching Future Teachers to Teach?” ended by showing just how frankly acknowledged such political imperatives could be. Gerald Graff of Northwestern University and Margaret Ferguson of Columbia University were the session’s main speakers; Neil Hertz of Johns Hopkins University and Peter Brooks responded.

Professor Graff’s presentation, “What Should We Be Teaching When There’s No ‘We’?” was by far the most practical paper in the symposium. Whatever one thought of his ideas, it was clear that he had devoted some considerable time to thinking about everyday pedagogical problems. In his view, the basic problem was that though the “we” of the academy is far more inclusive now than it used to be, there is no agreement on first principles and hence no consensus about what should be taught, or how. His solution was simply to dispense with the ideal of consensus and adopt a model of conflict. We don’t need a consensus, he told us, to carry on work in the academy; we can agree to disagree.

In some respects, Professor Graff’s proposals were reminiscent of the teachings of John Dewey; he thus assured us that the content of what is read “hardly matters”; what matters is the way it feeds into students’ experience. Turning to some practical applications of this insight, he suggested that one might experiment with “teacher swapping” (not to be confused with team teaching), an innovation in which one teacher teaches a course for, say, five weeks, after which another comes in and begins by asking what the first teacher said, probing his presuppositions and prejudices. In fact, this is a prescription for confusion, guaranteed to muddle young minds. But the real problem with Professor Graff’s vision—as with the progressive ideas from which it derives—is that it purchases “pluralistic” concord at the price of intellectual content. If it “hardly matters” what students read, it will “hardly matter” what they know or believe.
There was none of this spirit of accommodation in Margaret Ferguson’s paper, “Teaching and/as Reproduction.” Though delivered in measured, even demure, tones, it was easily the most radical presentation of the symposium. Her thesis was that in liberal bourgeois society teaching must be seen primarily as a means by which the ruling class perpetuates or “reproduces” inequitable class relations. In one sense, certainly, Professor Ferguson is quite right that schools are “sites for social reproduction.” That is a main reason civilized cultures have always put such stock by education. The problem today, however, is not that our schools “reproduce” the culture and values that support them, but that they are doing the job so poorly.

Yet to hear Professor Ferguson tell it, things are bad indeed in the particular capitalist bourgeois society that she has the misfortune to inhabit and work in. Thus she began by questioning the appropriateness of the word “should” in the title of the session: given the enormous constraints that the university supposedly places on “thought and action,” what sense does it make to ask what we should be teaching when the question of what we can be teaching is so pressing? And isn’t it problematic, she asked her colleagues, to see ourselves primarily as critics or teachers and only secondarily, if at all, as state functionaries or employees of a major corporation?

But think about it. What is so compromising about being an employee of the state or a corporation, even a “major corporation”? At what point did Leftist attitudes so infiltrate everyday language that working for the Post Office or General Foods, let alone a “major corporation” like Columbia University, should ipso facto seem to carry with it a moral taint? Are we to believe that the citizens of a socialist country are spiritually or physically freer from state control than their counterparts in Western democracies? And what dire constraints does Professor Ferguson imagine the university imposes upon the “thought and action” of its employees? She herself appeared remarkably unconstrained that afternoon.

That Professor Ferguson’s paper should be littered with such contradictions should not surprise us. They represent the standard operating equipment of intellectual Marxists, who are always ready to trump mere empirical evidence with the charge of “false consciousness” or bad faith—reserving to themselves the determination of what is to count as genuine insight and authenticity. It was only to be expected that Professor Ferguson should describe “capitalist social relations” as “monolithic” and then, by virtue of her criticism, arrogate to herself a place outside that allegedly monolithic totality; and it was simply business as usual that she should rail against the liberal tradition and its ideal of “pluralist accommodation,” even though it was only in a society governed precisely by that spirit of “pluralist accommodation” that criticism of the sort she propounded would be tolerated.

But in order to get the full flavor of Professor Ferguson’s Weltanschauung, let us consider for a moment the book that provided her with the inspiration and title for her paper, Reproduction in Education and Society, by the French Marxist sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron. A work of aggressive impenetrability, Reproduction in Education and Society advances the
thesis that education in bourgeois societies has the “social function of reproducing the class relations, by ensuring the hereditary transmission of cultural capital.” The book consists of a series of highly contentious propositions about social life and education dressed up and elaborated in the abstract, pedantic argot favored by certain academic Marxists. Near the beginning of the book, for example, Messrs. Bourdieu and Passeron inform us that “All pedagogic action (PA) is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power.” Their use of the term “objectively” here is a touch especially worth savoring. And later on, they confide that the corrupted ethos of the bourgeoisie reveals itself in its very language. Hence they distinguish between “bourgeois language,” which is said to tend to “abstraction, formalism, intellectualism and euphemistic moderation”—evil things, all—and “working-class language,”

which manifests itself in the tendency to move from particular case to particular case, from illustration to parable, or to shun the bombast of fine words and the turgidity of grand emotions, through banter, rudeness and ribaldry, manners of being and doing characteristic of classes who are never fully given the social conditions for the severance between objective denotation and subjective connotation, . . .

All this is the sheerest quackery, of course, though it does inspire the droll question whether its authors believe they have achieved anything like the stylistic frankness they admire in “working-class language.”

Like her mentors, Professor Ferguson displayed a thoroughgoing animus toward the Western democratic tradition. Invoking the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, she castigated the “ideology” of free will propagated by Western bourgeois societies. And on a lighter note, she indulged in ridiculing the authors of an article that appeared in Commentary for suggesting that traditional liberal academics attempted “to promote intellectual openness and tolerance through an honest reading of the West’s achievements.” Naturally, this provoked considerable mirth in the audience, for who still believes in either the West’s achievements or its honesty?

After Professor Ferguson’s performance, the responses could hardly help seeming anticlimactic. Neil Hertz maundered on about education as a process of “unmasking” and the desirability of opening up the university “to as many modes of self-dramafixation as possible,” while Peter Brooks took the occasion to pillory Secretary Bennett for his “reactionary” and “sclerotic” views about education. Reflecting on the title of the session, Professor Brooks noted that he understood “us” to mean “we who are not nostalgic for the old consensus.” Even the formal proceedings of the symposium, with its round of speakers didactically addressing an audience from a podium, was too formal and “too canonical” for his taste. Perhaps he would have preferred a series of spontaneous improvisations?

The discussion that followed, however, proved quite lively. Two exchanges in particular seem worth remarking. In one of the symposium’s rare moments of dissension, Professor Graff rose to challenge Professor Ferguson’s presentation. Though he assured the audience that he considered
himself “on the Left,” he nevertheless felt that Professor Ferguson had given a distorted picture of the situation in the American academy. Compared to what, he asked, may we complain that our universities are sites of “ideological reproduction”? Ah, yes: “Compared to what?” The question marked the day’s single great burst of common sense. Where else, Professor Graff asked, would one find the ideas of Marx, Foucault, Althusser, and Professor Ferguson’s other heroes taken seriously except in the university? Where else would her presentation not only be encouraged but actually listened to and (one assumes) paid for?

Obviously infuriated by her colleague’s impertinence, Professor Ferguson responded but did not really reply to these questions. Instead, she pointed out that success in the university, especially for women and minorities, comes at a tremendous psychic cost. She confided that she herself had had to internalize a code of decorum and manners to succeed in the academy; almost sadly, she assured the audience that she was not going to stand up and swear at us—or at Professor Graff—much as she might want to at the moment; part of the price of being there on the podium was being trained not to do such things. And in case we didn’t get it the first time around, she reminded us that she regarded the real problems in the academy as political problems: questions about the canon or pedagogy or education in general were merely fronts for political issues. Not surprisingly, Professor Ferguson’s confession was greeted by a loud round of applause.

Professor Graff replied by asking Professor Ferguson what she proposed to do with the many people in the academy who happened not to agree with her. No-one, he observed, had addressed himself to that rather elementary question. Nor was anyone going to. Sensing that the moment was ripe, Professor Baker intervened from his place in the audience to charge that Professor Hartman’s contribution to the symposium had been a “conservative, possibly racist response.” Moreover, he declaimed, Professor Hartman had indulged in “an extraordinary valorization of the university,” implying as he did that the life of the mind was a delicate thing that the university ought to take care to protect from the crass exigencies of society at large. This, too, got a rousing round of applause from an audience apparently disgusted with the whole idea of “valorizing the university,” even if they were only too happy to inhabit its protected purlieus. And poor Professor Hartman: “Conservative”! “Racist”! One wondered which epithet stung worse. He made some effort to respond, but it soon became clear that nothing as feckless as a reasoned reply could influence the course of opinion in a room so charged with overheated rhetoric.

Like most of the reflections in the *Salmagundi* colloquy, the symposium at Yale underscored the predominance in the academy of what the literary critic Frederick Crews has aptly dubbed “Left Eclecticism.” As Professor Crews explains, Left Eclecticism is not identical with Marxism *simpliciter*, but represents any of a wide variety of anti-establishment modes of thought from structuralism and post-structuralism, deconstruction, and Lacanian analysis to feminist, homosexual, black, and other patently political forms of “criticism.” But at the heart of Left Eclecticism is
an understanding, ultimately borrowed from the Marxist ethos, that analytic and theoretic discourse is to be judged primarily by the evident radicalism of its stance. The schools of thought thus favored make sharply divergent claims, yet all of them set themselves against allegedly repressive Western institutions and practices. In dealing with a given painting, novel, or piece of architecture, especially one dating from the capitalist era, they do not aim primarily to show the work’s character or governing idea. The goal is rather to subdue the work through aggressive demystification—for example, by positing its socioeconomic determinants and ideological implications, scanning it for any encouraging signs of subversion, and then judging the result against an ideal of total freedom.[7]

I think most would agree that, taken together, the Salmagundi collection and the Yale symposium offer a compelling illustration of the kind of thing Professor Crews has in mind.

What is particularly depressing about such spectacles is the thought that, far from being atypical, they represent the dominant current of opinion in our most prestigious institutions of higher education. Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Johns Hopkins, Columbia, Brown—the company is nothing if not renowned. That these men and women should be so blithely prepared to jettison the tradition and intellectual principles that have nourished and given meaning to their disciplines is indeed a sobering thought—as is the realization that these same men and women hold positions of considerable power and influence in the colleges and universities that are charged with educating our young. Their cynicism, devotion to shallow intellectual fashion, and unthinking acceptance of radical politics make it easy to wonder, with Allan Bloom, whether “there is either the wherewithal or the energy within the university to constitute or reconstitute the idea of an educated human being and establish a liberal education again.” There is little support for optimism.

3. I detailed one display of this rage in “Debating the Humanities At Yale,” The New Criterion, June, 1986, pp. 23-33. Go back to the text.
4. Salmagundi No. 72, Fall, 1986, pp. 101-165. Go back to the text.

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