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Abstract

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Review Essay

The Postmodernist as Academic Leftist; or, How to Stop Worrying and Learn to Love being Politically Correct

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Just after *Left Politics and the Literary Profession* (edited by Lennard J. Davis and M. Bella Mirabella [New York: Columbia U. Press, 1990] 316pp.) appeared (and thus well after the essays and introduction comprising it were actually written), right-wing politicos mounted a feeble-minded but nonetheless effective media counter-attack on left politics in the academy, under the rubric of "political correctness." After decades of excluding leftists from the academy in the name of anti-communism (among other things), the right decided to castigate the growing anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-capitalist consensus in the academy as a form of "left McCarthyism." In this new, noticeably defensive version of red-baiting specially revised for the 90s, being "politically correct" on the left had suddenly become a liability, whereas on the right, of course, it had always been as American as apple pie.

Historically—that is to say, specifically during McCarthyism and up until the Vietnam War—politicians counted on the university to suppress anti-establishment perspectives and movements. What is distinctive about higher education in the 90s, it seems, is that the politicians sense they can no longer always count on university personnel to do so, and they therefore resort to media campaigns to denigrate higher education altogether. It is this historical shift of consensus (at least among younger scholars) to the left that has made it necessary for reactionaries to change stripes and suddenly start championing the liberal cause of respect for diversity of opinion in the academy—basically because they are losing ground there.

It is easy to exaggerate this trend, and dangerously wrong to assume that the university has become politically correct in any true sense of the term. On the contrary: racism, sexism, homophobia, classism abound; learning opportunities as well as teaching and research positions still systematically accrue to those belonging to the standard race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, class, and political orientation. Nevertheless, the momentum of the civil rights, women's, and anti-war movements has indeed produced a shift to the left within the academy (if nowhere else). The aim of *Left Politics and the Literary Profession* is to assess the impact of this shift on literary studies: to address "the concrete achievements of the radical Left in academia" (5). The editors take as a point of departure and comparison a similar anthology published in 1971 entitled *The Politics of Literature* (edited by Louis Kampf and Paul Lauter [New York: Random House]), and they set out to "assess what is happening [today] in the practice, teaching, and study of literature" by "focus[ing] on the link between the radical politics of the 1960s and the intellectual activities of radicals who study literature in the 1990s and into the coming century" (15). But understanding the politics of literature and the literary profession at the turn of the twenty-first century, it seems to me, requires situating recent developments within a set of historical contexts considerably broader than the twenty years that elapsed between *The Politics of Literature* and *Left Politics and the Literary Profession*. For reasons that will become evident, I find it convenient to use the notion of "academic postmodernism" to situate within a broader historical context the current conjuncture in which left politics appear to be prevailing in the academy, but at the same time face stiff opposition from hostile right-wing regimes determined to bend even literary studies to the service of hierarchical, authoritarian rule.

Perhaps the first thing to note in response to those trying to enlist canonical western literature and culture in defense of the status quo is that western literary culture itself has been vehemently opposed to modern (i.e. liberal-democratic capitalist) society since its very inception. The first and more generous mode of opposition was romanticism. Itself a product of the great revolutions and their promise of free and equal self-development for all, romanticism was a constant reminder to modern democracies of all the promises they had failed to keep. Like postmodern criticism today (though perhaps more naively), romanticism sympathetically glorified, and often championed the causes of the oppressed and powerless, those left out of the modern social compact: women, children, the poor, even "minorities" (including Native Americans Indians). It is precisely *because* academic literary scholars understand and take western literature and culture seriously, in other words, that they now stand up for the rights of groups still disenfranchised and marginalized after two centuries of capitalist, liberal-democratic rule.

Yet taking such a stand implies a certain understanding of the second, less generous mode of cultural opposition, which is modernism itself (including the avant-garde). Unlike romanticism, though equally critical of modern bourgeois society, modernism was founded upon a serene indifference to (if not outright contempt for) democracy, the people, and any hopes for the development of enlightened, egalitarian social relations. The distinctive feature of academic "postmodernism" (in the specific sense I am using the term) is its repudiation of the cynical disdain typical of modernism and a return (albeit in ways yet to be fully realized or adequately defined) to some kind of neo-"romantic" engagement with popular struggles for freedom and self-determination on the part of women, minorities, Third World peoples, and so forth.

The postmodern critique of modernism, I want to suggest, is a crucial feature of contemporary literary politics, for it underscores the ultimate complicity between modernism, initially an oppositional movement, and the modern research university as a distinctly capitalist institution. Identifying the research university as such for one thing refutes the ludicrous idea that the left is somehow bringing politics "into" an institution devoted to "objective" inquiry where it doesn't belong. On the contrary: the university, though far from being either truly "politically correct" or entirely devoted to exclusion, oppression, and exploitation, is political terrain where differing forces vie for dominance, and indeed struggle to define the university's role in perpetuating or transforming social relations within and without its walls. More important, pinpointing the relations between the modern university and capitalist social relations helps us understand how it was that modernism prevailed over romanticism in academic literary and cultural studies. There are (at least) four senses in which the modern university must be considered a specifically capitalist institution, four ways it functions politically to maintain and enforce capitalist social relations (not to mention patriarchy and other forms of domination).

First and perhaps most obviously, the modern research university that displaced the older elite colleges was founded and organized to provide new technologies to fuel the advanced stages of the industrial revolution, initially in the areas of electricity and chemistry, then electronics and pharmaceuticals, more recently with computers, bio-engineering, and so forth. One crucial aspect of this market-driven university structure was departmental and disciplinary specialization: such an arrangement suited the relations among "hard" science, technology, and industry very well, but was also applied indiscriminately to the "soft" sciences, transforming them utterly beyond recognition. The humanities and social sciences have in a sense never recovered from this transformation, which segregated literature, philosophy, and the arts from the study of history and society (itself sundered into the fields of sociology, anthropology, political science, and economics), and turned each into an autonomous specialization.

One result of disciplinary specialization becomes apparent in connection with the second way the modern university functions politically to maintain and enforce capitalist social relations: its primary purpose is to train various segments of the work-force for increasingly complicated, narrowly specialized jobs—and not to educate competent citizens for active participation in democratic decision-making (nor prepare them for ethically and aesthetically richer social lives, for that matter). As Richard Ohmann points out in his essay on "The Function of English at the Present Time," even :

> English teachers . . . help train the kind of work force capitalists need in a productive system that relies less and less on purely manual labor. [They help] to inculcate the discipline—punctuality, good verbal manners, submission to authority, attention to problem-solving assignments set by someone else, long hours spent in one place—that is necessary to perform the alienated labor that will be the lot of most. (42)

But of course specialization has similar effects on faculty, which brings us to the third way the university serves capitalist political ends: by subjecting the study of society and culture to professionalization. Disciplinary and department specialization has meant that professionalized scholars are hard-pressed to devise research projects on important social topics that will "fit" neatly into disciplinary boundaries. The result is that knowledge becomes the intellectual property and privileged domain of professional experts, and its social relevance becomes harder to discern, disseminate, and apply.

The effects of disciplinary specialization and professionalization were particularly acute in the field of literary studies, and contributed crucially to the triumph of modernism over romanticism as distinct modes of opposition to liberal-democratic capitalism. At the emergence of the modern research university (during the last decades of the 19th century), two conceptions of literary study vied for control over the newly-formed departments of literature. One was derived from the elite college curriculum, whose "civilizing" mission was now to be extended to include (in principle) all citizens of nascent industrial democracy. Not surprisingly, major battles took place at this juncture over whether to expand the canon to include contemporary, vernacular literature along with the dead-language classics. In brief, this new civic-minded curriculum promoted the study of literature (along with philosophy, ethics, history, and politics) as a vehicle for moral education; in connection with extra-curricular reading and debating clubs, literature served as a point of departure for ethical and political discussions (on such topics of pressing contemporary relevance as abolitionism and female suffrage, among others). The other conception of literary study was based on positivist historicism, and involved research into the biographical sources and historical context of origin of individual literary works. The latter conception was bound to prevail, of course, inasmuch as it "fit" the department-structure and research expectations of the university far better than the former conception, which was geared to teaching rather than research, and to discussion of generally social themes rather than the single-minded pursuit of specialized projects.

Yet in a sense, even positivist literary historicism was not specialized enough: it looked too much like history and philology; it didn't focus narrowly enough on works of literature themselves to count as a truly autonomous discipline. This is where modernism entered the picture. In setting itself apart from antecedent romanticism and contemporary mass-consumption popular literature, modernist works required the development and application of special reading techniques: careful attention to details of wording and complexities of plot and point of view, refined sensitivity to irony and myriad types of ambiguity—inculcating a devotion to literature as a self-contained realm of truth and beauty independent from history, society, politics. Here was a literary mode perfectly suited to the demands of professional literary scholarship: oriented like historicism to rigorous and demanding specialized "research" rather than teaching and generalities, yet focused squarely on literature and literarity itself rather than on historical or philological "background." Another skirmish over the canon took place to include modernist works in the literary pantheon, and as modernism prevailed in the profession, the entire canon (including the romantic movement) was re-read in modernism's aestheticizing terms: as self-contained works of literature severed from all wordly ties and elevated grandiosely above them. The reciprocal fit between aestheticist modernism in literature and academic careerism in literary studies seemed a match made in heaven: specialization encouraged the professional author and the professional scholar alike simply to do their jobs, allowing them to serenely turn their backs on the debased and corrupting world of mass culture and mass politics beneath them.

Postmodernism has changed all that, disrupting the neat fit between literary modernism and academic professionalism, and provoking renewed interest in linking literary study with consideration of pressing social issues (sexism, racism, exploitation, nationalism, imperialism, homophobia, the environment) and the plight of various disenfranchised groups (women, ethnic and sexual minorities, Third World peoples). It is this postmodern repudiation of modernist self-absortion and self-serving professionalism that has prompted in response the quite unexpected unholy alliance between modernism and the chronically philistine right, which these days champions the universal truth and autonomous beauty of literary works in desperate reaction against the postmodern engagement of literature and literary study with social issues, critical opposition, collective empowerment, and political activism. Postmodernism appears in this light as an attempt to re-activate the pre-modernist, romantic critique of liberal-democratic capitalism, to renew commitments to the oppressed and excluded—to un-do, in a word, what modernism had done.

The reasons for the postmodern turn against insular modernist professionalism in academia are several. The disaffection with the university (among other social institutions) for its complicity with imperialist foreign policy, the military-industrial complex, and one-dimensional social life in general during the Vietnam war was one important factor: the notion of professionals "just doing their job" in such a context became intolerable. But even more important was the influx into the university of previously excluded or severely under-represented groups: women; Asian-, African-, and Hispano-Americans; the working and lower-middle classes. Against the backdrop of the civil rights, women's, and anti-war movements, these students expected higher education to answer to their needs and interests, not just those of the white, upper-middle class males that had predominated in the academy for so long. The stage was set for a re-assessment of the political orientation of the university and its role in post-war America.

In the period of capital dis-accumulation following the end of the world war—with the reconversion of immense productive capacity from military to civilian ends making jobs and consumer goods relatively plentiful for most Americans—the university accomodated the new populations rather well: learning opportunities and indeed the literary canon itself seemed to expand right along with job prospects and purchasing power. In-depth reconsideration of the "first principles" of literary study by diversely-interested new groups fueled the explosion of "theory," which Gerald Graff identifies in the opening essay of the anthology as a "structural feature of the dissensual culture we inhabit" (23). As Graff so cogently puts it:

> "theory" is what breaks out when the rationale for [a] community's practices is no longer taken for granted, so that what could formerly "go without saying" becomes an object of dispute. . . . Once consensus breaks down, assumptions that could previously be taken for granted become one set of theories among others, ideas that you have to *argue for* rather than presuppose as given. (23)

One of the strongest points in Graff's illuminating essay is his reminder that lack of consensus and hence debate about basic principles in "theory" are not just parts of the "dissensual" culture of postmodernism, but defining features of the culture of democracy itself (24).

It is this debate that right-wing politicians are attempting to close off rather than enter into, by refusing to recognize the existence of genuine disagreement as to the proper form and function of literary and cultural study in postmodern higher education, and by insisting instead that we return to the way things used to be not so long ago under the regime of modernist professionalism. The foreclosure of democratic debate and indeed the closing of the American canon itself by right-wing politicians and ideologues are symptoms of the epochal shift from capital dis-accumulation to re-accumulation whose turning-point was the oil crisis of 1974 to 1981. Since then, the expanding prerogatives of capital have meant a corresponding slash in learning opportunities, job prospects, and/or purchasing power for most Americans, especially those formerly-disenfranchised groups who were temporarily admitted into the social compact during the boom years, but are now to be ruthlessly excluded once again.

What is clear is that the assault on diversity and the re-enforcement of a "traditional"—that is to say, distinctly modernist conception of—canon are part of a broader political agenda to re-assert (bourgeois white male) supremacy within gender, race, and class hierarchies so as to consolidate right-wing rule in the service of capital re-accumulation. Nowhere is Ohmann's analysis of "the function of English [and literary-cultural studies] at the present time" more acute than in his account of the fourth way in which the university functions politically as a capitalist institution: by disguising a system of class, race, and gender hierarchies as a meritocracy:

> [B]y helping to sort out those who will succeed in school from those who will not, we . . . generally confirm the class origins of our students, while making it possible for a few to rise (and others to sink). The effect

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> - unintended of course - is to sustain the *illusion* of equal opportunity and convince the majority that their failure to play a significant and rewarding role in society is a personal failure rather than a systemic one. (42)

At stake here is a question at the heart of affirmative action: whether the university is to become a means of empowerment for historically oppressed groups, or instead remain a vehicle for reinforcing existing hierarchies through the invidious selection (statistically insignificant exceptions aside) of individuals who already conform to the norms (of gender, race, and class) to begin with. By closing the canon and the doors of higher education to the disenfranchised, the right aims to reduce even the slight chances that their cherished hierarchies will be upset, and to put women, the poor, and minorities squarely back in their place, outside the pale.

Progressive forces in the academy generally agree on the validity and strategic importance of implementing curricula of democratic empowerment rather than discriminatory selection, and most of the essays in *Left Politics* address this issue in one way or another. Of course the most immediate response to the right's attempt to pare the canon to the core is to expand it to make the canon (and by extension higher education), open to all; to insist on a principle of liberal-pluralist inclusivity. But this tack begs important questions: How do you now treat the texts that were already in the canon? What about developing alternative canons instead? How do you decide which texts, and even which kinds of texts, to add to the canon(s)? How must reading procedures be changed to accomodate new texts and new kinds of texts? These are questions contributors wrestle with throughout the anthology.

Reasons for keeping the canon open are clear. For one thing, a restricted-access canon serves in most cases as an obstacle to higher education for the disenfranchised, an alien hoop to jump through at the behest of the oppressor, not as a true means of acculturation (on which see Ohmann, 37-38 and 47-51). Diversifying the canon by including texts various students are already or can easily become conversant with (including works by women and minority authors, or even television programming, Ohmann suggests, 50) instills a sense of self-worth and competence as a point of departure for exploring less familiar reaches of the canon.

A very different strategy involves the study and development of alternative canons. The aim here, rather than worrying about "getting in" to the mainstream canon, is to consolidate one's own sense of cultural tradition and enhance the understanding and appreciation of it by its members themselves, first and foremost, and then by outsiders as well. The section of the anthology devoted to "Trends and Developments in Noncanonical Literary Traditions" contains three very useful, thoroughly-annotated surveys of recent Chicano, African-American, and lesbian literature and scholarship.

Yet another approach to questions of curriculum and empowerment insists that we not take canons (mainstream and alternative alike) for granted in the first place, that we instead examine and de-mystify the very processes of canonization *and* marginalization as they reflect and shape social relations in historical context. The essays by Paul Lauter and Lillian Robinson that open the "Reflections on the Canon" section agree that canon revision entails not just adding "great works" or "masterpieces" by other kinds of writers, but adding other kinds of texts as well. The thrust of such an approach is "to lead us out of a narrowly construed set of professional concerns and back into the broader social and political world," and Lauter is surely right that "even now as the academic right wing bemoans the triumph of heterogeneity in the university . . . the next challenge is to shift the locus of struggle . . . to public forums" (144). In a similar vein, Robinson insists that opening the canon to:

> the widest range of expression of [excluded] groups' experience . . . would be to see our whole past . . . as experienced authentically by all sorts of people with very different relations to the dominant culture and the fact of dominance. And it would be to understand this seeing as a legitimate part of our activity in the world of literary interpretation, not belonging to some other mode of apprehension outside the proper boundaries of criticism. (153)

The inclusion of marginalized authors and genres thus has far-reaching implications not just for the size or breadth of the canon, but also for the very modes of apprehension and interpretation comprising academic literary criticism itself, as Lauter agrees (135-36).

This transformation of the basic means and ends of literary and cultural study in the university follows from what I have been calling the postmodern critique of modernist academic professionalism, which implies setting new standards for literary scholarship itself. Speaking of feminist criticism in particular, though echoing remarks of other marginalized critics, Robinson observes that :

> feminist criticism can approach the traditional standards for canonicity, which are supposed to constitute "our" common aesthetic, either by demonstrating how the female tradition conforms to that aesthetic or by challenging the aesthetic itself. (154)

What distinguishes the postmodern turn in literary and cultural criticism from mere liberal pluralism, I have been arguing, is its whole-hearted commitment to the second of these two options: rejecting the "tradition" and the "profession" of that tradition as defined by modernist aestheticism, in order to apprehend and study literature and culture from other, more avowedly interested perspectives.

Nowhere has the postmodern turn in literary studies—the neo-romantic, anti-modernist engagement with struggles for liberation placing social relevance before aesthetic appeal—been more marked or more extensively developed than in feminist criticism. It is no doubt "because the women's movement, of all the political movements generated from the 1960s, is the one that has most successfully become part of the academic scene and has most successfully jumped the wall that has separated town and gown" (as per the prefatory note, 53) that the first full section of the anthology (following the introductory essays on "Theoretical Considerations" by Graff and Ohmann) is devoted to "Analysis and Evaluation [of] Feminism Then and Now." One of the most distinctive, albeit professionally problematic, features of feminist criticism has been its refusal of the automatic valorization of so-called "cutting edge" scholarship, which often means theory these days. In striking contrast to the predominant rhythm of academic modernism (or "modernization") forever seeking the latest trends in theory and criticism, feminism re-cycles the old criticisms—thematic criticism, image criticism, biographical criticism, and so on—while bending them to a renewed "neo-romantic" sense of political purpose and importance in connection with the women's movement at large. Placing social relevance before aesthetic appeal and theoretical sophistication has proven professionally troublesome for feminists, then, inasmuch as the discipline has remained committed to a modernist valorization not just of the shiboleths of "universal truth and beauty," but also and more recently of intellectual "progress" and theoretical avant-gardism pursued for their own sake. Of course, it must be said right away that alongside the various older modes of criticism re-cycled by feminism, feminist theory itself is in many cases as advanced, sophisticated, and powerful as anything going; it's just that its value for feminism is determined by its contribution to the advancement of women, not of theory or professional careers in and of themselves.

The section opens with a remarkable, comprehensive overview of the development and current disposition of Women's Studies by feminist scholar and former Modern Language Association president Catharine Stimpson. She is at her most provocative when she proposes women's studies as a possible model for postmodern scholarship in general:

> What if women's studies were to show what a conceptual democracy really might be like? What if women's studies were to serve as a laboratory for thinking through the complexities of community? (62)

Of course, as Stimpson is quick to point out, if women's studies makes for exemplary postmodern scholarship, it is not because everyone who counts for anything must now be a woman (the way only men really counted until recently), nor even because anyone who now counts is somehow like a woman: it is rather because feminism has had to learn to recognize, accept, and respect difference and diversity while at the same time maintaining coherence and impact as an active political movement. "Surely one of our greatest challenges," she concludes:

> is to rethink the world . . . as a multiplicity of heterogeneous identities and groups. . . . Only such a perception will organize the politics that the late twentieth century so desperately needs: a politics that accepts differences and rejects dominations. (71)

Under what I have been referring to as our postmodern condition, the challenge facing left politics in the literary profession is to realize such a vision by consolidating the egalitarian politics of difference and diversity within the academy, while shifting the locus of struggle against all-pervasive forms of normalization and domination into the public realm (Lauter 144). Feminism, clearly, is among the most developed and best situated of all left political movements to take the lead in such a struggle. The contribution of *Left Politics and the Literary Profession*, in any case, is to offer abundant bibliograhical references, survey important new fields of "non-traditional" scholarship, examine central theoretical and political issues, and stake out crucial positions in ongoing debates. It is by no means the last word on the subject, but provides a fine assessment of the current situation and future prospects for left politics in the literary profession and, one hopes, beyond.

It may be that the recent success of left politics in the academy and the academy alone has something to do with the kind of people attracted these days to scholarly careers in the first place: people whose commitment to equal opportunity and democratic values is exceptionally strong, but whose intellectual rigor, moral sensibilities, and sense of personal integrity are (for better and for worse) too well-developed to tolerate a career in politics per se. But the postmodern academy is not the ivory-tower haven from simple-minded partisan politics some might have expected: the "free exchange of ideas" comes more and more to resemble a shouting match, or in some cases an auction of intellectuals, as university administrators object to faculty course-designs and censor their reading-lists (UT Austin); conservative foundations sponsor right-wing publications with grants totalling in the millions, and fund academic vigilante-groups such as "Accuracy in Academia" and now the "National Association of Scholars" (Coors, Olin, Richardson); Reagan-Bush political appointees nominate academic hacks to rule on scholarly research proposals, and so forth and so on. With daunting control over the commercial media and the electoral arena, but with their backs to the wall in higher education, right-wing forces resort to the pseudo-liberal claim that "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion" to counter the growing left consensus in the academy. But everyone occupying a position of authority as a professional scholar-teacher is responsible for more than merely holding an opinion; they are responsible for upholding scholarly standards—something conservatives are increasingly loath to do as those standards turn against their long- and dearly-held prejudices. As recent developments in the academy show, intelligent, knowledgeable people (a certain number of paid and unpaid cranks notwithstanding) by and large share similar views on minorities, women, the environment, and their life prospects in the current social order. To be against slavery of all kinds (race slavery, gender slavery, wage slavery); against tyranny, fascism, and authoritarianism; against domination and normalization; to be for democracy, with freedom and justice for *all*; for equal opportunity and respect for others: these are some aspects (the precise details and practical applications of which are always negotiable, and always under negotiation) of what it means to be "politically correct"—and no-one need shy away from staking a claim or striving to be politically "correct" in this sense.