

# Doubting and Believing: The Hermeneutics of Suspicion in Contexts of Faith

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Religious and cultural conservatism currently enjoys much press and some praise. In contrast, many corners of our intellectual and academic worlds promote what Stephen Carter (1993) has termed a “culture of disbelief.” Current practices of teaching writing and interpretation in the academy exemplify this culture. Academics in several fields focus on unmasking hidden and illusory meanings, on revealing private personal pathologies and larger cultural wrongs. Some literary theorists openly recommend avoiding conviction and propose only hesitant, qualified modes of reasoning and writing lest conviction lead to dogmatism (Hartman, 1991). “The best lack all conviction; while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity” (Yeats, 1986, p. 91).

The current academic “doubting game” (Elbow, 1986) is sustained by the practice of “interrogating” cultural values and paradigms. The doctrinaire quality of this belief system confronts students when they arrive at colleges and universities with diverse convictions that—despite their differences from one another—differ even more radically from the skepticism that is the required mode of thinking, reading, and writing in many universities’ English curricula. Because the relationship between the life of the mind and the resources of belief has received so little attention in academic and scholarly circles, and because a diversity of cultural values and beliefs about learning are manifest among today’s college students, I propose that it is time to renew our attention to the relationships among belief and knowledge, skepticism and learning, education and obligatory doubt.

Rightly *and* wrongly, students reject or are confused by academic pedagogies and scholarly goals that focus relentlessly on skepticism and adversarial debate. As writers and readers, as teachers of writing and ways of reading, how should we expand the repertoire of analytic methods and practices that we employ? How can we reintegrate the valuable rigors of the life of the mind with the ability to read with the eyes of faith? The renowned Marxist teacher and activist Paolo Freire, for example, was also a committed Jesuit missionary. Can we not continue to applaud his liberatory pedagogy *and* begin to remember the religious convictions that inspired his teaching? Peter Elbow (1986) has defended the “believing game” alongside and in dialectical relationship with the “doubting game” familiar to academicians, as a more comfortable starting point for many student

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readers and writers. Similarly, Mary Belenky and her colleagues (1986) noted that a certain loss of faith accompanied the entry into the college classroom culture of the working class women they studied. Many of the students, upon learning to reject received and previously unquestioned authority became for a time radical skeptics and individualists, “separated learners.” In Belenky’s account, some never recovered from this radical epistemological isolation, from the loss of faith which is also a loss of self.

Blind faith in religious or political doctrines should not be conflated with faith in oneself, one’s activities, and the formation of a self that ground education, writing, and reading for many teachers and students. Can we improve on the crude understanding of religious belief and conviction as somehow indelibly anti-intellectual that is, itself, too often an unexamined article of faith within the academy (Carter, 1993; Holmes, 1993; Wills, 1990)? Can we develop related insights that will help us dismantle the political dogmatism of the left and the right that within and outside the academy increasingly foreclose discussion of diverse views, even while claiming to defend diversity? I turn to an investigation of how we might begin to answer such questions.

### Lead Us Not into Conclusion: The Academy’s Paradoxical Faith in Skepticism

Literary critic Gerald Graff (1990) defends “the culture wars” and propounds “teaching the conflicts.” Others ask whether recent critical theories—the hermeneutics of suspicion, deconstruction, and postmodernism—mean that the discovery and articulation of truth and meaning is no longer a valid aim of interpretation (Torgovnick, 1993). Should criticism and interpretation, the guiding forces behind the teaching of reading and writing, be so singularly devoted to questioning all bases of judgment and to a hermeneutics guided by suspicion of discovered or constructed meaning, indeed, of concluding anything at all? Concerns about the perils of negative dialectics, aimless deconstruction, and an unrestrained emphasis on abstract and analytic thought have been advanced by critics from unexpectedly different camps. Feminist scholars, postmodern theorists, and multiculturalists have converged on one point. For very different reasons they warn that outside of carefully defined purposes—such as criticism that is clearly directed at improved understanding—the relentless interrogation of received beliefs and the practices of skepticism, debate, and negative dialectic can lead scholars and students alike to become “expressionless, pitiless, unteachable . . . incapable of belief” (Wolf, 1984, p. 136). Like the separated learners that Belenky et al. (1986) characterize, such individuals in their radical skepticism can become alienated from the larger communities, including communities of belief, in which they might renegotiate themselves and their futures.

Further compounding the emphasis on doubt rather than on belief, the individual rather than the collective, the legacies of Marx and Freud have left us with a hermeneutics of suspicion, the habit of interpretive skepticism that questions any apparent or received meanings as possibly and even probably illusory. Marxian and Freudian theories guide practitioners in cultural studies, where approaches to race, class, and gender, alongside deconstructionist readings of texts, assume

that the culture, the author, or the reader have something deep to hide. The reader in these models of textual interpretation becomes the analyst of a situation that is assumed to be pathological from the onset. We have observed how easily such readings erode into victim narratives: stories of how an individual character or author or ethnic group was oppressed by an elitist culture, sadistic parent, or evil overlord. Freudian theories of individual identity and Marxist theories of cultural structure have, since early in this century, advanced the views that religion is delusory and narcotic, that belief is illusory, and that hope is naive.

These not-so-old hermeneutic habits die hard; the cultures of disbelief still outweigh the cultures of belief within the academy. But they are being countered in debates about academic personality styles, models of consciousness, ways of knowing, and ways of writing. Reappraisals of academic modes have in turn sparked renewed attention to the nature of argumentation, conflict, and controversy—extending the ongoing dialectic between controversy and dialogue within philosophy and philosophical hermeneutics (Maranhão, 1986; Swearingen, 1990). By the individualist measure of intellectual rigor, dialogue and reading for understanding are typically deemed “soft” and epistemologically incorrect. Why? Because notions of classroom dialogues and of the reading of literature as dialogic assume that there can be authentic exchanges between individuals, that there can be edifying discourses (Marino, 1993). Such models have been repeatedly questioned and even scorned in postmodern theory. Nonetheless, as an instrument of classroom learning and discussion, the dialogic paradigm is far more comfortable than debate and programmatic skepticism to many students, to many women in Western culture (Belenky et al., 1986), and to many non-Westerners (Gates, 1993; Ong, 1992; Said, 1991).

As the academy becomes increasingly multicultural and interdisciplinary, it is expanding and realigning its repertoire, and diversifying its models of thought, identity, ways of thinking, knowing, interpreting, meaning, and writing (Gates, 1993). Jerome Bruner (1986) observes that the Western educated self is only one among many possible “canonical images of selfhood” within as well as outside the academy (p. 130). The traditional Western individualist model of self and voice contrasts sharply with the social, collective phenomenology of knowledge, thought, and composition that many nontraditional students bring with them into today’s classrooms. Individuals from cultures where learning takes place in groups tacitly believe in themselves—and in their learning—partaking in a shared consciousness and pursuing a collectively acquired wisdom. Such learners believe themselves to be inheritors of a legacy rather than as forgers of new, original revolutionary thinking. These are not simply *nontraditional student* beliefs and practices; they are evidence of intellectual traditions that are entering into today’s academy and changing it. Even among the oldest Western traditions can be observed similar beliefs in collective knowledge alongside the more familiar and more emphasized paradigms of individual autonomy and analytic thought. Socrates’ “know thyself” came to mean “separate yourself from the Other” (Kierkegaard, 1966, p. 202). Socrates’ contemporary Epictetus (1962) understood the same enjoinder in an irreducibly collective sense: “Bid a singer in the Chorus ‘know thyself’ and will he not turn for the knowledge to the others, his fellows in the chorus, and to his harmony with them?” (3:14).

Alternatives to individualism and skepticism may be found in Western academic paradigms of Socratic dialogue (Kierkegaard's portrait of Socrates notwithstanding) and in hermeneutic practices directed at constructing collaborative meaning. These practices of thought and language have long emphasized interactional and collective models of mind, discourse, self, and meaning. However, these collaborative practices have often held a minority position in relation to the programmatic doubt and to the analytic modes that, since Descartes, have dominated the Western academy and its values.

Despite its reputation for spawning culture wars and promoting skepticism, the current multicultural academic setting can be particularly hospitable to dialogue and dialogical hermeneutics, ways of knowing and learning in the academy that have long provided alternatives and complements to skepticism, analytic dialectic, and doctrines of linguistic contingency (Gates, 1992). Truth-building modes of discourse have never been entirely absent from academic models; indeed, they illustrate that belief, and even faith, need not and should not be regarded reductively or as enemies of reason (Carter, 1993; Ong, 1991). Reading with the eyes of faith is an activity that secular Romantic aesthetics borrowed from Protestant hermeneutics in the late eighteenth century. The ability to read *with*, and *as*, is a believing game (Elbow, 1986) firmly grounded in literary aesthetics such as the Romantic poet Coleridge's notion that reading and appreciating poetry requires a willing suspension of disbelief, an edifying suspension of skepticism. Dialogue, thus understood, has long functioned as a classroom paradigm without diminishing or impeding the merits of skepticism and analysis. The academy's modes of thought and language can and should be renewed by rehabilitating a positive, constructive dialectical relationship between belief and dialogue, on the one hand, and the discourses of analysis and debate, on the other. Orchestrating diverse academic models could lead to intellectual multiculturalism in place of culture wars. If the academy's models were realigned to become less hostile to the worlds of belief, conviction, and reasoned action where most people spend most of their time, we might experience less difficulty, for example, in apologizing for or defending academic writing.

### Reading Literature Through the Eyes of Faith Writing In Hopes of Becoming

Literary study is rapidly changing, both as an object of classroom and scholarly interpretation, and as a repertoire of models for classroom and scholarly discourses. How we teach reading and how we teach writing are firmly linked in this movement. As literary, social, and cultural studies mingle in a multicultural academic environment, reading with the eyes of faith—faith in what we will become and should envision—can perhaps become a more acceptable epistemology. Such reading, in turn, has the potential to create writers and writings that begin to generate new canons of self and knowledge.

Serious attention to literature as a guide to intellectual and moral development is a belief-guided interpretive practice as old as the English and German Romantic concept of the *bildungsroman*—the novel as a paradigm of character development. The notion of literature as model and guide to the development of

identity is assuming renewed importance in a multicultural academy striving to define common grounds and values among its diverse constituencies. Although recent literary theory and aesthetics have often emphasized literature's strategic indeterminacy and status as beguiling fiction, it has also been approached in many times and places as a vehicle for making cultural and personal meanings by both readers and characters. Through their stories and through adult models all cultures present children with "canonical images of selfhood" (Bruner, 1986, p. 130). In the first classrooms of modern Western democracies, literary study was defined as an equalizing curriculum—a set of models of character and voice that would be shared by all students.

In the classrooms of the first Western democracies literary study was defined as an equalizing resource for the formation of self. Recuperating this model of literature as a model for identity can help extend the academic selves and voices we already propound to larger and increasingly diverse college student constituencies. Approached as a source of images of self and as a representation of intellectual discourses, literature, and the talk about literature modeled by teachers, becomes more than mere fiction, more than a trivial diversion or belletristic entertainment, and more than a ruthless exercise in cynically dismantling meaning and authorial personality. Literature, and the teacher's modeling of talk about literature, can also assume the roles of supplements to identity, training grounds for thought, models for language, and sites for reviving belief.

An ancient defense of belief working in accord with intellect posited that intellectual activity is, and should be, faith seeking understanding, belief creating a space conducive to thought and insight: *credo ut intelligam*. Such a model presents faith—in a higher being, or God—and belief—in commonly held doctrines, concepts, and values—as working hand in hand with reason and the intellect. In the Prometheus and Faust legends it is faith—in the gods, in the shared, constructed, common values of tradition—that must temper the potential arrogance of unguided rationality and excessive anthropocentrism.

We need not persist in treating faith as blind and belief as a primitive age of innocence—as stages in a developmental continuum in which true advancement is marked by the abandonment of belief and superstition, and the triumph of pure rational analytic thought. Compulsory skepticism, promoted as an end in itself, is perceived by many students as mystifying and repressive by many inside as well as outside the academy (Gates, 1993; Murphy, 1993; Phelps, 1992). Doctrinaire skepticism should continue to be tempered by the recuperation of belief-grounded learning based on collective social values. As this happens, the roles played by character, speaker, and author in literary study will be illuminated by new lights and seen through new lenses. Reprisals of the relationships among belief, collective social values, and the many roles of character, speaker, and author that we find in literary representations can help in the process. Recent pedagogical applications of this defense of skepticism have been challenged on the grounds that denying epistemological and social agency to groups who have long been marginalized is hardly an acceptable academic purpose (Gates, 1993; Murphy, 1993; Phelps, 1992). As writers, as readers, and as characters in recent literature, women and minorities seek to be more in the picture, more in the text, and more part of the discussion, not less so.

Alternative models of metacognitive and metalinguistic self-consciousness are often only implicit in cultures and literatures. Of the priestess's voice that speaks out of and to a collective culture, Christa Wolf's (1984) Cassandra says, "We have no name for what spoke out of me" (p. 107). Western philosophy and language theory have made names for what speaks: explicit, mandatory vehicles of thought and instruction. The Western separated self is able to refer explicitly to *my* identity, *my* position, but it is becoming increasingly clear in cross-cultural studies of identity and intellect that this self is only one among a number of possible selves, voices, and self images. The proximal learning accomplished by identifying with models that has been observed in early childhood development is true of identifying with literary characters and with teachers as well. Classical rhetorics, in their own multicultural milieus, were well aware of this when they emphasized imitation and mimesis as primary vehicles for learning ways of thinking, ways of speaking, ways of reading, and ways of writing. Jerome Bruner (1986) observes, "An *Anlage* of metacognition is present as early as the eighteenth month of life. How much and in what form it develops will depend upon the demands of the culture in which one lives—represented by particular others one encounters and by some notion of generalized other that one forms" (p. 67). Studies of proximal learning, identity formation, belief, and faith enhance a growing understanding that selfhood and agency are best developed—by many individuals in many different cultures—from within the circles of community and belief, contexts that should never be forcibly removed.

What uses can the academy make of these insights drawn from cross cultural studies of development? The academy has already begun to benefit from an expanded repertoire of models of selfhood, identity, and intellect as it becomes increasingly multicultural. However, an overly literal-minded, reductive panoply of canonical selves and identities—*women*, *Black/African/African American*, *Asian*, or, all lumped together, *nontraditional*—has already produced a fissured politics of identity that is troublingly conducive to a "self-esteem school of pedagogy, a view of education as a sort of twelve-step program for recovery" (Gates, 1992, p. 36). Edward Said (1991) warns against the dangers of reductive essentialism along similar lines. "To say that women should read mainly women's literature, that Blacks should study and perfect only Black techniques of understanding and interpretation, that Arabs and Muslims should return to the Holy Book for all knowledge and wisdom is the inverse of saying along with Carlyle and Gobineau that all the lesser races must retain their inferior status in the world" (p. 17). Newly formed cultural identities that are being shaped within revised academic curricula have been defended primarily on the grounds that they promote belief in oneself, defined as self-esteem. This basis for curricular revision confuses the strong evidence that school achievement is causally related to self esteem with the paucity of evidence that self esteem is related to school achievement. "When Laotian students in California ace their exams it isn't because the curriculum reinforces a rich sense of their Laotian cultural heritage" (Gates, 1992, p. 36). The development of new curricula in writing and literature should be given goals in addition to self-esteem. Multicultural curricular reform needs no further defense, but it begs for orchestration.

## Libretto for a New Canon

Proponents of various writing pedagogies, critical thinking models, and literary critical theories have recently engaged in disputes concerning agency, epistemology, and the nature and value of controversy within the academy (Graff, 1990; Holmes, 1993; Marino, 1993). This is potentially refreshing and illuminating, a reminder that teaching the conflicts, after all, is hardly a new idea. Observing contrasts, differences, and dialectical oppositions has long been a staple of Western academic practice, especially in the liberal arts and philosophy. With this in mind, I invite a reconsideration of how the commonplaces of ancient rhetoric were regarded as artificial but useful common grounds for discussing and debating wildly disparate materials, issues, and beliefs. Reappraising the rhetorical commonplaces of classical rhetoric included, however, not just difference and contrast, but similarity and comparison, not just dialectic understood as opposing propositions, but dialectic understood as dialogical truth seeking. The value of common places—in the larger cultural sense—cannot be underestimated in today's academy. The commonplaces of antiquity can help nurture this belief. They are ancient and were at their inception understood as artificial; they have already proven themselves in the long test of time, amid the constantly shifting cultures and languages of the academy.

Humanistic education has since the time of the first rhetorical commonplaces been based on the belief that learning critical thought through skepticism and debate prepares individuals to prove, perfect, and defend their views and beliefs in an ongoing dialectical examination. John Henry Cardinal Newman's 19th century essay, "The Idea of a University" (1982), extended this concept for one of the first times in modern times to incorporate the reading of modern literatures as part of a larger process of criticism directed at humanistic understanding throughout the university. Newman's discussion is a welcome reminder that humanistic study and education have been considered cultural criticism for well over a century. Criticism should be taught and learned, he proposes, through reading literature as itself a criticism of culture. The canonical literary authors many would dispense with today—Dickens, Eliot, Twain, Thoreau—were in their own time political activists, critics outside the academy of the dominant culture that the academy in their day did not address. Newman and others defended the study of the literature of diverse cultures within the academy as a way of reinstating humanism's role as cultural criticism that would promote values—beliefs about what it is to be human—from within an academy that had become desiccated by other kinds of criticism, science, and philology.

The political and ethical beliefs defended in Newman's "Idea of a University" clearly harken back to his classical training but are adapted to modern goals. For a multicultural (as we say today) society to exist, both differences and commonalities among peoples must be recognized. Education should seek to re-comprehend the diversity of human cultures in order to promote a belief in tolerance and respect. And it should establish as a basic premise—a fundamental intellectual axiom and belief—that tolerance and respect are impossible without knowledge (Gates, 1992, p. 37). Said (1991) defines this double purpose of the academy as a dialectic in which discovery is directed at transformation: "In the

joint discovery of self and other, it is the role of the academy to transform what might be conflict, or contest, or assertion into reconciliation, mutuality, recognition, creative interaction” (pp. 17–18). These are noble, decidedly attractive, familiar, and even pious goals. They are not, however, goals or activities that conform to today’s paradigms of academic skepticism and programmatic doubt. On what basis can reconciliation, mutuality, recognition, and creative interaction be established as common ground in the midst of contemporary literary and epistemological theories that regard common ground and its pursuit as politically outdated and ethically incorrect? The most recent movement in the academy, observed by many with dismay, is a concerted movement, often under the aegis of multiculturalism and teaching the conflicts, toward balkanizing academic disciplines and cultures into smaller and smaller warring factions.

Is there room in the decidedly Western elite civic and academic tradition for both forging and discovering the common beliefs on which goals like mutuality and creative interaction can be pursued? I hope we can begin to ask this question without apology. What does it mean to read with the eyes of faith—in this sense—in the academy, and what can the academy teach the eyes of faith? Liberal arts humanism and a civic-minded academy have often manifested a certain tension between the roles of paragon and gadfly, exemplar and cultural critic, between the aspirations to teach creativity and originality and the responsibility to define standards of taste and correctness (White, 1985). Similarly, the academy and culture alike have tolerated a commendable range of styles and goals among writers, artists, and critics, some of whom define themselves as makers and readers of literary art and others who define themselves as exponents of particular political agendas. I advocate the study and production of literary and critical writing that directly addresses social issues as well as that which does not. However, current practice seems to be a bit more polarized and doctrinaire. Some critical voices teach partisan political commentary; in other quarters critical and theoretical equivocation has led some of the best and brightest critical minds to retreat from commitment to specific positions, and to refrain from morally based action on theoretical grounds. “It is as if someone in a position of power were to issue a policy statement focusing solely on the difficulties of arriving at a policy or to decline doing anything because any action, might, in certain instances, be doctrinaire” (Torgovnick, 1993, p. 54).

Where Marxist cultural critics such as Gerald Graff have erred in confusing the *description* of partisan, reductive, and polarized academic theories with teaching to *theorize* (Phelps, 1992), cautious deconstructionists such as Geoffrey Hartman (1991) err with similar effect by creating a false dichotomy between deconstruction and political or engaged criticism, as if to say that these two very different activities cannot occupy the same academic space. Graff’s (1990) practice exemplifies what Hartman (1991) thinks of as theoretical fundamentalism.

I have proposed that a larger, dialectical relationship can be resuscitated to help redefine such oppositions, a double vision of their nature and value. One less reductive, less polarized alternative resides in the model of the mind as spirit, and of belief as the result of reasoned conviction (Kinneavy, 1987). Belief and faith-sustaining practices of knowing, learning, and teaching provide antidotes to overly psychologized notions of writing and textual interpretation



as inevitably fragmentary, eternally incomplete, merely personal, and exclusively therapeutic. Intellectual practices guided by belief, for example, enhance the ability to comprehend diversity as a unity, just as the quest for difference inevitably succeeds. The most dispassionate analysis, Kierkegaard and for that matter Plato long ago recognized, is in the end always directed by interests and purposes, passions and beliefs. Kierkegaard's deliberately personal forms of philosophizing (Mackey, 1971) were designed to provide instructive, edifying examples of philosophy as comprising multiple genres and fostering tolerance for many varieties of self while still retaining a common language and common goals. One of his titles, *Either/Or*, emphasizes that we choose to believe, in different situations and with different purposes, in the disjunctive *either* or the potentially less divisive conjunction, *or*.

Skepticism, criticism, and debate, regardless of the value that is assigned them by their diverse reformers and adversaries, remain distinctly Western. Definitive of academic discourse, these modes of knowing and speaking evolved from agonistic male-to-male rhetorical traditions within the academy and on the platforms of public political debate (Ong, 1992; Wills, 1990). It is increasingly clear that debate in this *liberal* and *humane* tradition has been sanctioned primarily for and by those in positions of power (Holmes, 1993). Women and minorities have until recently not been permitted to dispute, to debate, or even to speak on the public platform. Oddly enough, through similar rules of enfranchisement, particularly in the U.S. where church and state are so rigorously segregated, religion has often been excluded from public debate and indeed has been cast as the enemy and not as the ally of education, liberal humanism, and the pursuit of knowledge (Carter, 1993; Holmes, 1993; Wills, 1990).

It is a great irony that the denunciation of secular humanism currently propounded by the religious right necessarily appeals to the larger humanist value of open public debate. The irony is only compounded by a doctrinaire denunciation of any and all religion in the public place by academicians who want their doctrines of culture, society, and identity to receive equal time not only in the academy but in the public sphere as well. The conventions—the values and the beliefs—that govern the public presence and power of alternative voices is slowly changing. Let us continue to broaden the bases of tolerance and understanding for the many kinds of voices that are now seeking to sing together, to forge common values out of newly discovered common beliefs, and together make just a few simple leaps of faith. ☺

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