



**LITERATURE
IN THE
UNIVERSITY**

DANIEL GREEN

CONTENTS

Inventing Literature (2)

Performing Literature (10)

Reading Literature (20)

Theorizing Literature (25)

Historicizing Literature (29)

Relinquishing Literature (35)

Reclaiming Literature? (41)

At School (49)

A Period of Transition (62)

The Organized Efforts of the Program (70)

Abandoning the Ruins (75)

Inventing Literature

In his book *In Plato's Cave*, Alvin Kernan describes a career crisis that he no doubt shared with many other literary scholars of his generation:

The canon of great books, authors and their powerful imaginations, the formal perfection of the literary text, and the belief that literature was a central pillar of culture—these foundations of Literature were all crumbling. . . Fine poems and novels were still being written, but somehow they no longer became Literature.

Kernan's lament for what in an earlier book he called "the death of literature" has been echoed often enough over the last decade (most loudly perhaps in John M. Ellis's 1997 book *Literature Lost*), but the elegiac tone of his remarks suggest a resigned rather than a combative attitude toward the passing of the old order of literary study in which men like himself were entrusted with shoring up the "foundations of Literature." *In Plato's Cave* is Kernan's attempt to account for his career in academe, but ultimately he is willing to cede the ground to those, by now a majority, who no longer share his assumptions about the status of literature and the role of literary study.

Now that the battle between the defenders of capital-l literature and the partisans of the iconoclastic styles of scholarship identified with what has come to be called cultural studies does indeed seem to be over, the outcome decidedly in favor of the latter, what seems most striking about comments like those just quoted is the clearly implicit association, as if it didn't need to be stated, between literature broadly conceived as verbal works of art—poems and novels—and the academic study and analysis of literature. All of the features Kernan ascribes to "literature," such as the unique formal elegance of the literary text, are actually the products of academic theories about literature, meant to foster a certain kind of literary criticism and to facilitate classroom instruction. So accustomed are we now to thinking of literature as the subject identified by that name in the curricula of various university departments, primarily the English department, that it is almost impossible to use the term as a way of describing specific works outside of that context. And this, of course, applies as much to the currently trendy styles of criticism and scholarship as

to the old-fashioned kind of literary scholarship practiced by someone like Alvin Kernan. If anything, the champions of cultural studies are even more dependent on the exclusive right claimed by the academy to the brand name Literature—their work would be almost unintelligible without a previous academic literary establishment of which their own work is a needed corrective, and the new scholarship, at least that which seeks to historicize and politicize our notions of the literary, would itself hardly be sustainable if the idea of capital-l literature were simply to be abandoned.

Even though Alvin Kernan and other like-minded literature professors were largely unable to separate an appreciation of imaginative writing from the disciplinary imperatives of academic literary study, they nevertheless generally spoke of the qualities they most admired in works of literature as qualities that inhered in the works themselves, had clearly always been considered the salient characteristics of great literature, not as creations of the very discourse these professors had adopted for their own professional purposes. It is true that the urgently serious, at times even ponderous, approach to the “canon of great books” and much of the critical lexicon of the mid-century academic literary establishment were filtered through the writings of such poet-critics as Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, and John Crowe Ransom, but by far the most significant development in the practice of literary criticism in the twentieth century was the investment of authority over literary matters in the figure of the academic critic, from such celebrated members of the order as Lionel Trilling, Cleanth Brooks, and Northrop Frye to current critics such as Stanley Fish and Helen Vendler, around whom is still draped some vestige of this authority, however ragged it has become. To the company of so eminent and formidable a group of “scholars” as this, no mere literary journalist or, worse, lowly book reviewer need apply: criticism would no longer be in the hands of the ink-stained wretches, namely writers, but would become almost entirely transformed into the job description of a professional class of literary experts.

As someone who once sought admittance to this class, who still considers it at its best to have embodied an attitude toward literature well worthy of respect and to have produced a body of scholarly work both present and future readers should continue to find entirely useful, I do not believe that the assumption of such expertise on the part of literature professors was necessarily self-interested or carried out in bad faith. By and large, the institution of literary study as

administered from roughly the 1930s to the 1980s was dedicated to admirable goals, even if those goals—broadly speaking, to help provide students with a modicum of a liberal education, more specifically, to advance knowledge about the nature and history of literature and provide instruction to those interested in the formal analysis of literary texts—melded uneasily, if at all, with the overall curriculum of the university, which has always reflected American society’s intensely practical philosophy of education. Like any institution, however, it came to regard its established practices as settled and incontestable (how else to go about studying literature?), and when doubting Thomases did indeed begin to speak out from within its own ranks, the response from what came to be regarded as the old guard was at first dismissive, later mostly incredulous, and finally simply enraged.

Kernan’s *The Death of Literature* (1990), comes from the second stage in the academic literary establishment’s response to the new ways of thinking about literature and its place in the academic curriculum. So mystified does he seem in this book by the assault on the literary values that once seemed to need no defense that he really offers none, propounding instead the idea that the era of what he calls “romantic and modernist literature” has simply passed, that literature itself as we have known it for the past 200 years or so has ceased to be relevant. In neither *The Death of Literature* nor *In Plato’s Cave* does Kernan seem able to admit what his analysis and experience clearly show: that Literature is a product of the academic environment in which it has been defined and scrutinized since national literatures became respectable subjects of academic study early in the twentieth century—that professors like himself deserve most of the credit, or the blame, for inventing Literature in the first place.

Thus what drives Alvin Kernan and his generational cohorts crazy is not just that the discipline they helped to build has fallen so easily into the hands of a new breed of scholar who question the integrity of what was built, with furthermore an insufficient appreciation of the ramifications of this development on the part of college administrators or the public at large, but that what may have been their greatest achievement, the creation of a fascinating cultural artifact out of old books, poems, and play scripts has lost so much of its luster as to be no longer recognizable. Because most of them found their way into the discipline out of a genuine belief in the importance of these texts (*In Plato’s Cave* succeeds in affirming this impression), their dismay at witnessing a decline in respect for the great books must be taken as sincere, although it

is tempting to judge their enmity toward the currently dominant forms of scholarship as largely a case of professional resentment. Their failure to understand their own role in summoning Literature into being at all, however, making it almost inevitable that its exalted status would come to be challenged, is less easy to justify.

A succinct statement of the way capital-I literature was constructed as an essentially academic subject is provided in another book, John M. Ellis's *Literature Lost*. Against the "utilitarian" view of education held by many in American society, the professors responded with an alternative, although not incommensurate, view, according to Ellis:

The standard defense of the humanities. . . was that humanistic education provided all kinds of rewards, but the least important [emphasis mine] was the enrichment of our leisure through great literature and the arts. The most weighty arguments were that the humanities enabled us to see ourselves in perspective, to become more enlightened citizens, and to think more deeply about important issues in our lives. A society of people educated not just for a vocation but for full and intelligent participation in a modern democracy would be a far better and happier society—so ran the argument—and this overriding social usefulness of humanistic education compensated for its not leading directly to a means of earning one's living.

It is hard to imagine that many of the writers who actually left us with what Ellis would accept as "great literature" could have used language like this to describe their own sense of what their work was meant to accomplish. (Especially surprising would be the suggestion that the "enrichment of our leisure" should be at the bottom of our list of expectations of poems, plays, or novels.) Not even Matthew Arnold, perhaps the first great literary critic to postulate the existence of capital-I literature in anything like the terms delineated here by Ellis, could really have envisioned a formal course of literary study with ambitions quite like these. The extent to which the notion of "great literature" has been transformed into an entire system of interlocking texts is manifestly clear when Ellis further remarks that "[t]he body of enduring literary and philosophical books of the Western tradition is. . . a remarkable set of fascinating struggles with

problems and issues. Always prominent is the conflict and competition between the ideas and vision of one writer and those of others, and there is often a high degree of self-criticism.”

John Ellis believes that literature has been “lost” because this system is no longer taken for granted. Unlike Alvin Kernan, who ultimately seems mostly wistful about the dismantling of the system that once sustained him, Ellis is one of those compelled to vent his rage over what has happened. All of the usual suspects—multiculturalists, deconstructionists, feminists, Marxists—are brought forth and denounced for their apostasy, their refusal to acknowledge the supreme authority of Literature, and by the end of the book Ellis has in effect declared that with the overthrow of the traditional Western Literature syllabus, civilization itself is nearing its end. While some of his analyses of current scholarly methods and classroom practices are cogent enough (he is right in claiming that what passes now for literary study in many of the elite colleges and universities is little more than crude political posturing), Ellis is even less able than Kernan to imagine works of literature being read and appreciated outside the academic walls he has helped to put up, much less to think of literature as a still vital activity carried on by living fiction writers, poets, and playwrights. That he finally lays the blame for the perceived affront to the dignity of Literature on affirmative action, both in admissions and faculty hiring, only underscores the impression that for literature professors like John M. Ellis, the “body of enduring literary and philosophical books” properly belongs to a select group of academics teaching a similarly select group of compliant students suitably grateful for the honor.

In arguing that those currently in charge of literary study in American universities have banished, killed, or otherwise discredited literature, however, Kernan, Ellis, and company misleadingly suggest the new literary scholarship no longer accepts the academic concept of capital-l literature and its attendant history. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Literature remains a significant category in scholarly publishing, and most of the books published in this category do little to challenge the legitimacy of the underlying idea—especially not those books that explicitly claim to question the “hegemony” of canonical literature. Take, for example, Janice Radway’s *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (1998). Radway presents her study of what might be called the book club aesthetic as an alternative to the conventional kind of literary analysis that emphasizes “intricacy, subtlety,

and complexity.” Radway’s problem with “serious” literature, especially the more formally complex works of modern literature, is their lack of immediate accessibility:

The books that came to me as high culture never seemed to prompt the particular shudder, the frisson I associated with the books of my childhood, because they carried with them not mere promise alone, but also a threat, the threat that somehow I might fail to understand, might fail to recognize their reputed meaning and inherent worth. I developed, as a consequence, an aloof, somewhat puzzled relationship to “Literature” and to the ways of reading required and rewarded in my graduate seminars.

Radway clearly wants us to believe that the sort of book traditionally offered by the Book-of-the-Month Club (the sort that might excite in its reader the “shudder, the frisson”) deserves the same kind of respect as those books associated with “high culture,” but no one reading *A Feeling for Books* could conclude that its author advocates giving up either the class of books she learned to regard as Literature or the modes of analysis the study of such books gave rise to in the academy. For one thing, it is only in opposition to high-brow notions of literature that the competing notion of the middlebrow that informs Radway’s account of the Book-of-the-Month Club can even be formulated.

Paradoxically, those who most want to topple literature from its high culture pedestal are obliged to keep it fixed there in order to extol the equal value of popular or non-canonical forms of writing. Further, Radway’s chosen critical method could not be more immersed in the conventions of the academic style. Indeed, the dense and jargon-choked middle section of *A Feeling for Books* (a laborious examination of her subject’s “ideological position”) seems to presume a reader at least as specialized as any unrepentant formalist, and Radway doesn’t really invalidate qualities such as “intricacy, subtlety, and complexity” as standards by which to appraise some forms of expression. Instead, she simply elevates what seems a question of taste—a preference for poetry and fiction that are more emotionally direct, that provoke the “shudder, the frisson”—to a level of purported theoretical reflection that itself manifests a formidable degree of complexity.

Despite the inability, or unwillingness, of writers like Janice Radway and John Ellis to inquire into their own deep-seated and mutually unexamined assumptions, it is nevertheless certainly true that literature as an academic subject has been radically transformed in most upper-tier colleges and universities, and its survival in something resembling its orthodox form in some lower-rung schools is not likely to save it from eventual obsolescence. As traditionalists like Kernan and Ellis maintain, literature has lost the respect it once enjoyed from those devoted to its study, and it is not likely to regain that respect any time soon. And, as radicals like Radway would have it, capital-l literature has been promulgated with at best an overly reverent solemnity, at worst a kind of smug elitism that made the appearance of *A Feeling for Books* and similar rebellious efforts wholly predictable. However, while I could agree with the radicals that the institution of literary study came to be enveloped in an atmosphere of pretension and self-satisfaction, their current occupation of the grounds has hardly been an improvement.

Only if one accepts that literature and the academy are linked in some necessary and unavoidable way will one also feel that Literature's fall from academic grace is quite the catastrophe the traditionalists make it out to be, however, or that its influence had to be counteracted in the name of other causes one values more highly. Once this link is broken, Literature ceases to be, and the forms of writing that have long been held hostage to it—"fine poems and novels"—would then no longer be subject to any of the agendas academic scholars and critics bring to the discipline-based study of capital-l literature. I am convinced that this would be the best possible outcome of the curricular wars, both for the survival of those older works that once formed the core of the academic canon and for the work of living writers, which has generally either been considered unworthy of attention at all or otherwise made the objects of the most politicized, coarsest forms of analysis. Freed from the pomposities and prejudices of the literature professors, perhaps the books that have been drained of interest to all but those who want to believe in Literature can find the audience they still deserve, and, more importantly, perhaps even small-l literature might continue to be a meaningful term, especially if it were used to describe a continuum of "literary" activity that, if anything, privileged contemporary writers whose work is able to extend and replenish the genres comprising what can truthfully be called an enduring tradition of imaginative writing.

Cutting the ties that have kept literature bound to the academy could in addition have the salutary effect of reviving literary criticism as part of the potential renewal of an authentic literary culture apart from the enervating influence of the academic critics. While some may question whether the United States has ever had, or ever really could have, a literary culture worthy of the designation, certainly the invention of Literature has proved to be at best a synthetic substitute. One could easily conclude from the lively coverage of the literary scene by the multitude of blogs and online book reviews, from the proliferation across the country of book discussion groups, that an interest in small-l literature persists among non-academic readers, that were the remaining superstructure supporting academic Literature to collapse entirely from its own dead weight (which may already be happening), a more finely-tuned, less grandiose kind of literary criticism would soon enough emerge from its ruins. Such criticism might even be practiced by many of the would-be critics who currently regard academe as the only plausible option for anyone who takes literature seriously; professional without being professionalized, this sort of criticism would ideally combine an immediacy of response not often to be found in even the best academic criticism with an ability, developed through simple attentiveness, to contextualize and to read closely, as surely any seriously conceived and executed attempt at literary art deserves.

It is certainly possible, of course, that nothing like what I am describing here will ever come to pass. Capital-l literature will continue, in however debased and beleaguered a form, as the self-claimed domain of academic “experts,” and non-academic criticism will remain a scattershot affair, confined to routine book reviews in the usual periodicals, at best to the websites and journals most committed to the informed discussion of new writing. It is even possible that what we now call literature will simply vanish into the virtual ether of cyberspace, recognized only as an artifact of intellectual history, if at all.

Such a fate seems to me almost inevitable, in fact, if those who retain an interest in the possibilities of literature (small-l) hold on to the assumption that the responsibility for ensuring its survival lies with the academy. The folly of this assumption cannot now be more apparent. Fine poems and novels are still being written, and we can only hope they never become Literature.

Performing Literature

Although Elaine Showalter's *Teaching Literature* is clearly intended to be read primarily by graduate students or instructors just beginning their teaching careers, one can also read the book, against the grain of the author's own rhetorical goals, perhaps, as a guide for the academic outlander to the curious practices of that disciplinary subculture responsible for what still passes as literary study. Those who retain an image of the English professor as a high-minded if pedantic guardian of the treasures of Literature will find provided here what amounts to the finishing touches on the recast image the profession has been working on for over 30 years. Just as high-minded but in a more earnest, socially-conscious way, even more firmly attached to scholastic attitudes and the conventions of academic discourse, the self-appointed curators of this recast image have nevertheless worked very hard to dissociate literary study from its former aspirations to establish works of literature as a kind of secular scripture, an authoritative source of time-tested wisdom and a superior sensibility. Unfortunately, in the process they also have succeeded, as Showalter's book finally demonstrates, in dissociating it from literature as well.

The story of how "literature itself" came to be the focus of study in the English departments of American universities has been admirably told in Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature*. Over the course of the 20th century the role of literature in academic study was transformed from being a source of philological analysis to being a "subject" in its own right, a source of distinctive knowledge to be pursued for its own value. But as Graff's account shows, this change in status took place amidst great disagreement over ultimate purposes, even among those proposing it, and in many ways the metamorphosis was never really completed, as no real accord was ever reached about how the literature curriculum ought to be organized, how best to teach it, or even finally how to define "literature" in such a way that its disciplinary principles could be well understood and its boundaries well identified. As a result, American literary study has been characterized mostly by its instability, as one new wave of revolutionary thinking about the way it ought to be done has followed upon another, the only certainty being that the approach you now believe to be truly conclusive ten years from now will be moribund.

It has happened to the New Humanism, Marxism, the New Criticism, the Chicago School, Myth Criticism, Reader-Response Theory, Structuralism, Deconstruction, New Historicism (as happened also to the Old Historicism), multiculturalism in each of its variants, to the ideas of Freud, Sartre, Foucault, Bakhtin, Eco, Eagleton, Lacan, Jameson, Bloom, Fanon, Tompkins, Sedgwick, Said, Gilbert and Gubar, hooks, Burke, Auerbach, Kermode, de Man, Hartman, and Lentricchia. Not all of these movements, critics, and theories have been discredited or entirely discarded, of course, but none of the systems or elaborate critical structures erected in their names could still plausibly be considered the definitive method of literary study and criticism, the one method making all others, past and future, superfluous. To the extent that academic literary study has come to be perceived by the public, as well as by other academics, as frivolous, intellectually capricious at best, it is a consequence of this instability of approach built in at the very origins of the discipline's historical identity, rather than any of the specific excesses that have been attributed to current practices and particular scholars.

The present lack of obvious purpose in the English department, more pronounced than during the height of the "culture wars" of the 1980s and 1990s but no less a sign of the disorder inherent in the discipline from the start, is fully reflected in Showalter's attempt in *Teaching Literature* to survey all of the options available to the college literature instructor. Ironically enough, Showalter's obvious, even admirable, effort to include references to numerous possible approaches to the teaching of literature, and thus not to "privilege" any one approach in particular, only reveals more plainly the degree to which the organized study of literature in American universities finally neither involves nor requires any particular regard for literature at all, not even the sort of unstated "resentment" Harold Bloom ascribes to the contemporary literary academy. The clear implication of Showalter's account of what teaching literature is good for, in fact, is that if the whole endeavor is good for anyone, it is the teacher him/herself, whose well-being and sense of professional accomplishment are the incessant focus of *Teaching Literature*.

The book's concern to raise the level of the college English instructor's self-esteem is sounded in its very first chapter, "The Anxiety of Teaching," in which Showalter anatomizes the various causes of such anxiety and explicitly offers her succeeding chapters as the sort of informed advice that can alleviate them if sincerely considered. Some of her advice is perfectly

sound, to be sure—as is the more general contention that teaching induces its own distinctive kinds of anxieties—and that which touches on such unavoidable, perhaps more quotidian issues of class preparation and grading could of course be useful to those readers unable to acquire such information through more immediate means. Showalter is entirely correct in maintaining that much of the ordinary work of college teaching is systematically ignored in English graduate study, and is not much discussed by a younger instructor’s potential mentors among the faculty either, and thus any pedagogical guide that addresses this problem is undoubtedly to be welcomed. But this worthy intention is altogether undercut in a book that otherwise encourages its readers to view literature as essentially an adjunct to the act of teaching itself, as the platform from which the literature professor performs the salutary (and self-assigned) service only he/she (for reasons however vague and indefinite) is able to render.

“Performance,” as a matter of fact, is an important concept in *Teaching Literature*, as it would almost have to be in a depiction of the work of the literature professor that emphasizes so minimally an appreciation of the intrinsic merits of the subject purportedly being professed. Performance doesn’t necessarily involve simply the theatricality with which the professor chooses to present works of literature (Showalter explicitly disdains what she identifies as “teacher-centered” methods of instruction), but extends as well to the transformation of the classroom, indeed, of the literature course itself, into a kind of performance art whereby literature becomes the inspiration for the instructor’s own ingenuity in attracting students’ interest, but otherwise fades into the background as the more pressing requirements of the classroom drama necessarily take precedence. For example, Showalter describes her own method of imposing suitable order and form on courses in the novel, by which she gives such courses their own narrative structure, complete with “Beginnings,” “Middles,” and “Endings.” Further:

In my fiction classes, I try to incorporate elements of narrative into the teaching process, and also make students aware of how these elements operate to define experience as a story. I compare lecturing to narration in the novel, demonstrate ways to vary and violate it, and encourage students to think of how it might be done. (Once to show how you could rupture or break the narrative frame of the classroom, I had a graduate student interrupt the lecture by loudly announcing he had a pizza to deliver to a student. Readers will recognize the homage to *Fast Times at Ridgmont High*. But every

semester provides its own spontaneous frame-breakers, from a squirrel running around the auditorium to fire drills to students streaking.)

Something like this mirroring device seems to be what Showalter has in mind when claiming that “the most effective members of our profession are those whose literary theory is consistent with their teaching theory and practice.” In other words, one’s “theory” of the significance literature bears ought not merely to inform one’s scholarly work, or the choice of text to assign and study in the classroom (both of which already go a long way toward creating a distinct context in which the ultimate significance of literature is to be understood), but also ought to provide the mold into which one’s very classroom practice is to be poured. At first this highly artificial approach seems somewhat at variance with Showalter’s further statement in the same discussion of “Personae: The Teaching Self” that “although a persona can protect you against the intimacy and threat of self-revelation in the classroom, it can also prevent you from achieving the real exchange of ideas that makes teaching memorable” as well as from revealing the literature instructor’s “true self.” But finally these seemingly contradictory impulses—toward pedagogical contrivance and toward authentic self-expression—are bound together, part of the same goal of using the literature classroom for what *Teaching Literature* really affirms as the most compelling rationale for the activity named in its title: the valorization of the good intentions of the literature professor, provided the appropriate assurances of concern for the welfare of students can be made with credible conviction at the same time.

To those who believe that the tarnishing of the image of literary study is due mainly to the hyperpoliticization of literary scholarship over the past 15 years, I would argue instead that literature’s observable loss of luster comes as much from this more general evolution of literary study into the vehicle for the professor’s own self-aggrandizement, the current dominance of politically-minded scholarship being its most prominent manifestation for now. What the future developments of this tendency might bring about is anybody’s guess, but in my view that it certainly will mutate into some other method of the moment is beyond question. Whether the study of literature for its own sake, free of the enshrouding accumulations of which the self-projection advocated in Showalter’s book is only the most recent, will find its way back to the curriculum of the English department—or any other academic discipline that might arise in wake of its ultimate demise due to its lack of utility to the corporate university—is equally open to

speculation, but if the history of literary study over the past century is any kind of reliable touchstone, such a renewal of purpose could only prove temporary.

Ultimately *Teaching Literature* inadvertently demonstrates that literature functions poorly as a subject of academic inquiry, not because it lends itself to no plausible method of focusing this sort of inquiry but because it lends itself to so many possible methods. That works of literature themselves invite readings that find their own particular centers of interpretive gravity, angles of approach that are almost infinitely variable and determined by the individual reader's own presumptions, is so obviously true that it seems in retrospect somewhat peculiar that such an unavoidable consequence of academic literary study would have been ignored by those who persevered in the struggle to install literary study as a recognized academic discipline. Alongside so many other disciplines with true discipline—that have a single center of gravity, or at the very least do not encourage a proliferation of interpretation for its own sake—literary study was always fated to appear to circle around its purported subject without ever conveying the impression that its essential work helped to get us closer to an informed understanding of the subject—or even that it has anything that could be called essential work to do. Even the initial dispensation prevailing in literary study, whereby works of literature were considered primarily for their claims to possessing literary qualities (judged to be good things to have) and the ultimate justification of which was to clarify our ideas about the very category of the literary, produced “knowledge” of frankly dubious value all too easily dismissed by an academy that esteems instead processes more objective and results more exact than literary critics—even when transformed into “scholars”—are generally able to provide.

Literary scholars have not failed at conforming to this model through want of trying, however. Various attempts to make literary study and scholarship more “scientific,” either in spirit or in fact, have been made, from the more doctrinaire applications of New Criticism to the virtual conversion of literary scholarship into a branch of social science found in the move to cultural studies to the data mining that characterizes “digital humanities.” And while on the one hand this is just the predictable consequence of trying to bring academic “rigor” to the study of literature, on the other the more extreme of these approaches (including the extreme laissez-faire approach encouraged by Elaine Showalter) manifests an obvious lack of enthusiasm for the inherent and more immediate benefits that works of literature have to offer, benefits that

presumably draw most readers to them to begin with—namely aesthetic delight, the pleasures of a compelling reading experience, particularly those pleasures that can be the result of meeting the challenges posed by complex or innovative works, of actually expanding one’s capacity to enjoy satisfying reading experiences. It is precisely that imaginative writing that does elicit this kind of response most readers would identify as “literature,” and such a pragmatic definition of the term is probably as useful a way to distinguish what these imaginative works have in common as can be devised.

This may seem markedly similar to the definition Showalter endorses, literature as “what gets taught.” But actually it here I am in the starkest disagreement with Showalter’s own theory. It is a measure of how far the assimilation of literature to the academy has gone—some might say how thoroughly trivialized it has become—that apparently for many people it is unexceptional to so readily conflate works of literature (what gets read) with their place in the classroom, their potential for being taught. Furthermore, while this close association of the literary and the academic might seem to lead to a perception of literary study as largely an elite activity (as at an earlier period it probably was so perceived), Showalter explicitly renounces elitism by welcoming to the literature syllabus any fiction, poetry, or drama, “whether by Wordsworth or Maya Angelou. . .Jane Austen or Stephen King. . .” (She also approves of film, television, and other “cultural materials,” although considers their use to be separate from “teaching literature” proper.) Ultimately, Showalter’s come one, come all attitude to determining the borders of literary study only confirms the effective purgation of all meaning from the very concept of literature among the current coterie of literature scholars and teachers.

Yet I for one finally cannot muster any great enthusiasm for the idea of reclaiming literary study on behalf of something similar to the more focused, literature-centric conception I have myself advanced. To believe that works of literature are valuable first and foremost for those qualities that sharpen the individual reader’s critical faculties and enhance that reader’s aesthetic sensibilities is not to conclude that these are values that can easily be conveyed through formal classroom study. In fact, to believe that what literature is good for is to provoke this kind of encounter between one reader and the latent if still unexplored possibilities of the imagination and of human language, a fundamentally subjective and personal achievement on the reader’s part, is probably to conclude that the study of literature in a classroom setting can only be a

distraction from fostering such an encounter. Indeed, the perhaps inevitable result of bringing literature to the classroom at all is exactly the indulgent, aimless fragmentation depicted in *Teaching Literature*.

The best way out of the dilemma paradoxically created by academic critics hoping to elevate the status of literature in American culture would be for a new generation of literary critics to bypass the academy altogether and seek out some fresh and more reliable direction by which to guide readers to their own recognition of literature's abiding merits, which as ought surely to be evident by now, most productively occurs only outside the college classroom.

In many ways, "In the Penthouse of the Ivory Tower," Gideon Lewis-Kraus's essay in the July 2004 issue of *The Believer*, is just the latest rehearsal of what is by now a very tired journalistic routine: Go to the MLA convention and report on how absurd and silly most English professors are. (I've been reading versions of this exercise since at least 1985.) In this case, the author is able to cover the convention at somewhat greater length than usual, and he seems somewhat more interested and informed than most garden-variety journalists who have performed the routine in the past. He even tries to dredge up a little sympathy for the out-of-touch professors, although by the end of the piece this effort has mostly come to naught. However, the final verdict is expected enough: "So as much as I want to grab the panelists by their modish lapels and shake them and demand to know exactly what the hell they're talking about, it is not my right to do so, for I am not there by invitation, I am not a member of their community, and I have no right to expect that their words should mean anything to me. I still think their tortured, overwrought sentences are for the most part patently absurd. . . ."

It's not that I don't think that most sentences read aloud at MLA conventions--I've attended many--are "for the most part patently absurd." They are indeed. It's just that, like most of his predecessors in the laugh-at-the-professors genre, Lewis-Kraus doesn't really seem to comprehend just why they're so absurd, so overinflated, so utterly irrelevant. He thinks it's just a failure to speak in fathomable language, an unthinking capitulation to the professionalization of academic discourse. He thinks English professors are finally too insular. But that is not the

problem, that is not it at all. English professors no longer have a subject. They are literally speaking and writing about nothing.

Almost immediately upon listening to the first group of speakers at the 2003 convention, Lewis-Kraus is struck by the degree to which these people are asking, implicitly and explicitly, what it is that an English professor is supposed to be doing: "what is an English professor for?" It wasn't that long ago that such a question had a relatively straightforward answer. English professors taught literature, helped to keep the tradition of serious literary writing alive, introduced students and others to this tradition through the classroom and what was called "scholarship" about literature. In the very broadest sense, English professors were the caretakers in charge of maintaining some historical perspective on the language itself, studying literature as the greatest expression of the possibilities of this language. No professor of English today could claim these endeavors as the justification for English as an academic discipline. English professors have now dedicated themselves to the task of "interrogating" the literary tradition, as if it were an intellectual infection whose toxic elements have to be identified. And the only interest in the language most of them show is in injecting it as often as possible with rhetorical formaldehyde.

Lewis-Kraus writes of the papers he hears delivered at one session that they "are so bizarre and freakish and sodden with jargon as to make them utterly incomprehensible." I don't doubt that this was the case, but unfortunately he is unable to give us much in the way of quoted illustration of this kind of discourse. However, in looking at the most recent issue of *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (a publication to which I still subscribe and have myself contributed), one quickly comes upon a passage like this, from an essay on Richard Powers's *The Gold Bug Variations*: "Across the various epistemic systems of encyclopedic information, diachronic narrative processes self-organize reactions and catalyze reciprocal, feedback relations across the textual network. The structure of the system evolves as the product of co-evolution between system and environment, involving a multidirectional collection of linear and nonlinear processes." This is incomprehensible enough, even, as far as I can tell, meaningless, but it's not really the jargon that makes it so. For comparison, here is the beginning of the second paragraph of Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis*, one of the greatest works of literary criticism ever written. He is describing a scene in the *Odyssey*:

All this is scrupulously externalized and narrated in leisurely fashion. The two women express their feelings in copious direct discourse. Feelings though they are, with only a slight admixture of the most general considerations upon human destiny, the syntactical connection between part and part is perfectly clear, no contour is blurred.

Later in the same paragraph:

The separate elements of a phenomenon are most clearly placed in relation to one another; a large number of conjunctions, adverbs, particles, and other syntactical tools, all clearly circumscribed and delicately differentiated in meaning, delimit persons, things, and portions of incidents in respect to one another, and at the same time bring them together in a continuous and ever flexible connection; like the separate phenomena themselves, their relationships--their temporal, local, causal, final, consecutive, comparative, concessive, antithetical, and conditional limitations--are brought to light in perfect fullness; so that a continuous rhythmic procession of phenomena passes by, and never is there a form left fragmentary or half-illuminated, never a lacuna, never a gap, never a glimpse of unplumbed depths.

I'm pretty certain that most students, as well as most other readers unpracticed in literary criticism, would find the *Mimesis* passages almost as incomprehensible as the previously quoted passage about "epistemic systems" or as the scholarly papers Lewis-Kraus sat through. The difference is not that one uses jargon and the other doesn't. (Keeping in mind that *Mimesis* is a translation.) Both use jargon of one kind or another. Any kind of considered literary criticism is almost by necessity going to be caught using language that offends general-interest sensibilities. The real difference is that Auerbach is attempting to explicate the text in front of him, to help the reader "see" more fully what is really going on in the scene from the *Odyssey*. He has to use terms ("direct discourse") one wouldn't think of while reading the scene for the first time. The discussion of *The Gold Bug Variations*, on the other hand, has itself translated the novel into something else, an excuse to use abstraction and scientific-sounding argot and to discuss a subject the critic has invented. It has nothing to do with the novel it otherwise pretends to analyze.

Which is why Lewis-Kraus is on firmer ground when he comments that the kind of "scholarship" to which he is being exposed exhibits "a truly virtuosic incomprehensibility that makes sense only as a kind of poetic performance." It's not even that these scholars are communicating only with one another. They're not trying to communicate. It's all self-display and an allegiance to external agendas of the scholar's own choosing, agendas themselves important only to the extent that the professor in question can give it his/her own scholarly spin

In a response to Lewis-Kraus's essay, Sharleen Mondal makes a valiant effort to defend the contemporary literary scholar: "Literary scholars already hold themselves to a very strict standard when it comes to the validity of arguments—we are supposed to contextualize everything to the nth degree, historicize our analyses, enter the academic conversation, offer 'evidence' through the use of quotations and page references, are supposed to be clear about what we are contributing to existing work on the topic, show which theorists we are using to construct the basis for our argument, etc. If a reader is willing to do what it takes to become acquainted with all these processes, then I am perfectly happy to consider criticism. But my sense is that the reason why our work is often inaccessible to people outside our field is that most people . . . simply aren't interested—the immediate and personal experience of reading is enough."

Mondal is living in another academic age. None of the things she describes are any longer important, except when a "senior scholar" wants to have an excuse for denying a junior colleague tenure. All of them presuppose an existing interest in literature and in advocating on behalf of literature, but the literary academy as a whole can no longer summon up such interest. Lewis-Kraus's essay makes this patently obvious. There's scarcely a mention of literature in it except as "what you teach to your students" for the professors on hand at the convention. The fact of the matter is that not even most English professors care much about the "work" being done by those who have inherited the space inside the ivy-covered halls. Charles Bertsch, a professor who accompanies Lewis-Kraus to the convention, practically admits he has more interest in PAC-10 basketball. Literature is passe, and it's hard to muster up much enthusiasm for a fragmented curriculum that mostly rewards self-obsession.

In my opinion, it's this self-obsession that Lewis-Kraus mistakes "for a faint tremor of heroism in the air" as he sums up his experience of the MLA convention.

Reading Literature

On the one hand, Rohan Maitzen's comments about the nature of "academic criticism" seem to me unimpeachably correct:

. . .aesthetic judgment is not currently seen as a central (maybe even an appropriate) aim of academic criticism. We are too aware of the shifting nature of such judgments, for one thing, and of the many reasons besides aesthetic ones for finding a text worth studying. If asked whether a book is good, an academic is likely to reply 'good at what?' or 'good in relation to what?' or 'good for what?' It may be that this insistence on refining the question, or examining its implicit assumptions, is part of what makes academic criticism less appealing to the 'average intelligent reader,' if what they are after is actually a recommendation. . . . (*Novel Readings*)

On the other, that "aesthetic judgment is not currently seen as a central (maybe even an appropriate) aim of academic criticism" is probably the ultimate reason why "academic criticism" as specifically an act of *literary* criticism is not likely to survive much longer.

The only period in the history of academic criticism (which runs roughly from the 1920s to the present) in which "aesthetic judgment" was seen as the "central" goal of criticism was really the period dominated by New Criticism, which was in turn the critical method that solidified academic criticism's place in academe's disciplinary structure. Before the rise of New Criticism, those who opposed converting English departments from philology (the study of the etymology of words) to literary study proper (the study of texts as texts) did so precisely because something as nebulous as "aesthetic judgment"—or "appreciation"—was not considered an appropriate focus of academic inquiry. New Criticism provided a plausible method of quasi-rigorous scrutiny of texts that finally satisfied most criteria of what constitutes a properly "academic" field of study.

Yet even New Criticism did not really rest on "aesthetic judgment" as its foundation. New Criticism's strategy of "close reading" was not primarily used to make judgments about the objects of its scrutiny, to declare some texts "good" and others not. The New Critics generally

assumed the value of the works they examined (in fact mostly poems), although in some cases their readings did seek to demonstrate to perhaps skeptical readers that the work at hand possessed the requisite degree of "complexity" that New Criticism most fundamentally valued. (And in some instances, such as Cleanth Brooks's reading of Wordsworth's Intimations Ode, they also attempted to show that even works less generally esteemed according to New Critical standards could still be worthy of serious attention.) But the New Critics would never have conceded to the notion of "the shifting nature" of value judgments. The point of New Criticism was to establish that it was the critical method applying authentic "literary" criteria to the reading of literary texts. Some readers might find value in such texts for extrinsic reasons—political, historical, cultural—but for the New Critics, readers assessing them through the rigors of close reading would hardly come to the kind of relativistic conclusions Rohan Maitzen's comment entails.

Still, as the New Critics implicitly recognized, it's difficult to justify the study of literature as part of an academic curriculum if the primary purpose is to arrive at "value judgments." Something more tangible than "appreciation" has to be the fruit of literary study or it does indeed become such a "soft" discipline that few serious-minded students will want to pursue it and even fewer scholars from other disciplines will consider it a respectable practice. However, the very fact that New Criticism was able to establish itself as a suitable "approach" to the study of literature ultimately became the seed of its own undoing. If appreciation is not the only possible goal of literary study, then neither is form-oriented close reading. "Refining the question," or even changing it altogether, is not only possible but, given the academic imperative to create "new" knowledge, almost inevitable. More than anything else, I would say, this changing of the critical guard, the cycling through of formalism, structuralism, post-structuralism, historicism, cultural studies, is what makes academic criticism "less appealing" to non-academic readers. It is a disciplinary debate between academics the ramifications of which are of importance only to academics.

However, I also think it's a little unfair to say that the "average intelligent reader" is interested merely in a "recommendation." This only reinforces the divide between "criticism," which is perforce practiced primarily in the academy, and reviewing, the goal of which is presumably to provide a recommendation. It is the existence of this divide, whereby the academy is considered to be the place where genuine literary criticism is practiced, while general interest

book discussion involves. . . something else, that has helped to make academic criticism seem so insular, so reluctant to make itself intelligible to "ordinary" readers (no relevant recognition from other "experts" will ensue) and that has made what passes for general interest criticism so pallid and formulaic. (Although certainly academic criticism follows its own kind of formulas as well.) What both contemporary literature and literary criticism need is not for academic critics to become more "accessible" but for literary magazines and journals to publish more non-academic criticism that goes beyond book chat and conventional journalistic reviews but that also avoids the navel-gazing "refinements" of academic criticism.

And even though there are "many reasons besides aesthetic ones for finding a text worth studying," I further believe that most readers of poetry and fiction are drawn to them for the aesthetic reasons first of all. Some may later on take an interest in all those other things a text is "good for," but in my opinion most habitual readers of literary works want most immediately to have a fulfilling reading experience and, to the extent that criticism is pertinent to this goal, to use literary criticism as a way of enlarging and enhancing this experience. Thus, if "many non-academic readers would in fact like to think in more careful ways about their reading," as Maitzen also acknowledges, and if that's "where academic expertise presented in an accessible manner comes in," then the kind of "expertise" such readers might find helpful would be an ability to describe the aesthetic strategies and effects at work in a text, based ultimately on the ability to pay careful and focused attention to the text, in effect to let it reveal its own aesthetic nature. A knowledge of literary history and of the ways in which all poetry and fiction is finally implicated in that history could also be valuable, as long as that knowledge is put in the service of illuminating the work at hand, not of demonstrating the critic's own superior powers of discernment.

Suffice it to say that academic criticism has long abandoned this modest though still worthwhile mission. It has almost abandoned literature itself, except where it can still be used to illustrate the critic's particular theoretical construct or cultural diagnosis. Pretty clearly, "literary criticism" as practiced in the academy has shifted its emphasis to an analytical perspective more like philosophy for some, more like sociology for others. Since most "non-academic" readers read works of literature for their literary qualities (which, although they can't be defined precisely, at least not to everyone's satisfaction, are still readily enough apparent to those who are looking for them) and not as opportunities to do philosophy or study social patterns, academic

criticism isn't going to become more accessible to these readers, only less so. The real question becomes whether a new kind of literary criticism will arise, one less concerned with being "rewarded professionally" by the academy and more concerned with the elucidation of literature, less concerned with providing consumer guidance (buy this, don't buy that) and more concerned with assisting the consumers of fiction or poetry to guide themselves.

In an essay at *The New Yorker* (June 6, 2011), Louis Menand recounts an episode from early in his career as a professor in which a student asked him, "Why did we have to buy this book?" Continuing in the student's mercantile language, Menand avers that the student was "asking me to justify the return on investment in a college education. I just had never been called upon to think about this before. It wasn't part of my training. We took the value of the business we were in for granted."

Menand proposes three possible answers to the student's question. The first simply asserts that "you're in college, and these are the kinds of books that people in college read." The second assures the student "You're reading these books because they teach you things about the world and yourself that, if you do not learn them in college, you are unlikely to learn anywhere else." The most baldly utilitarian response has it that "advanced economies demand specialized knowledge and skills, and, since high school is aimed at the general learner, college is where people can be taught what they need in order to enter a vocation."

The third answer is the one now implicitly given by the school as part of the state apparatus, and Menand expresses the usual dismay at the pass to which we have come when this is the primary justification for reading books in college (although he does also acknowledge that the situation isn't likely to change). However, I can't see that the other two answers are any better. The first would be true if this were 1935 and all college students were undergraduates at Yale, but it hardly describes the situation in 2011. The second, which is Menand's own preferred answer, spells out perhaps the underlying justification for answer one, but if college students are no longer interested in learning "things about the world and yourself" in return for their "investment" in college (which in my experience they indeed are not, to the extent they ever were), this answer is no more compelling than the first.

The problem with all three answers, ultimately, is that they tie the value of reading a book (I'm assuming Menand has in mind primarily works of literature, since he's an English professor) to its potential value to the institution of college, to the school (most charitably, to the goals of "education"). In my opinion, a better answer would be something like this: "You should read that book because it's a significant book of its kind, one that anyone studying _____ needs to read." In my opinion, a literature professor's first allegiance is to literature, or to the period/genre/national literature the course covers, and as long as the college where the professor is employed requires or encourages its students to take courses in literature, this answer should suffice. All questions concerning the place of literature in a college curriculum need to be answered by administrators or campus committees, not by the individual professor otherwise just doing his/her job.

Perhaps the time has come to reconsider the literature requirement, however. Most of the justifications that need to be made of reading assignments occur in courses in which the majority of students would not be there if taking such a course were not a degree requirement in "general education." Although generally speaking I think it a good idea for as many people as possible to read as many worthwhile books as possible, I'm pretty sure that materializing this broad aspiration into specific college course requirements has not worked out that well. It has especially not worked out well for literature. Courses in "Introduction to Literature" or "American Literature, Beginnings to the Present" are hopelessly incapable of fulfilling the aspiration, at best providing some students with some "information" about the subject they might later be able to recall, at worst making most students resentful of being compelled to take the course and less likely to follow up on the assigned reading with voluntary reading of their own. Given the career and personal goals of most of the students who take such courses, there really isn't a good answer for them to the question posed by Menand's student. Frankly, I don't see why these students should have to buy the books to take this sort of course, and I don't really want to teach them.

Students who take literature courses voluntarily, or choose to major in English, Comparative Literature, etc., are implicitly agreeing to accept the instructor's judgment about what books are appropriate for them to read. They would have cause for complaint only if it were determined the instructor's judgment is demonstrably faulty or if the instructor is a demonstrably

bad teacher of the subject. An instructor (not just in literature) should be asked to know his/her subject well and to present it with integrity. He/she should not be asked to justify the entire project of higher education as it currently stands.

Of course, a great deal of instruction in "literature," particularly in the bigger universities and more prestigious liberal arts colleges (as opposed to, say, community colleges and many "regional" universities) is no longer instruction in literature. Literature is instead used to indeed "teach you things about the world" through cultural studies or to improve "thinking" through critical theory. Perhaps this development over the past twenty-five years or so has managed to keep what are still labeled as literature courses in the curriculum, but soon enough the question "why did we have to buy this book?" will be a question about some theorist's magnum opus, not Melville. At that point, the utilitarian answer may actually be the most truthful one.

Theorizing Literature

Peter Berkowitz's review of *Theory's Empire* in the Hoover Institution's *Policy Review* (Feb 2006) is mostly the usual sort of argument made against Theory by conservatives (cultural and political): Theory is just a cover for various kinds of leftist political crusades, it represents an attack on the inherited principles of the Enlightenment, etc. If people like Berkowitz really do want to reform academic literary study to make it more literature-friendly, as he insists he does, they're going to have to come up with a new set of arguments about what's gone wrong beyond these overblown denunciations. I am myself sympathetic to the notion that literary study has become literature-unfriendly, as many of the essays here clearly attest, but if I also find Berkowitz's kind of analysis shrill and reductive, who, exactly, is he hoping to convince? Certainly not literary scholars who might be in a position to alter the discipline's focus from the inside, who understand that blanket condemnation of Theory and the ritual invocation of Derrida as deconstructive demon aren't very helpful since they can't be taken seriously.

Berkowitz's critique of academic literary study cannot stand because it rests on flimsy foundations:

In these circumstances, it would be advantageous if our universities provided a haven from the forces so inimical to the love of literature. To do this, they need only live up to their official mission, which includes safeguarding knowledge of the cultural and intellectual treasures of the past, transmitting an appreciation of them to today's students, and, at the same time, equipping students to challenge authoritative interpretations and think for themselves. Unfortunately, the teaching of literature at our universities today routinely makes matters worse, burying knowledge of the classics, deadening students' literary sensibilities, and demanding students' assent to a partisan, dogmatic, and incoherent system of beliefs.

The "original mission" of literary study, at least in the United States, was not to safeguard literary treasures or to provoke students into an "appreciation" of literature. While a certain kind of traditionalist undoubtedly has often resorted to this kind of talk when defending the existence of a self-contained literary curriculum, as Gerald Graff demonstrates in *Professing Literature*, the argument that ultimately carried the day in getting "literature" accepted into the broader university curriculum in the first place was made on behalf of "criticism" rather than literature per se. Appealing to the American need to find utility and definable results in all endeavors, this viewpoint stressed (at least nominally) the quantitative possibilities of the sustained study of literature: "Knowledge" could be produced, and our understanding of literature as whole could be suitably "advanced." (In this way the American academy operates in a manner closer to the German, rather than the English, model of the university.) No appeal to timeless values could have secured literature its place in the university at a time when reading works of literature was considered a fine way to pass one's time but hardly something to do in a college classroom.

"Equipping students to challenge authoritative interpretations and think for themselves" is closer to the actual goal of literary study as it was envisioned by its original advocates, but it's hard to see how this can be accomplished without formulating critical methods—theories about criticism—that can be practiced in the classroom and illustrated in disciplinary journals. New Criticism was such a method, and although it presumably comes closer to satisfying the expectations of bystanders like Berkowitz, given the academic imperative to advance the field, it was well-nigh inevitable that it would eventually be supplanted by other methods that might or might not begin with the assumption that the disciplinary subject—literature—is a timeless

canon of great works whose ultimate value must simply go unquestioned. Those who would argue that such an assumption is finally incompatible with academic inquiry, even “distinterested” inquiry of a kind Peter Berkowitz might want to endorse but which “postmodernists” perhaps would not, are probably right.

In his conclusion, Berkowitz claims that “literature taught for its own sake serves a vital public interest in a liberal democracy. In our busy and distracted age, this may be even more true. Literature transports students to other times and places. It acquaints them with people and immerses them in circumstances remote from their own lives. It brings to life the variety of ways of being human. And it exhibits the common humanity in the glorious variety. In short, the study of literature for its own sake helps prepare citizens for the challenges of freedom.” Even Berkowitz seems to concede that literary study cannot be designed simply to inculcate “a love of literature.” It must be related to “a vital public interest” and help produce good citizens. I don’t necessarily dispute that literature can do the things Berkowitz lists here (although I don’t know that it is more important to the citizens of liberal democracies than to anyone else), but I don’t really see why reading it and thus benefitting from it in these ways has to be done primarily on a university campus. And to teach it in the way Berkowitz prescribes would indeed require a Theory about its nature at least as tendentious as any of those he disdains as “partisan” and “dogmatic.”

In the *Times Literary Supplement*, Peter Brooks (author of *Reading for the Plot*) recently wrote of the conquest of academic literary study by “theory” that “the coming of theory actually rescued the study of literature at a time when it was threatened with sclerosis and irrelevance. In particular, it brought students back to literary studies with a sense that there was something exciting going on.”

There are several things wrong with this contention, although I do not myself believe that “theory” of the kind Brooks discusses (he is reviewing a book centered mostly on figures like Foucault and Derrida, the “poststructuralists”) was itself necessarily a bad thing for literary study. Much of Derrida’s work, for example, is perfectly compatible with the kind of “old-fashioned” literary study focused on the close reading of literature for what it as literature has to

offer us, and he could not have been happy when the notion of "deconstruction" eventually became, among some alleged "followers," essentially a synonym for trashing the place.

But I do have problems with idea that the study of literature needed to be "rescued," and I do not believe that the coming of theory "brought students back," since they hadn't gone anywhere in the first place and since every account I have read about the level of student interest in English or Comparative Literature or Romance Languages suggests that enrollment in such departments has only declined since the advent of theory. If Brooks has the graduate study of literature in mind, then bringing students into a field where finding a job upon completing one's study, no matter how "exciting" it may have been, has now become difficult approaching impossible performs a service for no one.

More to the point: literary study may or may not have become "sclerotic" pre-theory, but so what? If this means that literature professors were just teaching students how to approach works of literature—defined sclerotically as poetry, fiction, and drama—so they might read them more profitably, and were trying to point them to the kinds of novels or poems that might be worth their attention, then they were doing their jobs as efficiently as it could be done. Unless you think that studying literature in this way just isn't peppy and glowing enough and requires a dose of "excitement" in order to show it off in meetings with the Dean. But this is just another step in the process of making "literature itself" secondary to other more suitably "advanced" methods of academic inquiry, methods that have now become themselves the subjects of academic literary study, leaving literature far behind.

This yoking of literature to other purposes and other causes is equally typical of more traditional humanists who wouldn't otherwise countenance notions about the "subversive" quality of critical inquiry. In an essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 4, 2004), Vartan Gregorian pleads for a return of liberal arts instruction to higher education. In many ways, this essay is just the usual blather one would expect from a certain kind of college president, pitched at such a high level of generality that he really never even bothers to define what he means by "liberal arts." It's pretty clear nevertheless that included in Gregorian's liberal arts curriculum would be the study of literature, perhaps even as its centerpiece. But what Gregorian wants is "to integrate learning and provide balance," to "help our students acquire their own identity," to

"provide a context for technical training" so students may "understand the general nature and structure of our society, the role of the university, or the importance of values." All worthy goals, I suppose, and if you wanted to include works of literature in an ethics class, or a psychology class, or a political science class, this might be a perfectly sound strategy. But if you set up whole departments devoted to literary study, and then charge them with helping to "understand the general nature and structure of our society," you're using extremely indirect means to arrive at results better pursued in other ways. And you're implicitly demeaning what literature might really do for individual readers quite apart from your social engineering scheme—although perhaps that's really the point.

Probably what bothers me most about Peter Brooks's claims about theory is the appeal to the potential "irrelevance" of literary study without it. I'm not even sure Brooks himself means to suggest that literature ought to be "relevant," given that immediately following the passage I've quoted he goes on to say that theory "was something that might in the long run turn out to be unsustainable, and perhaps unusable--but then most literary undergraduates aren't planning to build a career on how they have read either Milton or Foucault." Thus Brooks acknowledges that the study of literature is indeed irrelevant in the context in which universities generally function. A few students are in college or graduate school just to learn, literally to become "learned," less ignorant, but everyone will acknowledge they're a vast minority. Even fewer would like to become more skilled readers of literature. But this is really the only authentic constituency literary study has. Everything else is just defensiveness and empty rhetoric. Literature can't be relevant to civic responsibility and reform agendas except in defying them.

To be defiantly irrelevant. How subversive is that?

Historicizing Literature

In *Why Literary Periods Mattered: Historical Context and the Prestige of English Studies*, Ted Underwood proposes that such a view of the literary past—through “periodization”—ultimately does not in fact derive from academic literary study but from a more

general perspective on history introduced by a popular source, the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott. Scott “was celebrated specifically for his power to recreate particularized historical moments in intimate social detail,” writes Underwood, “and the English professors who introduced period survey courses to universities in the 1840s modeled their new courses implicitly on Scott’s accomplishment.” Scott’s ability to “recreate particularized historical moments” somewhat paradoxically depends on the reader’s awareness of an essential discontinuity in history, a recognition that the past is fundamentally different, irretrievable by study or representation except through contrast with the present. “Historical contrast” thus came to seem the logical way to organize a curriculum in English literature, since works of the literary past (at the time the only works that might conceivably be taught) are presumably marked as well by historical variance.

Underwood’s book is valuable not least for the account it gives of the establishment of English literature as a university subject (at University College—then the University of London—and King’s College) in the 1840s, prior to the efforts to introduce English as a field of study chronicled by Gerald Graff in *Professing Literature*, otherwise the definitive history of the rise of “English studies,” particularly in the United States. Graff frames the debate about whether the study of vernacular literature should have a place in the university as between “philology” and “criticism,” with the advocates of the latter arguing that studying literature for its own sake is justified because it helps to cultivate critical reading skills, against the linguistic/historical approach of the former, whereby literature serves as a source for the study of the development of language per se. Underwood’s analysis shows that underlying the triumph of criticism was the organizing principle of historical periodization, which survived all of the changes of critical approach that have characterized modern literary study, from the initial dominance of New Criticism to its later supplanting by critical theory and cultural studies.

This certainly suggests that periodization has been useful to the academy, so much so that Underwood believes most academic scholars and critics simply take it for granted, and in fact often resist the idea that some other organizing strategy might better suit literary study. By the end of the book Underwood more or less concludes that it is indeed time for English departments to reconsider periodization as the curricular norm, but the primary burden of *Why Literary Periods Mattered* is to illuminate why literary periods did indeed matter, and why the period

course continued to endure even though there were challenges to its dominion and the orientation of literary study toward its subject, literature, has changed rather profoundly.

The most logical alternative to organization by period would be an organization emphasizing continuity through genre, through “types” of literary practice, or through “issues” that arise across generic boundaries or even across nationalities. This sort of alternative was offered by “comparative literature” in its earliest manifestation. The comparatists, according to Underwood, “sought to explain continuous processes of development” and thus “challenged the whole underlying notion that literary study ought to be organized around discrete movements at all.” But comparative literature pretty quickly evolved into the discipline as we know it today, in American universities emphasizing literature in translation (at its most anodyne a vague sort of “world literature”). Soon enough comp lit courses were also being offered through periodization: “The literary curriculum was already organized around nations and periods. To gain entry to the curriculum, comparative literature generally had to borrow faculty from departments of national literature and adapt itself to a periodized structure.” Eventually, comparative literature became just as preoccupied with critical theory as English studies, managing to make it compatible with a period structure in both scholarship and course offerings. Underwood argues, in fact, that the view of history represented by a theorist such as Foucault actually accommodates itself quite nicely to periodization.

The real blow against comparative literature’s incipient challenge to historical periodization in the literature curriculum was struck by Rene Wellek, a supporter of New Criticism and himself a comparatist. Wellek believed that a literature curriculum needed to combine “critical evaluation” with literary history, and that periodization was the only way to do that. For Wellek, the challenge was to preserve a place for literary study that was distinctively literary, that did not simply loan out literature to approaches more interested in history or the study of culture more broadly. Underwood quotes Wellek’s expression of concern that

The study of everything connected with the history of civilization will crowd out strictly literary studies. All distinctions will fall and extraneous criteria will be introduced into literature, and literature will necessarily be judged valuable only insofar as it yields results for this or that neighboring discipline.

Wellek is essentially arguing that literary study, whose status within the modern research university was already precarious, could maintain itself as an academic discipline only if it remained self-evidently about literature. Once the study of literature had been admitted to the university curriculum, its integrity, Wellek believed, depended on avoiding “extraneous” issues that pointed away from “literature itself” to subjects properly belonging to other disciplines.

This is not an idle concern if you do believe that “literature” is a definable subject that includes an identifiable history of practice and a supply of important works, as well as provides a continuity of such practice so that it becomes more than just a collection of old texts but instead a “living tradition” to which students can be exposed (and perhaps some of them will eventually contribute). Whether the triumph of the comparative lit model would have had the effect of hollowing out literary study in the way Wellek describes is certainly open to question. That Wellek’s position prevailed as readily as it did suggests that scholars weren’t so eager to collapse the distinctions he wanted to reinforce, but even so the impression that losing sight of the autonomy of literature as an aesthetic form or special kind of moral reflection might eventually lead to the dissolution of “strictly” literary study into a hodgepodge of disparate approaches, often indeed moving into “neighboring disciplines,” was not ill-founded. Arguably this is exactly what has happened to academic literary study, even while periodization has otherwise continued to structure the curriculum. Wellek thus ultimately was wrong about the necessity of periodization for the preservation of “strictly literary studies”: organization by periods has made for a certain stability in course offerings and academic publishing, but it has by no means ensured that a focus on the kind of critical evaluation Wellek had in mind would continue to predominate.

We might even speculate that the “intrinsic” study of literature Wellek championed in his most famous book, *Theory of Literature* (written with Austin Warren) may have in fact been better served by a curriculum organized by literary forms or genres, with or without distinctions of nationality. To emphasize “historical contrast” is still to consider literature historically, and a field of study in which history weighs so heavily is going to foreground historical forces themselves to a degree that begins to make literary scholarship into a species of historical inquiry as much as, in some cases more than, it is a form of literary criticism. Likewise, the additional separations of nationality lead to analyses focused on social and cultural traits and tendencies

that works of literature conveniently make visible. The beginnings of “American Literature” may have involved efforts to celebrate the Americanness of American literature, while later on the goal was more often to question and critique the cultural assumptions to be found in American writing, but ultimately both approaches are equally willing to reduce literature to its instrumental value in examining national character or disclosing cultural attitudes.

Wellek and the New Critics wanted to value literature for itself, and their preferred method of doing so, what came to be called “close reading,” practiced within the framework of periodization, appeared to give literary study its disciplinary identity. The scholar became the academic critic (although more traditionally “scholarly” activities continued to be carried out, in a kind of *modus vivendi* with New Criticism), with “critical evaluation” taking on a more elevated status in relation to the book reviewer or literary journalist. Yet even close reading could not finally be safely claimed as the defining method of “strictly literary studies,” as the proponents of critical theory, while otherwise rejecting New Critical notions of the literary text as “verbal icon” to be held up for appreciation, nonetheless retained close reading as their own strategy for drawing out political, historical, and cultural implications of literary texts (which were to be “interrogated” more than read). Because periodization still allowed academic criticism in this new mode to operate perfectly well—in some ways even encouraged it, since these implications work themselves out differently in different historical conditions—the period-centered curriculum largely escaped scrutiny.

Underwood believes that the increasing prominence of “digital humanities” signals the end of periodization, and he argues that the quantitative methods of digital data-gathering can provide literary study a new mission in which the goal becomes to “map broad patterns and trace gradients of change.” The most well-known proponent of the quantitative approach is probably Franco Moretti and his notion of “distant reading,” its very name suggesting that academic literary criticism has now fully severed itself from the kind of criticism Rene Wellek once advocated. Underwood acknowledges that the quantitative mode also probably means that the autonomy of literary study Wellek wanted to safeguard is no longer desirable or expedient, predicting that with the adoption of quantitative analysis “it becomes increasingly difficult to draw disciplinary boundaries.” For those of us who continue to believe the study of literature carries its own kind of value that has not been exhausted, perhaps the only possible silver lining

in this rather cloudy prospect is that the final erasure of the disciplinary boundary that once gave definition to “literary study” will be complete enough that someone will again have the idea that literature might be an interesting addition to the college curriculum.

Miriam Burstein correctly notes that to the literary historian "aesthetic objections are neither here nor there" if a particular text has proven to be influential on subsequent writers (*The Little Professor*). Whether that text might be "overrated" on purely aesthetic--or, for that matter, any other--grounds is irrelevant if an accurate account of genre or period is your concern or if looking at the broad sweep of literary history is of more immediate importance than the aesthetic credibility of a single work.

However, Burstein expresses her concerns about the relevance of "aesthetic objections" in the context of pedagogical practice, of the way in which literature is taught in academic courses: "I still have to teach the book (if it's in my field, anyway)," she writes, "whether or not I want to throw it into the nearest recycling bin." Balancing historical and aesthetic issues is "the great challenge of developing a survey course."

I don't disagree with any of this, but what Burstein says does underscore the extent to which the prerogatives of academe, of instruction more broadly, dominate our view of "literary history," perhaps in some cases even shape the way literary history is brought into being in the first place. The purpose for which surely all novelists or poets want their work to be received—to provide aesthetic pleasure, to entertain and provoke—is displaced for the academic critic by the need to chronicle, categorize, and contextualize. Indeed, as Burstein herself concedes, "from the POV of literary history, it's quite possible to 'overrate' a novel's importance (the extent to which it attracted imitators, was genre-changing or -originating, etc.) by pointing to its *aesthetic* superiority."

As a move made as a response to the perceived requirements of a "field," such overrating makes sense. But if the requirements boil down to a novel's capacity to spawn imitators or alter genre conventions, then plenty of aesthetically superior works are going to be excluded from survey courses. Tracking the development of formulas and genre-bending (not breaking)

becomes the "subject" of literature courses and scholarship, and, although this approach does not displace actual literature from literary study as directly and thoroughly as does the focus on theory or cultural study, it does still remove the experience of literature—the opportunity to read the most potentially rewarding works of fiction and poetry—from the center of attention. From the perspective of a "literary history" by which such history makes us aware of the most rewarding works it has produced, this makes less sense.

But then the attempt to make literary study a way of invoking this understanding of literary history has already failed, anyway, as William M. Chace in *The American Scholar* attests. It probably deserved to fail, since the emphasis on deep reading experience was never really compatible with the accompanying belief held by many older-style literary humanists that, as Chace puts it, "this discipline had certain borders and limitations and that there were essential things to know, to preserve, and to pass on." Either reading great works is a series of singular experiences during which "essential things" are always open to question or it is part of a pre-established curriculum to be preserved and passed on. It is either the opportunity to find and follow one's own reading bliss or it is done within the context of a "field" to be demarcated. Since in each case the latter is much easier to accomplish than the former in an academic setting—to even justify as academic activities—it is unsurprising that determining what are the best books to teach has won out over discovering what are the best books to read.

Relinquishing Literature

Judith Halberstam thinks the Department of English needs to go:

I propose that the discipline is dead, that we willingly killed it and that we now decide as serious scholars and committed intellectuals what should replace it in this new world of anti-intellectual backlash and religious fundamentalism. While we may all continue doing what we do — reading closely, looking for patterns and disturbances of patterns within cultural manifestations, determining the complex and fractal relations between cultural production and hegemonies — once we call it something other than

“English,” (like cultural studies, critical theory, theory and culture, etc.) it will neither look the same nor mean the same thing and nor will it occupy the same place in relation to the humanities in general, or within administrative plans for down-sizing; it will also, I propose, be better equipped to meet the inevitable demands (which already began to surface after the last election) for an end to liberal bias on college campuses and so on. (“The Death of English,” *Inside Higher Education*)

I heartily endorse this idea. By all means, let Halberstam and her confreres establish a new Department of Patterns and Disturbances of Patterns Within Cultural Manifestations. This would allow them to do what they most dearly wish to do—distance themselves from the study of mere literature—and would further allow whatever renegade elements who still find themselves interested in the “merely literary” either to reclaim “English” as the name for what they study or perhaps to join in on the makeover fun and establish a Department of Literary Study, in which what actually goes on is the study of literature. The latter could perhaps be done by incorporating extant creative writing programs, and such a department would probably continue to offer traditional composition and linguistics courses. (Surely administrators would not want to entrust such courses to a department that otherwise focuses on “the complex and fractal relations between cultural production and hegemonies.” This very phrasing suggests that professors in the new department would not be the logical choice to teach courses the goal of which is to teach students to write.)

I believe that such a bifurcation of English would turn out to be a swell deal for the renegades. Given a choice between the PDPWCM department and its ersatz sociology and a Literary Study department honestly devoted to studying literature, I predict that many undergraduate students would turn to the latter. After all, most English majors have traditionally been drawn to the discipline simply because they like to read. If departments of English and comparative literature are currently suffering “massive declines in enrollment,” as Halberstam herself allows they are, I’d suggest that one of the reasons is that what students find when they get there—and what they would continue to find in the PDPWCM department—is a pedantic, turgid, supercilious, and utterly joyless approach to reading. Should the new department of Literary Study reemphasize some of the pleasures of reading, and some of the delight of

discovery in the study of literature, it would hold its own in a competition to avoid “downsizing.”

Michael Berube doesn't much care for Halberstam's proposal, for reasons that aren't very clear. “[No] kind of renaming or reorganizing is going to make English a coherent, tidy discipline,” he writes on his blog. “It would be hard enough to make it coherent if it were devoted solely to literature. . .” Berube doesn't seem to understand: Halberstam is advocating that those very tendencies in academic criticism that make English as it now stands incoherent be transferred to the PDPWCM department. The English department left behind would be entirely coherent, despite Berube's doubts. Without those scholars more interested in “cultural production” and “hegemonies” than in works of fiction or poetry or drama, other scholars and critics who think studying such works as forms of literary art is a perfectly nice thing to do would be left alone to get on with the task. Berube continues: “literature, as even the most hidebound traditionalists ought to admit one of these days, is a terribly amorphous thing that touches on every conceivable facet of the known world—and, as if this weren't enough, many facets of worlds yet unknown as well. . . .” I'm not a hidebound traditionalist—in my version of a Department of Literary Study, periodization and other manifestations of curricular slicing would be absent; professors would be free to teach what they want to teach, as long as the ultimate goal was to understand the literary qualities of literature—but in my experience literature is a perfectly morphous subject. Individual works of literature certainly do explore “every conceivable facet of the known world,” but the study of literature concentrates on delineating the way they do this, not on using literature as an excuse to pronounce on such “facets” oneself.

What Halberstam and Berube share, ultimately, is a plain impatience with if not disdain for trifling old literature. Halberstam sneers at the notion of “aesthetic complexity,” notes approvingly the way “queer theory, visual culture, visual anthropology, feminist theory, literary theory began to nudge the survey courses, the single-author studies and the prosody classes aside,” recommends that the study of Victorian literature be replaced with “studies of ‘Empire and Culture,’ romanticism with “the poetries of industrialization.” Berube wants to preserve close reading as “our distinct product line,” as “what we sell people” (so much for resisting the corporatization of academe), but reduces such readings to “skills in advanced literacy,”

something that promotes students' "own symbolic economy." Besides, "you don't have to confine yourself to literary works, either. You can go right ahead and do close readings of any kind of 'text' whatsoever, in the most expansive sense of that most expansive word." Berube forgets that "close reading" was developed specifically as a method of reading literary works, which required close reading because they don't give up their intended meanings so easily, are not storage centers of "meaning" at all but occasions for a reading experience of a distinctive kind. His appropriation of "close reading" is really just a theft of the term for purposes to which true close reading is simply not applicable. (But of course the New Critics have become the collective bogeymen of contemporary literary study, returning now and then from their repressed state to scare the children. They and their appalling practices must be warded off.)

Actually, the best thing that could happen to literature would be, once the Department of Patterns and Disturbances of Patterns Within Cultural Manifestations (or some equally dreary equivalent) was actually created, for "literature" to disappear from academic curricula altogether. After eighty years of experimenting with the study of literature as an academic subject, those carrying it out (myself included) have made a complete hash of it. Literature itself is held in contempt not just by the majority of ordinary people but by those professing to teach it. "Literature Professor" has become a near-synonym of "lunatic." That literary study would come to such an end was probably inevitable, since the primary imperative of academe—to create "new" knowledge—is finally inimical to something so difficult to dress up in fashionable critical clothes as serious works of fiction or poetry. Once it was perceived that "aesthetic complexity" was a spent force (at least as the means for producing new monographs and journal articles), approaches to literature that essentially abandoned its consideration as an art form were practically certain to follow. If Judith Halberstam is proposing that, in this context, everyone should acknowledge that the experiment failed, she's performing a useful service. Give literature back to the amateurs.

In the summer 2005 issue of *Bookforum*, Mark M. Anderson reviews *A New History of German Literature*, published by Harvard University Press. According to Anderson, "Interdisciplinarity and methodological eclecticism are the rule. This is very much a 'German studies' account of German literature, reflecting the state of a discipline that has moved

increasingly toward the study of literature and language as cultural forces in historical and social context.”

The same could be said of English as an academic discipline, as well as most of the other departments that have historically taken literature as their subject. Thus Anderson’s further comments quite readily apply to the current state of “literary study” in general: “To be sure,” writes Anderson, “every literary history has to make choices, and writers’ reputations rise and fall over time.”

But the real issue is the “German studies” approach behind so many of the articles, which tend to put aside formal literary questions (genre, prosody, figural language, stylistics, etc.) in order to probe connections with non-literary realms. The editorial mandate to choose a specific date almost automatically pushes the contributors away from a text’s formal literary features in favor of a historical event in which its ideological or extraliterary significance can be understood to crystallize. . .

Further:

. . .Is this political tendency the result of a “Benjaminian” attempt to break open German literature for new readers and surprising uses, or merely the reflection of poetry’s waning influence in the age of the artwork’s “mechanical reproducibility”? Ironically enough, Walter Benjamin. . . wrote poetry himself, and no doubt he would have lamented the loss of this tradition.

I vote for “poetry’s waning influence,” not necessarily in our Benjaminian/technological era as whole, but in the academy specifically. In effect, poetry itself is now considered by most academic critics as just so much fluff, useful for getting at “cultural forces in a historical and social context,” but not much else.

The “tradition” to which Anderson refers is really the tradition in which literature was considered as literature—involving those “formal literary questions” with which a mammoth history of an important national literature published by one of the great university presses apparently can’t be bothered—rather than as an opportunity to opine about “culture.” I don’t finally object to the practice of using literature as a mirror on cultural practices and assumptions or as a collection of artifacts among others through the analysis of which contingent historical

forces might be seen at work. I just wonder why such a text as the *New History* is still titled a history of German literature. Anderson makes it clear enough that the contributors are much more interested in “non-literary realms,” the “extraliterary significance” of literature rather than its ongoing value simply in literary terms. I can understand why the study of the formal features of literature might need to co-exist with historical and cultural study. But this is not what has happened. The “tradition” of studying poetry in order to become a more adept reader of poetry or because poems are singular expressions of the human imagination has been cast aside altogether. Why?

Shortly after reading Anderson’s review, I came across an essay on translation by Harish Trivedi. Trivedi describes the process by which the translation of literary texts as an instance of “translating culture” has become what he calls “cultural translation”:

It would thus seem to be the case that while wishing for the practitioners of Cultural Studies to come and join hands with them, those engaged in Translation Studies have not even noticed that something called Cultural Translation has already come into existence, especially in the domain of postcolonial and postmodernist discourse, and represents something that could not be further from their hearts’ desire. For, if there is one thing that Cultural Translation is not, it is the translation of culture. . .

All the recent talk of multiculturalism relates, it may be noted, not to the many different cultures located all over the world, but merely to expedient social management of a small sample of migrants from some of these cultures who have actually dislocated themselves and arrived in the First World, and who now must be melted down in that pot, or tossed in that salad, or fitted as an odd little piece into that mosaic. These stray little flotsam and jetsam of world culture which have been washed up on their shores are quite enough for the taste of the First World. Migrancy, often upper-class elite migrancy as for example from India, has already provided the First World with as much newness as it needs and can cope with, and given it the illusion that this tiny fraction of the Third World has already made the First World the whole world, the only world there is. . . . (91st *Meridian*)

“Cultural translation” is the act that eases this “social management,” provides the means by which the “newness” the developed world finds desirable is delivered. “In conclusion,” Trivedi writes, “one may suggest that there is an urgent need perhaps to protect and preserve some little space in this postcolonial-postmodernist world, where newness constantly enters through cultural translation, for some old and old-fashioned literary translation. For, if such bilingual bicultural ground is eroded away, we shall sooner than later end up with a wholly translated, monolingual, monocultural, monolithic world.”

Trivedi here makes a plea for the singularity of literary texts, but on the grounds that only they really offer access to “other” cultures. I think the problem he rightly laments was all but inevitable when his first notion of translation as “translating culture” was accepted. As Trivedi puts it, “the translation of a literary text became a transaction not between two languages, or a somewhat mechanical sounding act of linguistic ‘substitution’. . .but rather a more complex negotiation between two cultures. The unit of translation was no longer a word or a sentence or a paragraph or a page or even a text, but indeed the whole language and culture in which that text was constituted.” The true singularity of the literary text was essentially dismissed in this formulation, and without it, the slide from “translating culture” to “cultural translation” couldn’t be avoided. If “culture” is what you’re after, why go to all the trouble of translating or reading difficult books when it can be gotten so much more cheaply, with so little wasted effort?

Academic practice in literary study has really come full circle. Both scholars and translators have reverted to philology, the study of language and literature for the cultural and historical “information” that can be uncovered. Again, I guess I don’t mind if most current scholars in literature departments want to do philology. I do wish, however, that they’d relinquish the title to “literature” and give it back to those of us who prefer to occupy literary realms.

Reclaiming Literature?

Joseph North’s *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* is a book with a provocative premise addressing an important subject that ultimately does justice to neither. North

contends that academic literary study has settled into a stagnant and unavailing practice that aligns it entirely with “scholarship’]” at the expense of “criticism.” Further, the putative goal of this scholarship in a by now thoroughly politicized discipline – to act as a counterforce against the dominant neoliberal ideologies – is one that scholarship in its current form is actually unable to meet. Indeed, North maintains that the historicist/cultural studies approach that now dominates academic literary scholarship (to the virtual exclusion of nearly everything else) arises from and reinforces the neoliberal status quo and that only a return to criticism, with its greater attention to the aesthetic nature of literature, can in fact reorient academic literary study in such a way that it might have the capacity to “intervene” and effect real political and cultural change.

Unfortunately, North’s argument, as conveyed through his attenuated institutional history (the title of the book is misleading, since it offers a history of the shifting fashions in academic literary study, not a history – political or otherwise – of literary criticism per se) does little to clarify the stakes involved in distinguishing between criticism and scholarship, to explain exactly what North has in mind in his use of the term ‘aesthetic’ to identify the literary value currently absent in the dominant mode of literary scholarship, or what its presence would add. Nor does he specify how the ‘close reading’ he advocates would differ from the versions that in his account helped lead to the banishment of aesthetic criticism from the realm of literary study in the first place. Finally, North offers virtually no defense of the fundamental assumption of the book that literary study as an academic discipline has as an ultimate justification its role in achieving political transformation, in creating a more just world order. These flaws ought to be palpable to readers devoted to the “historicist/contextualist paradigm,” but those of us inclined to agree with North’s premise even before reading his book should be even more disappointed that he fails to make a case for the need to intervene in academic literary study to restore literary criticism to something like its formerly more central place.

It is possible, of course, to believe in the centrality of what North is calling “criticism” and not to care much whether it has a place in the academic study of literature at all, at least when such study is formally consolidated in an actual academic system. Criticism predates its inclusion in university curricula, and it will endure long after college professors have given up entirely on the notion that their interest lies in what was, after all, designated as ‘literature’ not that long ago – largely for the purpose of gathering together otherwise disparate forms of writing

for ‘study’ in the first place. If criticism understood as the attempt to describe and assess a literary work in order to grasp and “appreciate” it as “literary” is no longer much evident in the academy, it continues to be practiced in publications associated with the general literary culture – it could be argued, in fact, that it is flourishing online in a way that itself begins to return to criticism some of the credibility it initially gained from its ascension to academic status but subsequently lost when its “subjectivity” was deemed too insubstantial to support a properly academic discipline devoted to the creation of “knowledge.” If the sort of criticism whose primary purpose is to measure the strengths and weaknesses of a literary work on its own terms, to register the critic’s informed but inevitably unhistoricized response, is not welcome in academe, that aesthetic sensibility and critical judgment continue to be cultivated by serious-minded writers about literature seems apparent enough in the range of critics featured in these publications, many of them writers clearly impatient with the pervasive expectation that mainstream academic journals will almost exclusively feature scholarship (according to North’s delineation of the term).

North is certainly correct that ‘academic criticism’ in the strictest sense is now literally absent from literary study at the highest levels. North contends that criticism was discredited not because of its inherent unsuitability to academic study but through its appropriation by the wrong sort of people, the sort who wanted to convert it into a convenient means for elevating their own tastes and in the process reducing criticism to a tool for determining the relative ‘greatness’ of writers and works of literature. This betrayal was performed by the New Critics (the great collective *bête noire* in accounts usually given by those eager to hasten the transition to the post-criticism era) in sympathetic concert with FR Leavis, who together took the strategy of close reading introduced by IA Richards and wrenched it out of the context in which the latter had developed it, thereby rendering it as the method of choice for the most conservative and elitist forces in the academic hierarchy. This is a very familiar story, retold by North in the usual condescending way, differing only in that he exempts Richards from blame, maintaining that his notion of ‘practical criticism’ was intended to ground the study of literature not in an autonomous text but in the full context of the reader’s cultural position. ‘Before anything,’ North writes,

Practical Criticism is an attempt to examine as precisely as possible the actual relationships existing between works of literature and their most important context: their readers. Once we have put aside the idea that Richards is an early New Critic, we can begin to see that he is concerned everywhere to put the text into some productive relationship to its context of reception.

It is entirely defensible to argue that Richards has never really been accurately identified as a New Critic, although his initial example in focusing close attention on the effects of a work (specifically poems) was a real enough influence on critics such as Cleanth Brooks and John Crowe Ransom. However, Richards's approach is more appropriately understood in its correspondences with the philosophy of art advanced by John Dewey, which is similarly experiential and focused on the pragmatic – what is meaningful in works of literature is to be found in the reader's encounter with the text, not the latter's abstraction into an autonomous aesthetic object. Although North champions Richards as the potential source of renewal in contemporary literary study, it seems unlikely that Richards himself would have much approved of North's use of his example to advocate for literary study as a site of political transformation. Richards believed that close reading could reveal cultural and psychological forces that should occupy the critic's attention, but he hardly thought this attention would best be concentrated on narrowly conceived political interests. Richards's own interest in the aesthetic extends to its effect on the reader's whole sensibility (culturally-inflected, of course), and while he does not, as Dewey does, emphasize the particular qualities of the experience itself, Richards is surely not so instrumentalist that he regards the aesthetic quality of literature to be valuable primarily because it might help to subvert global capitalism.

That this should be the object of academic literary study is an axiom embraced by the current establishment that North does not relinquish, despite his analysis of the shortcomings of the present scholarly paradigm. Indeed, North spends much time throughout the book reassuring scholarly readers that he is a dedicated foe of neoliberalism, trying to convince those readers that a renewed commitment to the aesthetic is actually the better strategy for overturning the neoliberal order. It might be possible to imagine a generation of readers more intensively educated in the close reading of literature as way of becoming more appreciative of its values, coming to realize that those promoted by market capitalism are in contrast shallow and

destructive, that instrumental ambitions are not the only kind possible, but this would ultimately entail that these very readers also reject the underlying assumption that Joseph North himself clings to in this book about the role of literary study, since it too in its current incarnation (which North wants to modify, not abolish) understands its ostensible subject, literature, in strictly instrumental, utilitarian terms.

In fairness to North, perhaps it is this immersion in the ‘humane’ qualities of literature that he has in mind as the source of literary study’s potential to bring social and cultural reform. However, if so, North never really clearly identifies the mechanism by which social or political action is a necessary consequence of a curriculum of literary study with aesthetic analysis at its core. Most of the book is taken up with an institutional anatomy, tracing the ascendance of the historicist/cultural studies model back to Raymond Williams, whom North credits with justifying the shift from criticism to scholarship, and examining several scholars who, originally scholars of the knowledge-producing sort, began to struggle against the totalizing dominion of the new scholarly model. They sought to escape it, if not back to the discredited modes of moral and formalist criticism associated with Leavis and the New Critics, then toward some different relationship with literature that acknowledges the possibility of relating to it as other than a conduit for cultural analysis. In North’s judgment, none of these attempts (by, among others, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Isobel Armstrong, and Lauren Berlant) managed to fully depart from the reigning paradigm (but, then again, neither does Joseph North), and so the task remains to find the means to finally do so.

Whether academic literary study manages to regain its focus on literature considered as literary art, separate from or in addition to its utility as a window on culture, is finally not a very interesting question in itself. As North additionally points out, academic criticism has evolved as a series of shifts from one favored method to another, united only by the conviction that the latest is the one true way to study literature. This is not likely to change even if aesthetics retakes the field and a new cohort of close readers emerges. That both aesthetics and close reading might remain relevant concerns to readers and critics is of more consequence, however much the original relocation of “criticism” to a home in the academy joined the two in a seemingly permanent association, so that whatever falls out of academic fashion must accordingly be disavowed more generally. Joseph North objects to the New Critics because of their reactionary

politics and their elevation of favorite writers to the status of unquestioned greatness. But there is nothing about the kind of close reading introduced by the New Critics that necessarily entails right-wing politics, nor requires the creation of an imperious canon of great writers. "New Criticism" can't be revived under that name – its reputation is no doubt inextricably tied to its founding figures, who did indeed distort the underlying precepts of close reading in ways that made the principle of 'disinterestedness' seem transparently hypocritical – but North's book most usefully demonstrates, through the very contortions by which it seeks to identify an approach to literary study that allows for attention to "literature itself" but that is also politically acceptable, the extent to which the loss of focus on literature as first of all an object of aesthetic regard has itself left academic literary study floundering in its own self-imposed futility.

I greatly admire Helen Vendler. She is perhaps the greatest living close reader of poetry, especially modern poetry, in the United States. She is also passionately committed to the task of explicating the value of poetry, of literature in general, to as wide an audience as possible, as her recent Jefferson lecture, "The Ocean, the Bird, and the Scholar," makes abundantly clear. Cynics are advised to not go near this lecture: not only will they immediately encounter a student of literature utterly convinced of its centrality to human life, but they may wind up convinced of this centrality themselves if they read the lecture through to the end.

But it is precisely Vendler's sincerity and her eloquent communication of her own passion for poetry that ultimately, for me at least, make reading this lecture a rather sad experience. She's right about almost everything she says in trying to argue for making art and literature the curricular centerpiece in the study of the "Humanities" in American universities, but given how thoroughly the study of literature (art more broadly) has been rejected in this country, by administrators, politicians, students, parents, employers, and most pathetically, by literature professors themselves, the context in which her words are offered make this lecture sound more like a funeral oration than an inspirational address, an elegy for what might have been than a proposal for curricular reform. It's almost as if she hasn't noticed that the academic and business elites in America ooze contempt for art and literature, or, more to the point, that literary academics long ago stopped pretending they had any real regard for what is supposed to be the subject of their scholarly study.

Vendler is certainly correct in saying that "When it became useful in educational circles in the United States to group various university disciplines under the name 'The Humanities,' it seems to have been tacitly decided that philosophy and history would be cast as the core of this grouping. . . Philosophy, conceived of as embodying truth, and history, conceived of as a factual record of the past, were proposed as the principal embodiments of Western culture, and given pride of place in general education programs." Americans' demand for "facts" and "hard" knowledge, their disdain for the fluff that is fiction or poetry or painting or music, were reflected even in that realm of academic study that was—grudgingly—ceded to "humanists." She is also justified in claiming that "Confidence in a reliable factual record, not to speak of faith in a reliable philosophical synthesis, has undergone considerable erosion. Historical and philosophical assertions issue, it seems, from particular vantage points, and are no less contestable than the assertions of other disciplines." Finally, she makes as compelling a case that serious engagement with the arts is good for you as anyone is likely to make.

But her answer to her own posed question, "If the arts are so satisfactory an embodiment of human experience, why do we need studies commenting on them?," is not so compelling, at least if she means by this, "Why study the arts in college?" Or, "Why create an academic caste of professional 'scholars' to comment on art as a 'discipline?'" I unhesitatingly agree that "reminders of art's presence are constantly necessary," but is the best way to do this to relegate the study of art to universities, where the most concrete result has been the very marginalization, the trivialization, of art and literature? Vendler's second reason for installing the arts in the curriculum of universities, that "such studies establish in human beings a sense of cultural patrimony" is, in my opinion the weakest argument that can be made on behalf of the academic study of art or music or literature, since it threatens to reduce them to a form of nationalist propaganda—or a reaction against such perceived propaganda, which is largely what has indeed happened to literary study in particular. But Vendler doesn't finally seem to believe very strongly in this argument herself.

The real weight of Vendler's defense of "the products of aesthetic endeavor" falls on her contention that studying works of art and literature "helps us to live our lives," and that scholars are best situated to show us how this can be true. The weight of this argument, in turn, rests on her reading of three poems by Wallace Stevens, poems in which Stevens does indeed speak of

the indispensability of art—specifically poetry—and of the scholar's role in reminding us of this. I have no intention of disputing Vendler's reading of these poems. I couldn't plausibly do it even if I wanted to. But I do think she overgeneralizes Stevens's reference to the "scholar, separately dwelling," who "Poured forth the fine fins, the gawky beaks, the personalia,/Which, as a man feeling everything, were his" to mean the academic scholar of the sort we find in American universities. As Harold Bloom points out in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, the scholar of "Somnambulisma" is likely an allusion to Emerson's "American Scholar," who is not exactly the tweedy gentleman available for office hours we all know and love. If Vendler means in her discussion of this poem that it is desirable if not necessary that some people devote themselves to perpetuating the legacy of still vital poets and artists from the past, reminding us of the "pervasive being" Stevens identifies in his poem, I would have no quarrel with her. But I have a hard time believing there are many such scholars around anymore, the very denotation of the word "scholar" now understood as it is to designate exactly the gentleman/woman in the office.

Bloom additionally points out that "Large Red Man Reading," the second poem Vendler discusses, as well contains allusions to Emerson, who also saw the poet's job as writing the "poem of life," was also concerned with the "vatic" power of the poet, but again it is difficult to imagine that either Emerson or Stevens conceived of this "earthly giant of vital being" (Vendler's words) as a "scholar" of the modern kind. Is it part of the job description of the scholar nowadays that he hold his students in rapt attention as he teaches them that "the experiences of life can be reconstituted and made available as beauty and solace, to help us live our lives"? If such scholars as Vendler seems to evoke here ever existed, they surely no longer stride through the halls of the general classroom building, if only because such activity as Vendler wants to describe through her explication of this poem will certainly not get you tenure. The "Large Red Man Reading" helps us pay attention to what we otherwise wouldn't notice; the modern scholar only notices what is otherwise not worth our attention.

Although clearly what Helen Vendler values most in art and literature is the stimulation and pleasure they afford in their own right, in order to duly place them at the center of humanities education, she is ultimately forced to appeal to other services they might perform ("training in subtlety of response," enhancing "scientific training" through the "direct mediation. . .of feeling,

vicarious experience, and interpersonal imagination"), as is any proposal to include art in an academic curriculum. She is also led to adopt very dubious—and somewhat naïve—theories about how training in the arts is to be accomplished: "Once the appetite for an art has been awakened by pleasure, the nursery rhyme and the cartoon lead by degrees to Stevens and Eakins. A curriculum relying on the ocean, the bird, and the scholar, on the red man and his blue tabulae, would produce a love of the arts and humanities that we have not yet succeeded in generating in the population at large." I am not aware of any evidence that the aesthetic domino effect—from the nursery rhyme ultimately to Wallace Stevens—actually ever happens with other than those students who were always going to get to Stevens or Eakins anyway. And if "the population at large" were going to be led to a love of the arts, we would already have witnessed the appearance of this heaven-on-earth, since much of the justification for teaching the arts and humanities to captive student audiences during the last seventy-five years was based on some such theory. Everyone should read Helen Vendler's poetry criticism, as it indeed can lead individual readers to an appreciation of what makes poetry worth reading. Her Jefferson lecture, however, mistakenly assumes that this kind of concrete experience of literary art can be universalized into a system of academic instruction, still mistaken no matter how well-intentioned the effort might be. Or how nice it would be if it could actually work.

At School

In his memoir *Keeping Literary Company*, Jerome Klinkowitz, who became not long after the events described one of the best-known advocates of "contemporary" fiction, describes his graduate school experience:

At school [Marquette University] I was making my way dutifully through seminars on Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton, with other courses on Victorian prose writers, modern British poets, and the like. Not until my last semester did I add a couple classes [sic] in American literature, and then turned back to British poetry. . . .The

twentieth-century novel course I took ended with Hemingway from the 1920s and works by Faulkner and Fitzgerald from the 1930s. (6)

Having at the same time acquired an enthusiasm for the works of Kurt Vonnegut, Klinkowitz further recalls

[that] I stayed with Vonnegut through all this showed both that I could read out of class and that novels like *Player Piano*, *The Sirens of Titan*, and *Cat's Cradle*, which I bought as they came back into print, were a world apart from what Marquette taught us was the tradition" (6).

The year in which Klinkowitz is "at school" and engaged in such earnest study of the tradition is 1966, and although it is not exactly surprising to learn that the curriculum to which he was exposed at that time was still so very conservative, for those of us who now think of "contemporary literature" as a flourishing and more or less respectable field of academic study, to be reminded that even in the period most associated with cultural upheaval and literary innovation current writing could not be considered "literature" at all nevertheless might make us pause. At a time when cultural studies, an approach that welcomes not only contemporary literature but all forms of popular culture as well, has become the dominant mode of scholarly analysis in literary study, it might seem especially difficult to countenance a graduate program so hopelessly hidebound as to regard otherwise serious works of fiction or poetry beyond the pale because not sufficiently aged. But Klinkowitz's account of his subsequent attempts as a professor himself to bring contemporary American fiction—or at least his favored contemporary writers—into the college classroom implicitly reveals how Klinkowitz's efforts, like those of other "radical young PhDs" who also sought to open up the literature curriculum in the 1960s and 1970s (13), was in its way as conservative a project as that undertaken by Klinkowitz's professors in creating that curriculum in the first place.

Perhaps the most curious comment in the passages I've quoted is Klinkowitz's affirmation that in maintaining his interest in Vonnegut he "showed. . .that I could read out of class." Most likely this is simply a loose way of emphasizing the reading demands in class of a graduate literary education, but nevertheless Klinkowitz also draws attention to the fact that in 1966 a graduate student in English would be unable to read novels such as those he lists while "at school." And, more than anything else, this initial chapter of *Keeping Literary Company* is a

chronicle of Klinkowitz's success in securing the literature course, as well as literary scholarship, as a suitable dwelling-place for contemporary fiction—to make it acceptable in “school.” By 1969 he has taken a position at Northern Illinois University, where, he writes, “the department was alive with dialogue and debate, especially among the younger crowd who felt so excluded and estranged from the fat-cat professoriate that by virtue of their seniority ran the place. As opposed to these elders, whose taste was settled and whose curriculum was virtually petrified, we assistant professors and instructors were not only reading new works but were struggling to incorporate them in both our value system and our teaching” (13). One would not unfairly conclude from Klinkowitz's framing of the scene in which his memoir will unfold that the “literary company” he wants to keep is that of the canon of writers deemed worthy of study in the academic curricula of universities.

Thus what was presented as a critical advocacy of contemporary writers and an argument for the superior and distinctive qualities of contemporary literature—especially fiction—would be more accurately described as an effort to enhance the status of current writing by calling on the prestige and authority of the academy. These are decidedly distinct endeavors, and the predominance of the second has had several important and related effects. It has, most significantly, aggrandized the academy rather than contemporary writing itself, expanding its prerogatives to include becoming *de facto* arbiter of critical opinion about the merits and the direction of contemporary literature, a development the further unfortunate consequence of which has been that literary criticism outside the purview of academe has virtually ceased to exist. It has distorted criticism of all kinds, but especially criticism of recent fiction and poetry, by erasing distinctions between criticism *per se* and the historical, theoretical, and political projects to which it has increasingly and inevitably become subordinate. And, along with the parallel burgeoning of university-based creative writing programs, the successful establishment of contemporary literature as an academic field of study has in turn failed both to cultivate a more informed audience for contemporary writing and to foster in any credible or consistent way a more fertile critical environment in which such writing could take place. It could be argued, in fact, that the increasingly close association between the academy and contemporary literature has turned out for the latter to be more detrimental than not.

Klinkowitz's own professed enthusiasms point to an implicit conflict of priorities that, upon reflection, would seem likely to make this association an uneasy one, if not unavoidably to produce the kind of results I have just described. Not all "new" and "experimental" writers were equally welcome on Klinkowitz's pathbreaking syllabus. John Barth and Thomas Pynchon, for example, are dismissed—along with modernism in general—for their "philosophic intricacies and intellectual pyrotechnics," their "obfuscation and soul-killing technicalism" (7). Clearly Klinkowitz finds these writers too "academic" in comparison with Vonnegut, Terry Southern, and Ken Kesey, whose books he is most eager to bring to his students' attention. It is, then, at the very least unclear why he found it necessary to engage in such a struggle to bring the study of these writers into the academic curriculum, where almost unavoidably even the more technically transparent satirical and Beat-oriented fiction he wanted to champion would be subject to a kind of critical scrutiny that would itself be hard-pressed to avoid "philosophic intricacies" and "intellectual pyrotechnics." (Klinkowitz's own account of how he came to understand what Vonnegut was really up to in *Mother Night* is, in fact, impressively intricate.) One might even conclude that there is a palpable incoherence built into the project of securing the approval of the institution of academic literary study for fiction that advertises itself as unconventional and "disruptive."

To some extent, of course, contemporary fiction (understood as fiction published since World War II by writers not already known from the prewar period) was, even during Klinkowitz's time as a graduate student, not altogether absent from the university curriculum or from academic discussion. Klinkowitz received his own Ph.D from the University of Wisconsin, where the English department was known for its receptivity to the study of contemporary writing, including its publication of the journal *Contemporary Literature* (Klinkowitz 6). Tony Tanner points out in a prefatory note to *City of Words*, published in 1971, that this book's origins lay in a number of seminars on contemporary literature held in several different American universities. But if one is to judge from the first few important academic studies of contemporary fiction (including *City of Words*), most such consideration of contemporary writers was done within the disciplinary domain of existing fields of academic study, most often as a further development in "modern" literature broadly conceived or, especially, as part of the relatively new fields of American Literature and its close cousin, American Studies.

The influence of all of these scholarly “areas” can be seen in the first two widely-cited scholarly studies of postwar American fiction, Ihab Hassan’s *Radical Innocence* (1961) and Marcus Klein’s *After Alienation* (1965). More so than the sedate and airless seminars on “Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton. . .and the like,” the kind of high-minded but intellectually less inhibited critical study represented by these two books was the earliest prevailing model of the scholarly analysis of postwar American fiction by which, and against which, contemporary literature would become the object of serious academic examination, and ultimately not just an acceptable if isolated course offered by the English department but itself an area of duly organized literary study in which one could ultimately become a certified “specialist.” By no means musty and pedantic, bound to no obvious critical orthodoxy, both books enthusiastically embrace contemporary writing and attempt to explicate then-recent fiction, as well as enliven their own examination of this fiction, by placing it very much within the main currents of the literary, historical, and intellectual developments of the mid-twentieth century.

Which is not to say they are not thoroughly “academic” in both intent and effect. Considering that if there was a reigning critical orthodoxy at the time these books were written it was New Critical formalism, one might expect them to show the influence of this method, but their origin in academic discourse and assumptions is to be seen in other ways. Both books are interested not in the close reading of text, nor even really in describing the specifically aesthetic qualities of the fiction they survey at all, but in classifying and categorizing, in isolating the thematic and structural features of these works that help Hassan and Klein compose a broader treatise on American literature as a whole, on modern intellectual history, on postwar American culture. Both are thesis-driven books—in each case, the thesis encapsulated in the book’s title—that seek to capture their cultural moment or identify a “certain tendency” in current practice, in effect to stay ahead of the literary curve, able to take the comprehensive view unavailable even to the writers whose practices are at issue. In so doing, these books proved to be the scholarly model for many academic studies of contemporary fiction to follow, which together could be taken as a kind of serial attempt to find the highest ground from which to scan the literary horizon. Indeed, this sort of well-positioned survey of current fiction would become arguably the most ambitious kind of scholarly book produced by the academic critics duly charged with the professional scrutiny of contemporary literature.

In Hassan's case, the abstracted conceptual marker is that of radical innocence, a characteristic of the "new hero" of postwar fiction, who "brings the brilliant extremities of the American conscience and imagination to bear on the equable tenor of our present culture" (6). Using this encompassing idea, Hassan makes his way through selected postwar novels, showing how in all of them "the disparity between the innocence of the hero and the destructive character of his experience defines his concrete, or existential, situation" (7). That Hassan has much bigger game than present-day novels and novelists in his sights is further evidenced just in the titles of some of his chapters: "The Modern Self in Recoil"; "The Dialectic of Initiation in America." Although Hassan's readings (generally brief) of particular novels and stories can certainly be insightful, and in some cases remain useful critical references for readers interested in writers Hassan discusses (the reading of Salinger, for example, which benefits in an unforeseen way from the truncated nature of his career), as a whole the book is necessarily constrained by the author's need to fit notable postwar fiction inside the critical framework he has erected. The notion that the protagonists of the various fictions he surveys are to one degree or another marked by a "radical innocence" remains a cogent enough formulation, applicable to a significant number of American novels—not only postwar novels—but it seems unlikely that Hassan was persuaded by its cogency only after a disinterested sampling of all of the diverse kinds of fiction produced by American writers after World War II. Such a sampling would be less dramatic in its pronouncements than *Radical Innocence*, to be sure, and would perhaps at best result in a rambling style of discussion such as that to be found in Frederick Karl's encyclopedic *American Fictions 1940-1980*. The more learned analysis of *Radical Innocence* certainly allows for the kind of elevated commentary that might be thought appropriate for the critic who is also a professional academic.

Many of the writers on whom Hassan focuses his attention have continued to be regarded as important postwar American writers (many of their books, at any rate, continue to be read, or at least continue to be in print). A few of them, such as Jean Stafford and Frederick Buechner, are no longer very frequently discussed, a few others, such as Robie Macauley and Harvey Swados, have almost entirely faded from critical view. By and large, however, one could construct a credible syllabus for a course on American fiction of the 1950s and 1960s using those writers whose works Hassan gives the most extensive consideration: William Styron, Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud, Ralph Ellison, John Cheever, Salinger, Saul Bellow. Indeed, any truly

comprehensive survey of American fiction in the second half of the twentieth century would readily include any or all of these writers. *Radical Innocence* was a considerably influential book, for many years after credited as the first general study of contemporary fiction, which inevitably leads to the question of the book's own role in producing a consensus view of what writers really matter, in helping to determine what might be called a provisional canon of academically sanctioned contemporary writing. Was it simply obvious in 1961 that these would be the important writers of the immediate postwar period? Was Ihab Hassan especially discerning in being able to point them out? To what extent were succeeding scholars, instructors, and students persuaded by Hassan's analysis, perhaps reinforced by other, subsequent, scholarly books and articles, enough to invest it with the authority to establish appropriate standards for this provisional canon?

Moreover, to what extent can it be said that the touchstone provided by Hassan's book (Klein's as well) served to initiate a process whereby "criticism" as an ongoing activity of weighing the merits of current work was brought completely within the confines of the literary academy? During the 1950s and at least partly through the 1960s there were still literary critics who worked independently of university English departments, producing intellectually respectable, albeit by today's standards excessively "belletristic" literary criticism. With the advent of academic criticism of the sort *Radical Innocence* portends, such "popular" criticism begins its decline into the superficial book reviewing and book chat it essentially, with exceptions, has become. With the further transformation of text-based academic criticism into theory and cultural studies, an unforeseen consequence of the triumph of "contemporary literature" in the academy is now that very little of what previously counted as literary criticism is even published at all. Certainly Ihab Hassan could not have fully anticipated such a development, but one could argue that implicit in the project of shifting literary criticism to the academy is the possibility that it will be subject to variations in the prevailing academic paradigm.

Reading *Radical Innocence* today, however, one can't help but be struck by how inexactly it appears to fit any single academic paradigm. Influenced by American studies, incorporating elements of existential philosophy, myth criticism, and cultural anthropology, but not identical with any of these, it is, as I have already stressed, still a notable book in part

because it helped to create a place for the study of contemporary literature, in effect to build a new paradigm suitable for academic discussion of current writing. Yet if it does not conform to any particular version of the then sanctioned scholarly methodology, it might not either be regarded by today's academic readers as altogether "scholarly" in its presentation, at least according to presently preferred procedures and standards of decorum. Chapter 4, "The Victim with a Thousand Faces," begins:

History in the West seems to be consumed before it is made. The modern age belongs already to the past, the contemporary period yields to the immediate present, and the present in America fades in pursuit of an uncreated future. Obsolescence is the tribute we pay to our faith in perfectibility. And yet we continue to wonder about the internal logic, the unheard voice and the impalpable fatality, of the moment in which we live. (61)

The degree here of undocumented assertion, of outright, naked pronouncement, would not easily be accepted in the now prevailing cooler climate of scholarly discourse (however heated the underlying issues). But ultimately such prose, characteristic of the book, although not exclusively so, is not so much insufficiently academic—judged by complexity of thought rather than an established orientation to subject or style—as it is only the most obvious indication that Hassan's overriding purpose in *Radical Innocence* is to express his own vision of the "modern condition," contemporary fiction offering him the most immediately salient representations of this condition.

That much postwar American fiction does conveniently illustrate Hassan's thesis is undeniably true, but it is also true that something like "radical innocence" is a character trait deeply rooted in American literary history and that in many ways it is not surprising this trait would reemerge with particular color and urgency in the years not simply following on World War II but also marking the beginnings of the Cold War. This is not so much a criticism of Hassan for a lack of originality or a willingness to rely on critical conventional wisdom as a more general point about the kind of stock-taking, multi-author study *Radical Innocence* represents. Any genuinely penetrating analysis of works of literature requires attention to particulars, if not exhaustive treatment of a particular work then careful consideration of any given work in the context of its author's other works, at the least an assessment of the concrete effects of such tangible matters as, say, genre, or unmistakable anxieties of influence. Books that,

following *Radical Innocence*, seek to in effect disclose the essence of contemporary writing or identify the truly significant contemporary writers, however much they may capture some relevant feature of recent literary fiction inevitably miss the many other more immediately “existential” features one actually encounters in reading individual works of fiction in favor of academic abstraction.

No more than Hassan is Marcus Klein in *After Alienation* much concerned with the aesthetic particulars of the works he examines, although he does discuss his five authors in more detail and across the full range of their at the time published fiction. He asserts quite explicitly, in fact, that “[t]he something new in these writers. . . is to be defined historically. . . in terms of the relevance of these writers [Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Wright Morris, Bernard Malamud] to the age.” Their importance “does not reside in any formal inventions or in any preferences of technique.” Rather, their fiction, “for all that it tends away from explicitly social subjects, is shaped by the social and political pressures of an age that is the most desperate in all history” (294). The hyperbole here is especially striking, since Klein’s enunciated thesis is that what makes his chosen writers “relevant to the age” is, presumably in response to the “social and political pressures” that under the circumstances could only be overwhelming, their work represents an “accommodation” to the realities of modern life, an “adjustment to the social fact” (29) in contrast to the typically modernist attitude of “alienation.” To adjust to the social facts of “an age that is the most desperate in all history” would seem a literary feat of remarkable rhetorical skill indeed.

Nevertheless, it is just such a determination to avoid the moral evasions of alienation that Klein locates in the work of Bellow et. al. For if Hassan draws on more eclectic sources of critical analysis, Klein seems a more straightforward moral critic of the kind perhaps most prominently represented in the postwar era by the New York intellectuals. These critics, associated in particular with the publications *Commentary* and *Partisan Review*, were indeed notable for the serious attention they gave to the work of current writers, and, initially at least, were mostly unaffiliated with university literary study. But by the mid 1960s not only were a number of the more prominent New York intellectuals (Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin) increasingly moving into university-sponsored positions, but younger critics in part inspired by them were also entering the university as bona fide academics. Klein, who received his PhD from the

Columbia University English department of Lionel Trilling and Richard Chase, seems clearly to be writing from within the ambit of the New York critics and their focus on the social and cultural efficacy of literature, and his book represents both the exhaustion of *Partisan Review*-style criticism as an independent critical movement and its assimilation into the broader authority of academic literary study, as well as a kind of final capitulation to that authority about which even someone as thoroughly ensconced in academe as Trilling had expressed reservations (Leitch 109-14).

It is also a material example of the rightward political drift of the New York school as a whole by the mid 60s, in this case manifested not so much in the neoconservative political views to which many of the original New York intellectuals became increasingly inclined but in Klein's outright disdain for the legacy of modernism, or at least the American version of this legacy, which he reduces to the assumed attitude of "alienation." The New York critics are remembered largely as the expositors of modernism, champions of modernist complexity, although their enthusiasm for modernist writing was allied with a belief in its political potential. Klein continues this preoccupation with "social engagement"—"Social engagement," he writes at one point, "is the meaning of accommodation" (26)—but the social/cultural significance Klein discerns in the fiction he singles out in his book is of a decidedly moderate if not utterly conformist character. In isolating those qualities of this fiction that allow him to argue it shows an accommodation to the social realities of postwar America one could also say that Klein robs it of its capacity to do anything other than affirm, and in so doing take its orderly place in Klein's own accommodationist Cold War sociology.

That Klein would prove to be wildly wrong about, at the very least, the endurance of this move toward accommodation among American writers—even as Klein was publishing his book an intensely iconoclastic and unaccommodating strain of comic and experimental fiction was beginning to appear and would eventually come to seem the most significant development in postwar American fiction—and even arguably exaggerated the degree of accommodation expressed in, especially, Ellison, Baldwin, and Malamud is not the most important point to be made about *After Alienation*, however, although it does insure that few people would want to read it now aside from its historical interest. But it does have historical interest as the prototype for the academic survey in which contemporary literature provides a useful tool for sounding out

fluctuations in the cultural atmosphere, however much the writing itself stands in as notional subject. The book further offers a compelling illustration that an interest in literature as political instrument or as the means for “cultural criticism,” no matter how “radical” its origins or “engaged” with the social and moral issues to which literature affords a point of access, is ultimately fully consonant with an academic criticism that likewise exploits the cultural standing of literature as a way of elevating its own discursively distinct project. In both cases, moreover, the aesthetic import of work not yet fully assimilated into even the most expansively defined literary “canon” is not merely ignored but implicitly judged not to be the concern of criticism at all.

If anything, *After Alienation* is even less interested in aesthetic analysis than *Radical Innocence*. Klein’s chapters consist mainly of a series of plot synopses and cursory explications that keep the writer focused on the book’s thesis that the important American writers after World War II move toward accommodation, which Klein at least manages to stress with some efficiency. It is noteworthy that, at a time when the prevailing academic critical method was—or is now broadly perceived to have been—New Criticism, these two books that first bring extended scholarly attention to postwar American fiction so resolutely resist formalism altogether, much less the specific presuppositions now attached to the New Critics. This approach to contemporary fiction—as a source of ideas or examples or cultural generalizations but not really as the object of detailed formal or aesthetic critique—has been prevalent enough in subsequent years that one could wonder whether there doesn’t after all lurk beneath the expanding scrutiny of contemporary fiction a residual uncertainty about its artistic value in the long run. How far beyond the disdain for contemporary writing embodied in the curriculum against which Klinkowitz rebelled is it really to allow certain writers and their work a kind of utility for advancing a brand of academic cultural commentary but implicitly regarding it as otherwise ill-suited to the ends of aesthetic inquiry? (To the extent, of course, that aesthetic inquiry is itself regarded as relevant to the business of academic criticism.)

Together *Radical Innocence* and *After Alienation* did help to establish for mid-century American fiction an identity separate from the “modern” fiction of the era following on World War I and clearly placed in the context of post-World War II American culture. One could even argue that although the concepts of “radical innocence” and “accommodation” seem to be at

some variance as critical terms for apprehending this identity, they are actually two sides of the same critical coin, a retreat from “alienation” that, given the conditions of the immediate postwar period, assuredly requires the most radical kind of innocence. But by 1971, when Tony Tanner’s *City of Words* was published, the stability of that identity delineated by Hassan and Klein is plainly in question, and the critical effort needed to keep track of the direction in which fiction is heading has greatly expanded.

The most immediately noticeable sign of that expanded effort in *City of Words* is the very breadth of its coverage of “American Fiction 1950-1970.” Well over twenty American fiction writers are given extended treatment in Tanner’s book, many others are discussed more briefly, and Tanner apologizes in his preface for being unable to get to at least a dozen more. This encyclopedic approach is accompanied by a surprising variety in selection, despite the more specific emphasis on what might be called “experimental” fiction that emerges from the book; certainly it is more interested in the formally and stylistically bolder fiction that was appearing in the 1960s than either *Radical Innocence* or *After Alienation*. While Tanner examines the work of such now notoriously postmodern writers as John Barth, John Hawkes, and Thomas Pynchon, he also includes chapters on Malamud, Ellison, John Updike, and Norman Mailer, none of them plain stylists to be sure, but certainly all considered “mainstream” postwar novelists. The diversity of subjects and approach represented by these writers would seem to cast doubt on the enterprise of establishing a commonality among their novels and stories based on a shared cultural outlook or any single imputed theme.

Another significant difference between *City of Words* and its two predecessors (both of which Tanner himself cites as forerunners in the preface to his book) is the method by which Tanner claims to have come to the critical insight about postwar fiction that serves as the book’s thesis, embodied in its title. “When I started thinking about writing this book,” Tanner writes, “I had no preconceived notions about recurrent themes by which I could group writers, or neat categories in which I could place their work. If anything, I embarked on my readings and re-readings motivated mainly by a sense of admiration for the wide range of individual talent which has emerged in American fiction during the last two decades.” Instead, “with continued intensive reading, certain recurring preoccupations, concerns, even obsessions, began to emerge from what at first appeared to be very dissimilar novels” (15). Thus, while one senses that Hassan and Klein

approached their projects with preconceived philosophical and political ideas they hoped to illustrate through their selection of writers and texts, Tanner is more genuinely presenting a reading of the fiction he cites, a consideration of its manifest features as they make themselves apparent to the critic interested in identifying them. This is arguably, in fact, the most revealing and impressive feature of *City of Words* itself, one that finally distinguishes it most clearly from books like *Radical Innocence* and *After Alienation*, and one that regrettably few later studies of contemporary fiction really shared. Tanner gives the impression, at least, of giving his attention to the immediately experiential qualities of his texts, of taking from them what they have to give—of being concerned first and foremost with what these texts have to offer as literary creations.

Tanner's interest in the literary character of current fiction is expressed most directly in his book's focus on language, on the tendencies of style he finds at work in much of this fiction. Although the specific styles of the disparate group of writers are distinctive enough (a fact of which Tanner takes due account in his individual analyses of their fiction), Tanner does delineate a common impulse among these writers to accentuate style to the point of making language itself implicitly one of the subjects their fiction pursues. So insistent is this impulse that Tanner introduces the term "foregrounding" to describe "the use of language in such a way that it draws attention to itself—often by its originality." Even more pointedly, Tanner suggests that in some cases of especially self-referential styles "within the same book words can be both referential and part of a verbal display" (20). Although Tanner is attentive as well to other formal and thematic elements of this fiction that takes its readers to the "city of words" (of plot he writes: "narrative lines are full of hidden persuaders, hidden dimensions, plots, secret organizations, evil systems, all kinds of conspiracies against spontaneity of consciousness, even cosmic take-over" (16)), it is this thesis about the self-reflexivity of postwar fiction and Tanner's thorough exegesis of his selected texts in illustration of it that continues to make *City of Words* an intriguing and rewarding work of historically informed literary criticism.

Along with Robert Scholes's *The Fabulators* (1967) *City of Words* is the first critical study to take note of this new self-reflexive fiction. While the word "postmodern" does not appear in Tanner's book, what would soon routinely be called by that name is, retrospectively at least, clearly the real subject with which Tanner is engaged. In many ways Tanner's analysis of

this fiction captures its most essential characteristics and identifies its most important practitioners; other, later, books would concentrate more intensively on “metafiction,” on black humor, on the “art of excess,” but few of them would really advance that much beyond the insights into the foregrounding of style, the creation of “verbal space,” the American writer’s antipathy to “conditioning forces,” afforded by *City of Words*. For that matter, no later elucidation of the artistic motives or conceptual designs behind the practice of literary postmodernism quite explains the whole phenomenon as well as Tanner’s observation that “American writers seem from the first to have felt how tenuous, arbitrary, and even illusory, are the verbal constructs which men call descriptions of reality” (27).

Nevertheless, throughout the two decades following the publication of *City of Words*—the period during which “contemporary literature” was accepted in the academic curriculum as an intellectually respectable subject of study—the perceived cutting edge in academic criticism of contemporary fiction was unquestionably criticism about or related to the innovative writers who could plausibly be associated with the postmodern. Indeed, a serious scrutiny of academic scholarship in general during these years would just as unquestionably reveal that the burgeoning critical and scholarly discourse on “postmodernism” more generally was derived more or less directly from this original discourse on the postmodern in American fiction. To the extent that *City of Words* stands as the precursor to these later books and scholarly articles, it must be said to have initiated what has been to date the most influential line of academic critical fashion in the study of contemporary literature. Unfortunately, so prominent, in fact did this line become that the very word “postmodern” would eventually be understood by many as almost synonymous with “academic” in its most imposing and ponderous mode, and in turn postmodern fiction would be classified as academic in an equally derogatory sense of the term.

A Period of Transition

Since courses in “contemporary literature” became respectable additions to the university curriculum, the corresponding scholarly books on the subject have assumed a few recognizable

forms, each of which have inevitable limitations for such books' survival as the kind of long-term contribution to "knowledge" academic scholarship is expected to provide. In this respect, the turn to theory in academic criticism has perhaps been beneficial to the study of contemporary literature, at least within the confines of academe itself, as it brings a stability and an established context to the study of writers who in most cases are still developing careers and whose work is thus subject to at best incomplete examination. For better or worse, academic criticism of contemporary fiction and poetry that endeavors primarily to survey or illuminate this work for its immediate literary value, or even for its broader cultural relevance, has provided only partial insights while risking the possibility of its own ultimate obsolescence.

A staple of all academic criticism is the single-author study, and such scholarly works on still-active writers have played a significant role in the "field" of contemporary literature. (Among other ways in which this field struggles against an unstable object of study is implicit in its very designation: Many of the writers on whom much of the early academic work on contemporary literature was focused are no longer contemporary, of course, and any subsequent criticism of their fiction (the book ultimately under scrutiny here examines fiction) will need to assign it to some other category, while newer writers become "contemporary.") The publication of a critical book surveying an author's extant body of work or exploring the author's habitual themes and methods generally signaled that the author in question had earned a place in the still-evolving canon of writers included on the syllabi of courses in contemporary fiction and thus deserved the extended treatment of a single-author volume. By now, such series as the Twayne U.S. Authors books and the "Understanding. . ." studies published by the University of South Carolina Press have made this sort of book much more commonplace, but in the development of academic criticism considering contemporary fiction it fulfilled an important function establishing an at least informal roster of writers worthy of academic attention.

Eventually the single-author monograph took on ambitions beyond providing an introduction or broad overview of its subject's work and began offering more "sophisticated" analyses of theme and aesthetic strategy and, with the rise of Theory, using the author's fiction as tests of a sort for the elaboration of theoretical perspectives or other external systems of thought. While this approach arguably does perhaps extend its own shelf-life for a somewhat longer time—until the theory in question begins losing its academic luster or otherwise no longer seems

salient—its long-term value in illuminating the author's work becomes questionable, even if the theory itself retains some interest. Many of the books written about, for example, Thomas Pynchon, Don De Lillo, and Toni Morrison are so heavily inflected by theory, by extra-literary agendas in general, that it is difficult to imagine that future readers interested in deepening their understanding of these writers—as opposed to tracking the influence of such figures as Lyotard, Lacan, Baudrillard, or Gayatri Spivak on American academic criticism-- will really find them very useful..

If single-author studies of contemporary writers threaten to become historical curiosities or episodes in the history of literary theory, another genre of critical book, the multi-text survey, aims for a more enduring utility it can only partially provide. Multi-text surveys actually come in several different sizes and varieties, ranging from the most all-inclusive historical surveys such as Frederick Karl's *American Fictions 1940-1980* to more focused surveys such as Steven Weisenburger's *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel 1930-1980* or Robert Rebein's *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists: American Fiction After Postmodernism*. What they have in common is a kind of topographical ambition to lay out the land occupied by contemporary fiction, to create and preserve a map of the practices and accomplishments of "current" writers in such a way that something like "knowledge" results, although it is a knowledge of trends and movements more than of individual writers and their bodies of work. Whether the trends and movements deemed significant upon the publication of these books will still be perceived as such when the currency of the analysis no longer obtains is of course uncertain, even if the more ambitious of such books seek to influence, even fix, future perceptions of what counts as important in this era of literary history. Certainly the more perspicacious of the multi-text surveys may still retain value for readers interested in a synoptic view of that era, to which all critical and historical accounts would contribute, but only the passage of time is going to allow some degree of settled judgment about the relative importance of the various practices that for now remain unavoidably contingent.

Some of these surveys take an approach that perhaps potentially reduces such contingency, but in assuming the form they do they risk becoming less studies of fiction per se and more examinations of social forces or cultural expressions. Coming with such titles as *Insanity and Redemption in Contemporary American Fiction*, *Designs of Darkness in*

Contemporary American Fiction, and *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk*, these books treat a selection of contemporary fiction thematically, through the application of a framing concept, generally of the author's own devising. The framing concept is advanced as offering a special insight into the nature of the subject texts, both individually and when considered in relation to one another. In most cases, such books avoid making overarching claims to capturing the essence of these texts, what makes them individually unique. At their best, they offer a perspective on the selected texts that can be considered alongside others and in that way help to demonstrate that those so considered are works that reward sustained attention.

Joseph M. Conte's *Design and Debris: A Chaotics of Postmodern American Fiction* belongs within this line of conceptual criticism. It is one of the numerous studies of American postmodern fiction that attempts to account for the postmodern in fiction by focusing on a particular formal quality or philosophical orientation that further specifies what makes a "postmodern" text distinctive beyond the vaguely radical connotation generally associated with the term. In this book Conte proposes a dual impulse in certain postmodern texts, toward on the one hand the disintegration of presumed order, both in the world and as the world is represented in fiction, and on the other toward the cultivation of an emergent order out of the disorder these texts faithfully render. "Design" is thus as much a defining feature of postmodern fiction as the "debris" of contemporary life this fiction must also acknowledge.

Postmodernism has proven to be probably the most examined phenomenon in postwar American fiction. Not only were postmodern authors and practices ("postmodern" as we now retrospectively apply the term, at least) more or less at the center of scholarly interest in contemporary fiction for the first decade or so after its acceptance as an academic field of study, but even now, more than four decades after its emergence as literature's contribution to the "radical" cultural movements of the 1960s, postmodernism continues to engage the interest of academic critics. While some such critics are more interested in postmodernism as a cultural orientation than specifically as an approach to the writing of fiction, Conte belongs among those who have attempted to delineate the radicalism of postmodern fiction in its departure from conventional modes of representation and its concomitant intensification of modernist formal experiment by examining the radical literary strategies at work in postmodern texts.

Conte focuses on both what must now be called canonical postmodernist novels such as De Lillo's *White Noise*, Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association*, and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, as well as less-discussed works such as John Hawkes's *Travesty*, Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*, and Gilbert Sorrentino's *Pack of Lies*. *Travesty* is Conte's first and most compelling example in fleshing out his claim ("design and debris," in fact, is a phrase taken from this novel), and it is one of his book's chief virtues that it brings this welcome attention to Hawkes, whose work may represent, in such books as *The Beetle Leg*, *The Goose on the Grave*, and *The Lime Twig*, the earliest appearance of what would later be characterized as postmodernism and whose body of work as a whole stands as one of the greatest achievements in postwar American fiction. He has become an unduly neglected figure in the consideration of literary postmodernism, and Conte's discussion of *Travesty* demonstrates Hawkes's centrality to this phenomenon.

According to Conte, "As a postmodern novelist, Hawkes does not shrink before the proposition of 'unmaking' or decreative force; he extols the complementarity of the two terms; and finally, he proposes the existence of an orderly disorder." *Travesty* "illustrates the tenuousness of authoritarian control as it slips into madness, the fragility of pattern as it dissolves into irregularity; and it proposes the revelation of some hidden order in the scatter of random occurrences, some more profound design within the welter of chaos" (42). This seems an accurate description of the thematic burden of *Travesty*, although the extent to which the "design and debris" strategy informs the novel's own formal design is not really explored very fully. One could argue that Hawkes's dictum that he began to write fiction "on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and theme" committed him to a design and debris aesthetic by which he reconstituted fiction from the shards of convention through what he called "totality of vision or structure." Unfortunately, Conte confines his discussion of design and debris to the thematic exposition of its salience as revealed in the "design" of its main character, who is driving a car hurtling at high speed toward an inevitable crash, and who discusses his intentions with his captive passengers. From Conte's analysis, one might conclude that *Travesty*'s narrative manifests "design and debris" allegorically, but not that Hawkes has fundamentally altered the formal assumptions of fiction in a way that is distinctively "postmodern."

If critical examination of postmodern fiction has in general exhibited a bias that distorts our perception of postmodern, experimental fiction and prevents full appreciation of its expressed qualities, it would be a bias toward the thematic, broadly philosophical implications that can be drawn from it. Most academic critics of postmodern fiction celebrate its antifoundational or "subversive" qualities, its capacity to incorporate cutting-edge critical theories and new ideas in science or epistemology, but rarely do they attend predominantly to the purely aesthetic consequences of postmodernism's various dismantlings of narrative convention. While the debris of inherited form lies in the wake of postmodern strategies, "design" is also an ultimate product of those strategies. Form is not discarded--putting aside the question of whether any work of fiction could be truly formless--but instead made more elastic, often through highlighting "form" as a specific issue of concern within the text itself. The real legacy of American postmodern fiction will be a demonstrable expansion of the range of possible formal variations of which fiction is capable beyond even the initial expansion of those possibilities achieved by the modernists, and more analyses of how a writer such as John Hawkes contributed to this legacy are needed.

The fiction of Kathy Acker also seems especially illustrative of a postmodern strategy of design and debris, and Conte does examine *Empire of the Senseless* in the context of its radical formal iconoclasm. As Conte notes, "Acker can be expected to disregard the traditional rules of fiction" (56). Her work employs discontinuity, collage and parody in a way that makes it an exemplar of Hawkes's dismissal of "the true enemies of fiction" almost as provocative as Hawkes's own; in some instances it is even more thoroughgoing in its rejection of narrative coherence. Unfortunately, Conte chooses to put most of his emphasis on the way Acker's iconoclasm serves an ulterior political purpose, insisting that "the scumbling of levels of discourse in the novel reflects Acker's anarchistic methodology, undermining the reader's presuppositions of dominant-intellectual and subordinate-proletarian cultural positions" (59). It is hard to deny that Kathy Acker included among her ambitions the desire to upend the "patriarchal order," but to whatever extent her fiction attracts future readers it will be because of its "anarchistic" formal energies, not its analysis of "cultural positions."

That Acker may have been motivated to create her unconventional texts at least in part by the belief they might implicitly undermine class and gender constructions does not ultimately

determine how their formal/aesthetic effects will be perceived. As in his discussion of Hawkes, Conte is ultimately more interested in Acker's thematic treatment of "design and debris," concluding that "Acker finds that even in the domain of anarchy—in nomadic space, after the disruption of the state apparatus, where women ride motorcycles—there must be discipline present" (74). But the real "discipline" Acker brings to her fiction is in the alternate "order" she provides despite the apparent anarchy of her means. Only if, in fact, readers catch on to the design of a work like *Empire of the Senseless*—unorthodox but nevertheless present—will such a work continue to find its readers. Conte identifies this design as rising from a conceptualism by which "methodology is directly supportive of the concept" animating it, but it is the way in which the reader can discern the relationship between methodology and concept that ultimately gives Acker's fiction its literary interest. Acker's particular application of conceptualism to fiction is what future readers are likely to find compelling about it, while the concept itself will likely come to seem rather reduced in its power to provoke.

Conte does a much more adequate job of accounting for the formally challenging postmodernism of Gilbert Sorrentino, Harry Mathews, and John Barth, writers Conte identifies as "proceduralists" who "invent forms without knowing the precise manner of text that will be generated" (76). Such works embody design and debris by revealing "an immanent design within their apparently chaotic distribution of materials." The designation "proceduralist" seems most immediately and most accurately applicable to Mathews's fiction, since his association with the Oulipo is well-known and since the Oulipian credo specifically calls for the use of rules and formal constraints in creating literary texts. "Procedural" seems less obviously descriptive of the fiction of Barth and Sorrentino, and Conte usefully examines the way Barth uses "arabesque" in his novel *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (and implicitly in other of his books) to create "nested frames" which provide a "recursive symmetry" that organizes the narrative, as well as the way Sorrentino in his *Pack of Lies* trilogy employs a complex patterning of constraints, some perhaps fully apparent only to Sorrentino, to give the novels a unity that is not conventionally serial. Conte's concluding remarks about Sorrentino aptly capture an essential element of this writer's work:

Sorrentino's conviction that structure can generate content in his fiction relies upon the reciprocal influence between author and text. The author invents the structure of the

work, but that structure compels his performance in ways that he had not anticipated.
(110-111)

If Conte's discussions of Barth and Sorrentino illuminate qualities of their work that have not previously been as clearly identified, his chapters on *White Noise*, *The Universal Baseball Association* and *Gravity's Rainbow* to some extent retrack old ground in the critical consideration of these novels. Conte uses information theory, systems theory, complexity theory, and the ideas of the mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot to map the design and debris strategy at work in these iconic postmodern texts, and while the readings that result seem perfectly cogent in elucidating that strategy, nothing very fresh is really added to the commentary on the novels themselves beyond what has already been offered in the voluminous existing criticism of them. At best they demonstrate that such works readily lend themselves to a critical approach that is itself "postmodern" in its assumptions and its resources, although in my view their complexity is less a consequence of their concordance with the more abstruse levels of postmodern theory than their capacity to stand up to critical and interpretive scrutiny from a multitude of perspectives and still seem not exhausted in their potential to reveal meaning and provide for a bracing reading experience.

A final chapter attempts to bring the study of postmodern fiction into the digital era, announcing that "The paradigm shift from print to digital culture should be acknowledged as a defining aspect of postmodernism" (193). Containing relatively brief analyses of the work of William Gibson, Richard Powers, and De Lillo's *Underworld* as examples of fiction that "though bound to the present order. . .is provocatively enhanced by an engagement with the terms and conditions of the information age," (199), it essentially reaffirms the accomplishments of the "print order," at least in the form of postmodern fiction, which "offers certain palliatives for. . .symptoms of technological neurasthenia." For Conte

Finally, postmodern fiction offers relief for the "pixelated," those viewers stunned into anomie by the bombardment of pixels--the smallest image-forming units of the video display. It turns out that print on paper still has the capacity to evoke images and ideas as compelling as any we might encounter in the flicker of a screen.

It seems to me that here Conte has stretched the "postmodern" to the limits of its utility as a critical concept. If the "paradigm shift" ushering in digital culture is a "defining aspect of postmodernism," why should it not require the postmodern critic's unhesitating embrace? If Conte is right that what he calls "electronic composition" has not yet produced its "masterly" author, then doesn't this shift mark a break, a period of transition between postmodernism and a new dispensation that will embrace the dominance of the digital? Surely "postmodern" cannot continue to be the designation of choice for describing all literary or philosophical projects that show the world to be more complex, beliefs about it more necessarily relative, than we once imagined. Nor can it indefinitely remain essentially a synonym for "unconventional" or "experimental." Unconventional writers might be motivated simply by the desire to try out alternative strategies, not to seek out those that are already acceptably postmodern as critics and theorists have defined the strategy.

It may be that academic criticism will turn to electronic forms as the subject of "advanced" analysis. This would certainly be more in keeping with the direction academic criticism has taken in the last twenty-five years: away from the consideration of works of literature as a self-sufficient task and toward approaches that enhance the role of academic criticism itself. In the study of contemporary fiction this would mean less emphasis on identifying and examining the most significant writers and works and more or on the cultural and cognitive implications of the electronic medium itself. Literary study, or at least that branch of it devoted to the contemporary, could merge with media study. If present and future writers are to be provided with the same sort of critical attention that has been accorded to the postmodernists, it will probably be necessary that literary criticism be rejuvenated in a form free of institutional requirements. It will require critics once again interested first of all in literature and not in the status of their own critical projects or the interrogation of trends in culture as a whole.

The Organized Efforts of the Program

To say, as Mark McGurl does in *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, that "far from occasioning a sad decline in the quality or interest of American literature, as one so often hears, the writing program has generated a complex and evolving constellation of aesthetic problems that have been explored with tremendous energy--and a times great brilliance--by a vast range of writers who have also been students and teachers" is not to say creative writing programs themselves have been responsible for the "tremendous energy" and frequent "brilliance" that I agree does indeed characterize a great deal of American fiction in the post-World War II period (especially the period of the 1960s and 70s). Although I wouldn't necessarily claim that a "vast" number of energetic and brilliant writers have been "students and teachers" in creative writing programs, still, a large enough number of such writers, from Flannery O'Connor to Donald Barthelme to Stanley Elkin, have participated in the creative writing "program" to one extent or another, but surely these writers would have been just as energetic and just as brilliant if they had not had creative writing to jump-start their careers or to provide them with a reliable livelihood.

Nor is to say that, on the whole, the "program era" has produced "a rich and multifaceted body of literary writing" to say that, however "multifaceted" it might be, "this body of work is "rich" all the way down. Again, just to list some of the writers who have been associated with creative writing is to show that much of the best postwar fiction can be claimed by "the program," even if it is hardly responsible for providing these writers with their talent. That creative writing has help to nurture writers from previously underrepresented groups of American is undeniable (and one of its greatest accomplishments), but this does not mean either that it can be credited with the quality of what the best of these writers ultimately produced or that the fiction created by these groups is uniformly "rich." I believe that creative writing programs can help aspiring writers achieve a minimum level of competence with certain kinds of writing tasks they may not have been able to achieve as quickly on their own, but they surely do not manufacture good writers simply through the fact of their existence.

McGurl does make a claim on behalf of the enhanced "excellence" of postwar American fiction that is based on the fortuitous rise of creative writing:

Because of the tremendous expansion of the literary talent pool coincident to the advent of mass higher education, and the wide distribution, therein, of elevated literary ambitions, and the cultivation in these newly vocal, vainglorious masses of the habits of self-conscious attention to craft through which these ambitions might plausibly be realized, is it not true that owing to the organized efforts of the program--to the simple fact of our trying harder than ever before--there has been a system-wide rise in the excellence of American literature in the postwar period?

Many readers and reviewers seem to have taken *The Program Era* as a brief on behalf of the salubrious effects of creative writing on American literature (really just American fiction), but this is as concrete an account of the way in which creative writing "improved" American literature as we get—it was there to take advantage of the greater accessibility to higher education, and the increase in "literary ambitions" this inevitably entailed, and to encourage "habits of self-conscious attention to craft." Nothing in the overwhelmingly most popular method of creative writing instruction adopted by writing programs—the "workshop" method—is shown in particular to have resulted in the "excellence" of the system, although the focus on "craft" has presumably helped foster a more widespread technical competence in the "literary fiction" that gets published.

That is why Elif Batuman's critique (*London Review of Books*) of creative writing in the guise of a review of *The Program Era*, which otherwise makes some perfectly good points worthy of debate, was really beside the point as a response to McGurl's book. McGurl is more interested in the way in which writers, finding themselves in an environment in which they were systematically exposed to "a complex and evolving constellation of aesthetic problems," unavoidably considered and addressed those problems, and how American fiction in the postwar era unavoidably shows the influence of this engagement. Thus, when Batuman (among others) focuses on whether creative writing is good or bad for writers, she's not really discussing the subject of *The Program Era*, and when McGurl himself takes up Batuman's indictment (*Los Angeles Review of Books*), he has to alter his own focus and consider the questions she raises about the baneful effects of creative writing on would-be writers. His book describes the ways in which writers and their work have reflected or embodied the "complex" problems they

encountered from within the system, a description to which Batuman's reservations about creative writing as a discipline simply aren't germane.

Ultimately *The Program Era* isn't much different from many other academic studies of postwar or "contemporary" fiction that attempt to find just the right formulation or critical insight that captures the essence of postwar fiction, or at least an important practice that is distinctive of postwar fiction. Other books propose such terms as "systems novel" or "radical innocence" or "dirty realism" as candidates. ("Black humor," "metafiction," "minimalism," and, indeed, "postmodern" began as such terms.) McGurl proposes "program fiction." As an interpretive tool, this formulation works pretty well in McGurl's analysis, and in my opinion *The Program Era* is a valuable addition to the collection of scholarly studies of postwar American fiction attempting to give this period some critical definition.

Such books have been numerous, of course, because as a scholarly discipline, "contemporary literature" is by definition undefined. The literary "fields" predating the contemporary have already been intensively, and more or less permanently, sorted and categorized, their important authors, works, trends, and movements identified and established for further study. As an academic field, contemporary literature is unsettled and in flux (although perhaps the immediate postwar era, say 1945-1975, is becoming more stable in its outlines), which on the one hand provides an opportunity for an assiduous and well-read critic to map the territory, but on the other hand this effort probably can't help but be reductive unless the critic merely intends to treat all writers and works equally, including as many of the former as possible and restricting discussion of the latter to simple summary.

Thus if *The Program Era* is not as comprehensive as it claims to be, this does not make it less useful as an examination of that large enough slice of American fiction on which McGurl concentrates—the fiction that can plausibly be understood at least in part by its author's affiliation with writing programs. But just to name a few of the writers that McGurl excludes from consideration indicates the limitations of "program era" as interpretive lens: Stanley Elkin, William Gass, Gilbert Sorrentino, Saul Bellow, John Updike, Norman Mailer. Elkin, Gass, and Sorrentino were associated with creative writing programs, but their work nevertheless doesn't quite fit McGurl's notion of "technomodernism," his renaming of one the tendencies usually

identified with the postmodern. Bellow, Updike, and Mailer are perhaps the three most obvious examples of writers who had nothing to do with creative writing, and it is really implausible to claim that postwar American fiction can be adequately measured without discussing them.

"Program fiction" becomes in McGurl's analysis a perfectly coherent concept for thinking about this kind of contemporary fiction, but finally "program era" doesn't suffice as a label for the whole period. The book is very good in its chronicling of the way the pool of literary talent was expanded by creative writing, and in analyzing the dynamics of the interaction between those who found themselves part of "the program" and those "aesthetic problems" swirling around it. But, however much American society was transformed by the swell of enrollment in higher education, American literature was not completely subsumed into the university. (Indeed, another book considering those writers who resisted the migration of literature and the literary vocation into the academy would be an interesting project.) "Creative writing" did not entirely replace "fiction" and "poetry" as the name for the form to which poets and novelists aspire to contribute.

And if McGurl is trying to characterize an entire literary era, then his neglect of poetry and the role of poets in the creative writing program is also a debilitating problem, however much he needed to limit his focus to make the scope of the book manageable. In my opinion, this omission is a much more serious problem, even for the thesis that the creative writing program is the most important postwar development in American literature, than McGurl seems to think. In almost every way—number of faculty, number of students recruited, influence of a program's graduates, etc.—poetry has been on an equal footing with fiction in the development of creative writing. Is it less important to understand how the institutionalizing of literary practice has affected American poetry in the postwar years than American fiction? Is taking and teaching a poetry workshop less reflective of the democratization of higher education than taking or teaching one in fiction?

Perhaps most importantly: Are the same forces McGurl describes as influencing the work of fiction writers through creative writing programs similar in shaping the work of poets, such forces as the injunction to "write what you know" or the impulse to find one's "voice" or the pressures of class and ethnicity? If so, then we need an account of how such forces can be seen

affecting the work of individual poets just as McGurl provides for fiction writers or the overall claims he makes about their salience are less convincing. If not, then those claims are much more questionable to begin with. Arguably both the writing and the criticism of poetry have been absorbed by the academy even more thoroughly than with fiction, and a history of the creative program that deliberately avoids reckoning with the place of poetry and the consequences of its absorption seems, if not fatally flawed, then certainly incomplete.

A full account of the effects of creative writing on American fiction would also require an assessment of the role played by literary magazines in providing publication for the students and graduates of creative writing—particularly that first publication, which often determines whether a writing career will be possible. The vast majority of these magazines are either sponsored by creative writing programs themselves or publish primarily writers with ties to creative writing. They have become de facto a part of the academic system that created and maintains creative writing, and it is fair to say many if not most of them exist to keep the system working. While also rising from the "little" magazines pre-dating creative writing, these journals are now firmly entrenched as part of the academic machinery that confers status and enables promotion within the system, and their part in determining the direction of literary history—past, present, and future—needs scrutiny as well.

Abandoning the Ruins

As a younger man, my overriding aspiration in life was to become a Professor of English. Lest this seem an even more feeble ambition than in fact it actually was, I must qualify its expression by adding that, of course, I understood the job of the English professor to involve primarily writing about and teaching literature, activities I had come to think of as the twin poles of a vocation both eminently civilized and, as far as I could tell, uncommonly satisfying. I knew that there were obstacles to fulfilling my ambition, some obvious and in plain view, others

unforeseeable, but my belief in the virtue of this calling was such that I was more than willing to face those obstacles, come what may. The biggest obstacle, finding a suitable position from which to profess the wonders of all things literary, proved as daunting as I could have anticipated and more. However, it was finally not the indignities of the collapsing job market, well-documented as they nevertheless are, that convinced me I should abandon my hopes for a tweedy life of highminded literary study. Rather, the study of literature itself gradually lost its appeal; by the time I was willing to admit this fact to myself, the very idea of literature as an academic “subject” seemed a contrivance designed expressly to destroy all interest in the actual writing that brought the subject into being in the first place.

I do not mean to echo the complaints leveled at trendy forms of literary study by conservatives and other traditionalists calling for a return to more established methods of teaching literature, complaints voiced with almost apocalyptic urgency in such titles as *The Death of Literature*, *Literature Lost*, and *Who Killed Homer?*. While many of the criticisms made by the outraged traditionalists are valid enough—literary study in the major universities has become highly politicized, literary texts are being enlisted in and subjected to agendas that distort them beyond recognition—they are also, in my view, deliberately misleading in their suggestion that before the barbarians arrived the study of literature was essentially unproblematic. These traditionalists would have us believe, for all they are willing to seriously examine the actual practices they implicitly defend, that teaching literature, at least as they would have it done, is an entirely transparent affair, simply a matter of making available the intrinsically valuable qualities of literary works through the methods appropriate to the task. In this view, one might take one’s own “approach” to the elucidation of these texts, as long as all such approaches are finally subordinate to the larger goal of revealing what is properly literary in the work at hand. This kind of diversity can be seen simply as evidence of the richness of literature, and effective literary instruction would seek precisely to authenticate the riches to be discovered in great works of literature. I myself accepted such a justification of literary study without reservation, but my experience forced me to recognize that it provided a no more self-evidently natural way to include literature in a college curriculum than any of the current varieties of literary theory so offensive to the traditionalists.

It must here be acknowledged that my experience teaching literature has not been in the upper tier of American colleges, nor even in the more favorably regarded of the state universities. For that matter, I have no more than a passing acquaintance with the community college, which by most who discuss higher education in the United States are often held out as the primary institution serving those students not attending the prototypical university or liberal arts college. (The prototype usually seems very similar to the university at which the commentator either was once a student or is currently employed.) Instead, I have been an Instructor/Lecturer/Assistant Professor in the American regional university or state college, of the kind usually called the University of _____ at _____, or Central _____ State College, schools that are often required to admit any student with a high school diploma. To those who would say that such schools do not provide a representative sample of the quality of literary study in the United States, I readily grant that the expectations for literary study at one of these institutions are of a different order than in the better colleges, that few of the students expect to make it a professional vocation (although a significant number of them are in training to be high school English teachers), and that the methods and goals of instruction are less self-consciously up-to-date. But I think it is nevertheless fair to suggest that if literature as an academic discipline is to be given its due, a test of its efficacy must be its results at colleges like these. Although an appreciation of literature might indeed be an acquired taste, has not an implicit motive for offering, and in many cases requiring, its formal study in American colleges been to enable as many students as possible to acquire the taste?

I am including in my definition of “literary study” not just the graduate study of literature or the structured undergraduate English major or minor, but also the various kinds of introductory literature courses taken largely by non-majors. Again, it seems to me, the credibility of literature conceived as an academic subject depends at least as much on the success or failure of these courses as on those designed for students who presumably come to them with an already established interest in the subject. Given that the introductory course is often part of a general education curriculum (as it was in almost every college at which I taught such a course), one must conclude that it is perceived as carrying its own distinctive value. That value is admittedly described in a variety of ways. The study of literature, for some, is an exercise in “critical reading” that can be transferred to other, non-literary, contexts where the ability to interpret

“texts” is thought to be a useful skill, as is the “critical thinking” that can be developed through writing about literature. For others, exposing students to works of literature allows them to engage with ideas and issues in ways not possible in other courses. For most, however—and this holds true for both faculty in the English department and, surprisingly enough, many faculty members across the campus—a literature course simply requires students to read literature, which is seen as good in and of itself.

Luckily, the English faculty at the kind of college I am describing (henceforth I will use the composite name “Service University” to refer to this type of school) have an easier job grasping the purpose of their department’s major. Most of the students pursuing a major in English at Service University are in fact preparing to be secondary school English teachers, for which the English department provides only part of the curriculum (generally 6-8 required courses). Since it is presumed they are being asked to acquaint these students with “literature” at a fairly rudimentary level, the faculty is by and large free of the need to think much about the broader ramifications of literary study. On the one hand, the courses they teach are limited in scope and essentially unvaried from year to year, so that little attention needs to be given to them on a curricular level. On the other, the very narrowness of the curriculum paradoxically allows for many different views about what specific works should be included in the survey courses that dominate the course schedule and about how they should be presented—those with interests in this writer or that literary movement want to make sure their interests get represented, to avoid having their dissertations or their research work come to seem wasted efforts. Thus, the only way to insure that all such views are respected is to in effect give free rein to each. In fact, given the general paucity of opportunities to teach the desirable literature courses, there is among the faculty a built-in disinclination to question the methods employed by colleagues. No one, especially among the junior faculty, wants to be denied his or her turn at these courses by appearing to be someone ready to rock an already precarious vessel. The result is a situation in which it is in the interest of every department member (if not of the department itself) to actually discourage attempts to bring coherence or integration to the literature curriculum. The only way to preserve a place for one’s own philosophy of literary instruction in the Service U English department is to agree, tacitly at least, to preserve a similar place for everyone.

It is true that, for the most part, the predominant philosophy of instruction in such a department could be described as “traditional,” that is, it emphasizes interpretation, historical context, and thematic continuity, all of which are directed ultimately to the task of providing students with both a deeper understanding and an appreciation of literature. Indeed, the Service U English faculty would for the most part accept the curricular philosophy favored by the traditionalists, so that the differences among them are considered to be differences merely of degree that somehow get resolved through the broader agreement about ultimate purposes—even if this agreement has always remained unstated. Perhaps it is simply taken for granted, but perhaps most on the faculty have forgotten that it was ever necessary. That each member of the faculty brings different assumptions to bear on his/her work thus doesn’t seem remarkable because everyone further assumes that such a state of affairs is part and parcel of the discipline itself. It is unavoidably what happens when one goes about the job of teaching a subject like literature in the first place. In my opinion, the fragmentation that occurs in the English curriculum at a school like Service is actually more harmful to the students the department serves than the kind of fragmentation one finds in the more prominent departments of English. In many, if not most, of the latter, the integrity of literature has long since been dismissed as an appropriate disciplinary concern, and students are left to piece together the shards of different theoretical and critical viewpoints into some minimally clear perspective on the broader landscape of critical and cultural theory. At Service University, where literature is still ostensibly the focus of study, students are informed about any number of issues related to the history and interpretation of literature, but are never really told what, if any, importance they are to attribute to literature as a distinctive form of expression. This is left to take care of itself.

At least, a traditionalist might say, at Service the importance of studying literature is still assumed, even granting that the nature of its importance is not fully articulated. At the more “prestigious” colleges and universities the diminishment of works of literature to a status no more exalted than any other culturally-influenced text, at best (at worst, to a role as carriers of various kinds of oppressive cultural attitudes and sociopolitical forces), not only threatens the survival of literature but openly proclaims its study to be fundamentally instrumental, in this case the means of furthering a largely political, or at least extraliterary, agenda. Clearly the proponents of literature-for-its-own-sake in their struggle for hegemony in the English

department (and other modern language disciplines as well) want to suggest that their methods are not instrumental, that what they advocate is a return to the kind of literary study for which literature is not a means to other, externally determined ends but is itself a sufficiently compelling focus of attention. But it is finally difficult to accept this notion. Nothing in the history of literary study or, more broadly speaking, in the evolution of the English department, gives much credence to such nostalgia for the lost purity of the literature curriculum. Certainly the example of Service University, where a semblance at least of the otherwise vanished curriculum survives, does not furnish much support for believing that the academic study of literature could be an endeavor free of personal or partisan secondary interests, if only it could rid itself of those who have diverted it from its proper path, either through an inability to recognize this path or through sheer bad faith. If anything, the open turn to forms of literary scholarship and an English curriculum that make little attempt to conceal their disciplinary impurities can be seen as a logical consequence of adapting literature to the American university curriculum in the first place, where almost inevitably a premium will be put on a subject's utilitarian possibilities.

As Gerald Graff shows in *Professing Literature* (1987), this adaptation was made only gradually and in fits and starts, with each attempt at installing literature at the center of English studies met with skepticism and outright resistance by philologists and other historicist scholars unable to see what the simple appreciation or interpretation of works of literature would add to an academic curriculum. Until literature was finally able to fully displace philology and its research cousins (which, to judge from Graff's account, did not really take place much before the 1930s), it was certainly the case that works of literature were employed by English professors for their instrumental value as exemplars of rhetoric, as sources of historical knowledge, or as texts provoking moral and ethical reflection. Once the study of English became more or less synonymous with the study of literature, however, the assumption seems to be that "literature itself," as Graff puts it, was unambiguously the focus of attention. (Putting aside non-literature programs such as linguistics, creative writing, and, more recently, composition/rhetoric.) But, as Graff's narrative also clearly shows, even the proponents of a literature curriculum did not exactly envision it as an exercise in passive appreciation. Not literature itself, but "criticism" became the activity that supplanted philology, criticism understood as textual exegesis rather

than ethical commentary. So successful, in fact, was the assimilation of criticism of this sort into the academy that eventually any distinction between literary criticism and literary scholarship became so blurred as to disappear. Not only have the terms become virtually synonymous in practice, but to all intents and purposes the only variety of “literary criticism” to be found outside the academy any longer is the (brief) periodical book review, and even these are frequently written by academics.

The mode of criticism dominant in academic literary study until at least the 1970s was, as almost everyone now agrees, the New Criticism. Although New Criticism is now regarded as hopelessly old-fashioned because of its reputed focus on the aesthetics of literature, clearly, in the context of the narrative provided by Graff, it became the quasi-established method of both literary scholarship and instruction because it could be presented as a means of producing knowledge. Its more or less discernible, more or less “objective” procedures gave the analysis of literature a rigor of sorts, even though one could always employ the method to arrive at a highly idiosyncratic interpretation, or at least one not necessarily subject to testing in the manner of real science. While many of the practitioners of New Criticism did believe themselves to be in a sense advocating the aesthetic possibilities of literature, it is surely true that defenses of the practice would often require speaking of “literature itself” as finally a perpetually fruitful source of interpretive analysis, as a tool for developing New Critical reading skills. Those who were taught these skills can probably be forgiven for thinking that because of its emphasis on a certain terminology and its insistence on a set of sanctioned reading strategies New Criticism—at least as represented by those of their professors influenced by it—was more about critical methodology than about literature, and even those who understood that the method was meant to be a way of disclosing the constituent beauties of literature could easily enough forget to underscore this fact if and when they came to teach literature to students of their own. (I did.) As with any other favored method, those who employ it can become so enamored of its virtues as to lose sight of its intended objects.

I would argue, in other words, that in the battle over the English curriculum between the partisans of cultural studies and the partisans of literary study the latter are in no position to charge that cultural studies relegates literature to a supporting role secondary to the promulgation of a particular critical method. The notion that as a discipline English has ever been, or even

could be, essentially a preservation society dedicated to the inherent virtues of literature is mostly unsupportable. Further, the impression, conveyed perhaps as much by the media outside of academe as by the idealists within, that this ought to be the mission of an English department with literature at its core has arguably helped to hasten the hostile takeover of English by cultural studies and all the other forces seen by the traditionalists as arrayed against the serious study of literature. By defending what they have come to regard as the proper home of literature against the perceived interlopers through misleading claims of concern about the integrity of literary study, appealing more often than not to such words as “tradition,” “wisdom,” or even “beauty,” the critics of recent curricular trends have allowed the rebels to make rival claims to the standards generally more valued by the academy: objectivity, analytical rigor, theoretical sophistication, and, above all, a commitment to the real-world relevance of their work. I do not mean to imply that the traditionalists’ love of literature is insincere or that such love counts for nothing. I do suggest that the generation or two of English professors trained after the ascendancy of criticism came to so closely identify the cause of “literature itself” with the activity of their university department that they could not separate the two, even when to do so might have made their cause less tied to the inevitable fluctuations in the marketplace of academic criticism.

As a graduate student led to graduate work in English out of what I thought was a simple love of literature, I myself came easily enough to accept this identification of the literary with the academic. If I began graduate school with little thought of becoming a professor—truth be told, with little thought of what would come afterward at all—by the time I finished, any distinction I might once have seen between my initial fascination with works of fiction, poetry, or drama and taking up the professing of literature as a professional career had all but disappeared. Perhaps I was among the last group of students to receive a graduate education in an English department still governed by the assumptions of New Criticism and related critical perspectives, and thus the conflation of an initial enthusiasm for literature with the disciplinary imperatives of the University may no longer arise, or at least may not arise in quite the same way. If so, I cannot agree with the traditionalists that the absence of enthusiasts like my younger self from the English department, in whatever form it comes to take, will either do lasting harm to the vitality of literature or ensure that English as discipline will cease to be relevant—although without

literature at its center it would admittedly become a different kind of discipline. In transforming itself into a field of study more comfortably embodying current institutional values English could hardly be accused of shirking its responsibilities; by the same token, I cannot see how interest in “literature itself” would disappear if it was no longer held hostage to the prerogatives of the University.

It is easy to see how, literature having established itself as a respectable academic subject, these prerogatives could be adopted as one’s own. James Axtell, in his 1998 book *The Pleasures of Academe*, encapsulates the high ideals held by many, if not most, university professors of Axtell’s generation:

Whatever else they are, colleges and universities are institutions designed and sustained by society primarily for intellectual purposes: to increase the knowledge, understanding, and mental prowess of their students and, at the same time, to increase knowledge and (ideally) wisdom for the greater good of society and humankind through the published research and scholarship of their faculties. The essential life of the university, therefore, consists of the “long slow quest and slow discovery, the quiet expanding influence of personality upon personality, of mind upon mind, the silent interdependent growth of knowledge and power and spirit, the slow unconscious advance toward maturity, from day to day, in both teachers and taught.” It is at heart the product of the intellectual and imaginative synapse between professors and students in the classroom, office, library, and lab.

Although Axtell is a political science professor, this statement would no doubt be heartily endorsed by his colleagues in the English department. If anything, the literature professor is likely to view his subject as the most eminently qualified to meet the lofty goals described here. But, as I have previously pointed out, to enlist the study of literature in the larger project of developing the “mental prowess” of students is to conceptualize it in essentially instrumental terms, however much it is necessary to deny that literary study otherwise needs to pass the test of practicality. While Axtell’s appeal to “the greater good of society” might no longer command the unqualified assent it once might have, his general account of the academic mission would long have been considered unexceptional, even self-evident, highlighting again the way in which the

professing of literature was able to accommodate itself to the terms of that mission with remarkable alacrity. That it does not now seem quite so self-evident can be attributed not only to the sharpened edge of the contemporary academy's attitude toward American society but also to a phenomenon less clearly linked to specific disciplinary practices and, to my mind, much more likely to undermine whatever remains of the original justification for including literary study in the university's curriculum.

In *The University in Ruins* (1996), the late Bill Readings confronts this phenomenon head-on, providing a perspective on the travails of the postmodern university that should be sobering to everyone concerned with higher education, not just literary scholars. Readings sees the university's plight as the inevitable outcome of social and cultural forces it is essentially powerless to combat. Simply put, the role established for the modern university over the past 200 years, to mold educated citizens who will take productive places in the nation-state is no longer tenable in an era when the nationstate is declining in significance:

. . .the University is becoming a different kind of institution, one that is no longer linked to the destiny of the nation-state by virtue of its role a producer, protector, and inculcator of an idea of national culture. The process of economic globalization brings with it the relative decline of the nation-state as the prime instance of the reproduction of capital around the world. For its part, the University is becoming a transnational bureaucratic corporation, either tied to transnational instances of government such as the European Union or functioning independently, by analogy with a transnational corporation.

Readings shows how universities have come to replace the former goal of nurturing national culture with the unobjectionable but ultimately vacuous goal of cultivating "excellence. Although this latter standard provides American universities with some uniformity of purpose—all institutions presumably can commit themselves to the pursuit of excellence—the criteria by which the new excellence is to be measured are so vague and so various as to essentially float free of any mooring in actual content. By making excellence an end in itself, without reference to truly common standards, or more importantly, a common understanding of how the various disciplines move toward it in tandem, the question of why these disciplines are housed together in a place called a university at all is effectively elided. At best, the work done by and in the

disciplines becomes the available commodity the corporate university is able to market to its student customers.

Readings's analysis makes unequivocally clear the extent to which all academic departments depend for their legitimacy on a socially shared perception that they function as part of a larger project conferring the benefits of education in some recognizably valuable way. Thus in the old dispensation the study of literature in the United States could be justified as part of the effort to mold national character or instill national pride, especially during the long period of the cold war, at the least as an activity that could plausibly contribute to the development of those attributes desirable in the responsible citizen of the world's dominant nation. In the new dispensation, however, it is difficult to see how such study could really continue to be indulged to quite the same degree, no matter how "excellent" an individual program might claim to be. What, exactly, is the cash value of excellence in literary study to the corporate university? What tangible rewards does it bring to the student, the institution, or the nation? Of course, the good that the study of literature promises to the individual—enhanced critical thinking skills, refined sensibilities, a raised political consciousness—or to the idealist professor—an educated vanguard of whatever sort—can still be defended (as Axtell does), but why would either the corporate university or its various stockholders conceivably find these goods worth paying for?

Readings's portrayal of the university in ruins would seem to be sufficiently disturbing to prompt all sides in the conflict over defining the literature curriculum to find common cause against the real threat, not just to its coherence or its potential utility but to its very existence. It is hard to imagine either the traditional or the radical version of the curriculum flourishing in any meaningful way in the corporate university, where service to the all-encompassing universe of corporate interests is bound to be the ultimate measure of excellence and where the other-worldliness inherent in all forms of literary study will not be easy to conceal. (The corporate order will surely find both Harold Bloom and Fredric Jameson equally irrelevant and entirely beneath notice.) But each camp seems content, for now, to keep firm hold on their illusions that what they do is not merely an important element in the college curriculum but indeed is the very energy source of the "essential life of the university"—if only the other camp would just go away.

There are some in the academic establishment who do claim they have seen the folly of their ways. Robert Scholes, a veritable eminence grise of literary study in America, confesses that he now sees the discipline of English as “a field of study that seems to me hollow, falling, though perhaps not yet visibly fallen.” It has become, in other words, a discipline in ruins. In his book *The Rise and Fall of English*, Scholes argues that an English curriculum dominated by the study of literature is no longer viable, partly because of the demands of an increasingly multicultural society but also because of the responsibility of the corporate university to its biggest customer:

What this society wants of those who graduate from its schools and colleges with degrees in the humanities—as opposed to what many of those who claim to speak for it say it wants—are, at worst, docility and grammatical competence, at best, reliability and a high level of textual skills. What this society does not want from our educational institutions is a group of people imbued with critical skills and values that are frankly antagonistic to those that prevail in our marketplaces, courts, and legislative bodies.

Scholes has apparently come to accept the notion that what society wants, society should get, and he goes on in *The Rise and Fall of English* to sketch out a plan he feels should fit the bill.

I do not necessarily find Scholes’s argument outlandish, or even unconvincing. He has come to the same conclusion from his sinecure in the Ivy League that I myself came to after a much different kind of experience teaching college English: that literature makes a poor subject of academic study. His book is especially refreshing for its open admission that literary study cannot be sustained without a seal of approval on its utility by society. (He is also right in suspecting that his prescriptions for change will not likely go down well with either the academic traditionalists or the curricular radicals—both sides are too heavily invested in their unfounded belief in their own autonomy, in their essential freedom from social obligation.) Yet this is not to say that the program he proposes for saving English, if not literature, ought to be enacted. While this is clearly not the place for a detailed evaluation of Scholes’s solution to the problem he correctly identifies, since his analysis runs on a track parallel to my own there are two points I would like to make about his proposal to overhaul the English curriculum.

The first concerns its complexity. At its heart is a general education core that returns to the medieval concept of the “trivium,” comprised of the study of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. Each of these topics is broken down into specific courses with names such as “Language and Human Subjectivity,” “Representation and Objectivity,” “Systems and Dialectic,” and “Persuasion and Mediation.” Given that the number of core requirements in most colleges is being reduced rather than enhanced (especially the 13 number of English-sponsored core courses), it is difficult to imagine that such an ambitious project as this would have any chance at all of gaining support, even if all of its potential complications could be adequately foretold. Added to this reconfiguration of the core curriculum is Scholes’s redesign of the English major. At this level, courses would be offered in four categories: theory, history, production, and consumption. These courses would not focus on the teaching of literature, but rather on what Scholes here and elsewhere calls “textuality” (see *Textual Power*, 1985). At this stage, the distinction between Scholes’s program and what is called cultural studies essentially disappears, as “texts” of whatever variety and provenance would be welcome as objects of study. This sort of approach certainly has as much validity as, say, the coverage model of literary study, but its amorphousness suggests it would be monstrously hard to administer, and thus likely would prove to be no more coherent than the curriculum it seeks to replace.

The second point brings me back to Service University. Simply put, Scholes’s program could never be adopted at a school like Service U. If it were to be tried, I am almost certain it would produce nothing like the results Scholes has in mind for it, just as the literary model copied from the liberal arts and research universities has failed to meet the needs of the students entangled in it. Not only would the English faculty resist such a program with all its collective might (which does not itself make a case against the program), but the students, majors and non-majors alike, would find the entire concept virtually incomprehensible. This is not, it should be said, because these students would be less prepared to do the work asked of them than those attending Professor Scholes’s classes at Brown, but because they would be utterly unprepared to understand why they were being asked to do the work at all. Those academics, like Scholes, who dominate discussion of curricular and pedagogical issues in American higher education seem unable to imagine the conditions that prevail at a school like Service University, so different from those they are used to at their own more advantaged campuses. Here the students have at

least become accustomed to the idea they must take a few English classes, including some literature, because it is said to be good for them. Some even find the one or two composition courses they are required to take at least potentially helpful, although it is doubtful in the extreme that many of them would ever perceive Scholes's overdetermined "trivium" as something designed to provide them with the more rudimentary writing and communication skills they will need. The English majors understand English to be a "subject" that includes British and American literature, and they expect to learn something about such literature, if not exactly to be transformed by it, and to in turn teach this subject to their own future high school students. Scholes's revamped English department, with its trivium and its textualities, could not be more ill-equipped to fulfill the expectations of the students attending Service University.

The Rise and Fall of English is nevertheless about as solid and coherent a blueprint for the refashioning of English within the corporate university as any other we are likely to see, although Scholes would, no doubt, object to this characterization. I am not suggesting that he is in some way politically retrograde, merely that his interest lies in preserving a role for the profession to which he maintains an allegiance within an institution undergoing irreversible change. From the English department Scholes hopes to create students will not receive an education in taste and sensibility, nor will they receive instruction designed to help them become informed and responsible citizens—at least not of the traditional American nation-state. They will receive, it seems clear, an excellence-certified curriculum that will help them negotiate their way through the postmodern global village. My contention that this sort of curriculum would be simply bewildering to the students at Service University, where the global village seems as distant and foreign as Service U itself must seem to Professor Scholes and his students, and where the goal of most is to find a comfortable place in the village they already inhabit, does not imply that the traditional literature curriculum serves a purpose any more useful to these students. In fact, I have come to regard the failings of literary study at Service University as the most compelling evidence that the very attempt to include literature in the college curriculum was a mistake, and that any subsequent attempts to rebuild on the original unsound foundation, no matter how well-intentioned, are doomed to only compound that initial mistake.

Unfortunately, there is no institutional history comparable to Graff's of literary study at colleges like Service University. Such a project would probably strike most people as either

redundant—surely nothing important could be added to the story told in *Professing Literature*—or beside the point—what would an examination of such schools really contribute to our understanding of the place of literature in a college curriculum? I believe that a careful scrutiny of literary study in this outback of the academic world would be anything but redundant, although I could imagine most of Graff's audience finding it so alien to their own experiences that it would seem of very little relevance to the development of appropriate professional standards. Unquestionably it would do little for the maintenance of a duly flattering professional self-image. What such a shadow history would show is an ad hoc process by which schools like Service, seeking an upgrade in status, can do so only by succeeding in becoming pale imitations of their perceived betters, mere facsimiles of an archetypal University. The consequence of this process in the English department is a curriculum that looks something like that to be found in a real university (although on a smaller scale and with a heavier emphasis on composition and general education and other service courses) but that for this very reason serves the purposes neither of the students expected to make use of it nor of the discipline of literary studies itself, certainly not as delineated in Graff's book. The newly-hired instructor, who can have only the sketchiest knowledge of the way what seems an otherwise recognizable curriculum came into being, must sooner or later come to terms with this unsettling truth, while trying to avoid his/her own looming versions of Scylla and Charybdis: to this side. a growing contempt for the many students who increasingly seem not to measure up to expectations, and to that, a palpable loss of confidence in the relevance of the subject he/she has been trained to teach.

My own graduate training most assuredly did not include advice about how to deal with such a dilemma. I now understand that my professors had no real incentive to fully inform me about the facts of academic life, even if they themselves were in full possession of the facts about a school like Service, and I could not have expected the faculty at Service to be eager to reveal the unpleasant details to prospective job candidates. It became clear enough during the interview process that Service did not really resemble my graduate institution, but the impulse to suspend judgment is strong, especially if it seems this might be one's only chance to pursue one's chosen career. The extent to which these false hopes continue to be nourished no doubt depends on the new instructor's capacity for self-deception. My talent for ignoring the obvious proving capacious indeed, I tenaciously hung on to my illusions about where I was and what I was doing

for a number of years before watching them dissipate like a valley fog. Although the temptation to relate the multiple indignities I was forced to endure as an overly idealistic teacher of literature is strong (the most vivid classroom image from my days at Service will always be of the young man in his baseball cap, sitting in the back corner of the room so as to make (he thinks) his frequent perusal of the scenery outside the window, and his occasional naps, slightly less conspicuous), such an exercise would not be particularly enlightening. Others have undergone the same ordeal, and the process is entirely predictable: the young (or at least naïve) instructor assigns a selection of readings that to him seem intrinsically compelling and that he presents to his students with great expectations, only to gradually realize they couldn't find them less compelling and further find his own interest in them rather puzzling. Eventually the disillusioned instructor faces a choice: stay put and adapt to the situation, making whatever compromises seem consistent with maintaining the commitment that brought one to the classroom in the first place, or move on, perhaps to find a new vocation that doesn't so insistently undermine one's morale. My story differs only in my inability to move on completely, my need to account for the irreparable breach that opened up between my assumptions about the nature of literary study and the reality I actually encountered.

I am willing to take my share of the blame for failing to inspire a greater appreciation of the benefits of studying literature. Confronted with students assuredly in need of such inspiration, I was unable to carry out the task. Whether my failure was a result of my own inadequacy or the inadequacy of my training is probably irrelevant in the end. While most of the students I encountered could not use what I had to give them as a teacher, I did along the way have a few truly bright students who were deeply engaged by the literary texts they read. As far as I could tell, they really didn't need anything I could give them. Perhaps a particularly dedicated and determined teacher would find the circumstances at Service University a welcome, albeit daunting, challenge. An argument could indeed be made that such students as those at Service provide the most meaningful opportunity for creative and diligent instruction. But this sort of dedicated teaching requires a sense of purpose unrelated to one's knowledge or love of literature; cultivating this view of teaching is certainly not a priority of most graduate schools, and unfortunately I could never quite summon either the desire or the ability to view it this way on my own. To be a good teacher, I discovered, I needed to retain some vestige of my original

sense of purpose, and as my confidence in the value for my students of what I was doing continued to erode, my interest in teaching as a mere professional activity became little more than perfunctory.

Above all, my experience led me to conclude that it is entirely appropriate to raise questions about the utility of literary study, despite the protestations of those who either pronounce it to be obviously its own reward or who consider taking such questions into account tantamount to collusion with the established political order. I could no longer deny that my own approach to the teaching of literature was built on its own assumptions about ends and means. I might explicitly dismiss the idea that literary study was a method of indoctrination, whether to the beliefs of the right, the left, or the presumed national consensus, but implicitly my initial belief that literature effectively taught could play a valuable and distinctive role in the development of the critical faculties (itself based on the assumption that acquisition of the skills involved could be valuable to most people) was heavily invested in the broader notion that literary study was indeed useful in some fundamental and profound way. The biggest problem with the Service University English department, I now understand, was not that my colleagues had no suitable conception of the ends to which their professional activities should be directed, but that, like me, they each had their own rather firm convictions about what they were doing that were nevertheless never fully examined and that led each of them to proceed according to his/her own particular understanding of how literature should be presented and why their students should want to learn about it. To say the least, these sometimes irreconcilable practices added up to a program that was anything but useful to the students for whom it was ostensibly created.

Unfortunately, this is a problem without a plausible solution. The model of literary study on which the Service U program is based is not only moribund, but was never really appropriate for such a school in the first place, as I have tried to point out. Literally, the students at Service U have no use for it. This is less, I believe, a comment on the abilities of the students than it is a recognition that a liberal education, especially when centered around the study of art and literature, has a necessarily limited appeal. If the best collective justification that can be found for the formal study of literature is some variation of “it’s good for you,” then literature—the individual poems, stories, novels—becomes merely useful in the narrowest, most utilitarian

sense. That someone like Robert Scholes would propose an alternative program built on almost exclusively utilitarian grounds seems finally a belated acknowledgment that literature can play only a subsidiary role in an English department that seeks to have its work validated by an American society in which practical intelligence counts for more than theoretical sophistication or aesthetic sensitivity. Such adaptability will unquestionably be required for the professor of English to retain a comfortable place in the new corporate university. (Indeed, it will likely be required of all professors in what is still called “the humanities,” an academic construction that has largely been built on literature as one of its central pillars and is likely to collapse entirely once that pillar is removed. The fate of this division of the corporate university will probably prove to be the most ruinous, as its foundation was the shakiest to begin with. What other plausible justification for its very existence can really be offered beyond the avowal that some exposure to it is “good for” students?)

The prospect of an English department without literature at its core does not, it must be clear by now, particularly distress me. I would be more disturbed by it if I accepted the notion that literature itself could not survive shorn of its institutional supports in academe, but I cannot find such a claim very persuasive. It surely cannot be said the transformation of literature into an almost entirely academic pursuit has significantly enlarged the audience for serious works of literature—a good case could be made, exemplified by students such as those passing through my own classes, that it has instead done the opposite, discouraging more potential readers than it has encouraged. Nor can it be claimed that the academic literary curriculum provides the only, or even the best, opportunity to introduce curious readers to the literary tradition. Organizing a given array of literary works into some preconceived system is one thing, and should not necessarily be dismissed. But when I reflect on the way my own interest in literature developed, and on the way my best students’ progress in acquiring the skills of serious reading seemed to parallel my own, I find it hard to believe that such an organized, formal authority is needed to motivate those fascinated with the literary imagination to further investigate its possibilities, both as realized in the past and as explored in the present. The resources on which the classroom instructor draws are by now readily available to anyone willing to seek them out, and serious writing is in perilous shape indeed if it can only be kept alive by a system based on the colonization of those resources.

Literature can survive without this institutional support not because the academy has saddled it to untenable conceptions of its use-value, but because its intrinsic usefulness cannot be served by the practices of the academy. Richard Rorty has offered a description of literary writing as that writing which depicts the singular kinds of indignities human beings can inflict on one another, thereby reminding us of the inherent cruelty we are unfortunately prone to. This is as good an attempt to supply an interpersonal use-value for our giving respectful attention to works of literature as we are likely to find, but even here it is difficult to see how such a justification for reading literature necessarily serves as a justification for its formal study within the walls of the university. Indeed, it is extremely difficult to see how the corporate university especially would find it possible to measure “excellence” in fulfilling this purpose, however consequential one might really find it to be. In my view, however, Rorty is still too concerned with locating the pragmatic value of literature in its potential social utility. I believe that literature is profoundly useful, but that its benefits are ultimately and unavoidably personal. Serious works of literature, of whatever genre and from whatever period, give free range to the imagination and to the innovations of language—for both the writer and the reader. All other potential ways of valuing literature may or may not be “teachable”—but they do not, they cannot, encompass these most important qualities. This was, I now recognize, something I understood even before I decided to “study” literature, and the lesson I myself learned from my disillusioning efforts to profess the study of literature is that a literary education of this more immediate and untutored kind, free of the artificial structures that divert our attention, available to anyone determined to gain it, and not confined to the enervating space of the classroom, remains the best reason to value what literature can do for us.