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## Scholarship, Politics, and the MLA

In its Fall 1991 newsletter, the Modern Language Association of America provided a demonstration case of the way in which—by focussing its attention upon various deflective red herrings—it has been able to avoid addressing one of the most central issues of political correctness. In response to outsider attacks, the organization's Executive Council claimed that media criticisms of the MLA "reduce complex issues to slogans and name-calling" and that it is unreasonable for critics to see a majority of MLA's 30,000 members as imposing a monolithic leftist ideology on the humanities departments of American colleges and universities. And indeed, it *is* unreasonable to regard the majority of MLA's members as radicals. The unacknowledged reality, however, is that the most authentically damaging criticisms of political correctness have come not from the media but from this large centrist constituency itself, whose point of view can be played down by the Association until it becomes publicly necessary to insist to the outside world that MLA is *not* a monolithic community of leftists. A sample of this centrist constituency was made uncomfortably visible in the same issue of the *MLA Newsletter* in the form of two rather bitter letters complaining about the harassment of antifeminists by the ruling forces of the profession. Their authors could hardly have been dismissed as neoconservatives and the letters themselves voiced familiar professorial grievances about academic social engineering.

The argument that *numerically speaking* most MLA members are not in fact politically correct "radicals" cuts two ways: if it is true, then MLA does them a disservice when it pretends they don't exist except when it's convenient to trot them out to pacify media critics. But to speak numerically doesn't really make much sense in any case, since the character and operations of the academic literary profession are determined by a relatively

small handful of influential scholars at major universities who eventually decide what goes into Norton and Heath anthologies (and now the MLA *Introduction to Scholarship*<sup>1</sup>), and thus what materials and attitudes students absorb, what projects they work on, and what books dominate the output of university presses (as any inspection of the book exhibit at the annual MLA convention makes obvious); in a word, they determine the governing character of life and work in the humanities.

Given such a context, the question bound to suggest itself to any well-informed reader confronted by the prospect of an *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literature* from the Modern Language Association is "Can this book be trusted?" The *Introduction* consists of a preface, fifteen essays, and an epilogue by eminent specialists surveying what the Association regards as some of the major areas of literary study in the academy today. If the point, however, of reading a book of this kind is to learn about the latest concerns of literature departments at the major universities, the ones that eventually determine the course of studies almost everywhere else, then it is hard to quarrel with all but one of the final choices (and that exception is begging for more than a quarrel). So while the book is indisputably politically correct, it has been carefully and considerately crafted: most of the contributors have read (and refer to) each other's drafts and the essay-chapters have been editorially interrogated and screened at many levels (with, again, what appears to be one egregious exception). The undeniable thrust of the collection is its reflection of the current expansion of "literary" studies into "cultural" studies, an expansion that has come about as a result of the devaluation of "literature" as a privileged category ("I have lost my faith [and, yes, I once had it] in literature as an institution," says Robert Scholes in his chapter on "Canonicity and Textuality") and its replacement by the more inclusive category of "texts," which includes films, popular culture, visual arts, criticism, philosophy, anthropology, and so on. The chapters on "Cultural Studies," by David Bathrick, and "Interdisciplinary Studies," by

<sup>1</sup> INTRODUCTION TO SCHOLARSHIP IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES, Second Edition, ed. by *Joseph Gibaldi*. The Modern Language Association of America. \$37.00; \$15.00.

Giles Gunn, in effect describe what is taking place: a transformation that entails “a remapping of the humanities as a whole around new contents, new canons, new media, and new theoretical and methodological paradigms.”

This remapping involves the disavowal of a number of sacrosanct traditional beliefs, such as:

that there is one “definitive” meaning of any text that is to be associated with the intentions of some transcendent Author; that there is any such thing as an Author, transcendent or otherwise, who is alone, or even chiefly, responsible for what a text means; that texts must be read independent of their relations, anxious or imperialistic, to other texts; that reading can be viewed only as a process of reception and absorption but not of production and intervention; and that when reading, interpretation, criticism are seen as creative and not merely reflective activities, their operations must still be restricted to individual works and cannot be expanded to apply “literary” modes of analysis to the entire spectrum of cultural phenomena.

The contraries to these beliefs yield pervasive foundations for most of the book’s accounts of present-day theory and practice, with the ubiquitous categories of race, gender, and class not far behind. Even though most of the authors are fairly self-conscious about their shared shibboleths, there are, inevitably, some breaches of taste or intrusions of righteousness, as when Andrea Lunsford (in a well-written and genial essay on rhetoric and composition) tampers with Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* by quoting his phrase about the “good [wo]man skilled in speaking,” as though even the ancients needed to be saved from their false sexist consciousness, or when she informs us that the “Athenian citizenry” was “an elite all-male group,” as if certain academic departments are not elite all-female groups—or academics themselves not as elite as you please; but hers is an avowedly gender-oriented political piece, sufficiently cordial to be tolerable despite its warm appreciation of its own virtues.

Donald Marshall’s elegantly lucid and coherent account of “Literary Interpretation” (one of the book’s best essays), notably influenced by the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, of which he is a translator, stresses the inability of texts to speak for themselves. Interpreters are mediators between authors and audiences, but “interpreting

remains a complex social practice situated within a historical moment." Like most of the other scholars here, Marshall finds the term "text" preferable to "work," which suggests "a determinate and permanent form crafted to express its maker's original idea"; whereas "text," as something interwoven with history, society, language, and multiple reader-responses, encompasses the notion already expressed by D.C. Greetham in an earlier chapter on textual scholarship that pieces of writing are never seen outside of a particular physical embodiment whose binding, typography, annotations, critical reputation, setting in a library or bookstore, etc., all shape our responses. In their role as interpreters, teachers and critics bring to bear upon these texts their own professional and social histories, giving us not the "work" itself, but a very mediated product indeed. Yet somehow, critical responses cannot be completely arbitrary or socially conditioned but must maintain a connection with the author's intentions (it is not quite safe to use these words outside of quotation marks right now, but I'm in an intrepid mood). And audiences, inevitably, reweave the text into the fabric of their own lives, reconstructing it (or "producing" it) from the historically finite conditions of their own psychological experience. Speaking of a tension between a "hermeneutics of recovery," which aims to bring the reader to sympathy with the text and what it says, and a "hermeneutics of suspicion," which lays bare the presuppositions and processes of signification of a text and renders them questionable," Marshall sees critical reading as both a defense against unself-conscious readers (who get what they "want" from a text) and against a misleadingly "self-evident" text whose meanings are far from unitary. He concludes that "to understand a text is to find in our own form of life points of contact with the form of life of which the text is a witness," a very Gadamerian compromise, but, I think, open to the danger of an infinite regress of finessing.

Robert Scholes's critique of literary canons expresses the now familiar (and plausible) position that the professionalization of literary studies at the end of the nineteenth century established a canon by means of political choices and processes that developed unnoticed because they were made to seem "natural," as though literary excellence were a self-identifying phe-

nomenon rather than a judgment of “interested” people. Or as he puts it, “Now, we know that one set of appointments to the Supreme Court will give us one set of laws and another set of appointments will give us others.” On the other hand, even he claims still to believe in “standards,” while admitting that he “cannot find any single standard for determining the worth of a text.” He too likes the idea of “textuality” rather than “literary work” because textuality “weakens the boundaries of the individual textual object and reduces the strength of its connection to an individual author or a specific situation, in order to emphasize the intertextuality of every such object and the freedom of the reader to establish connections. . . .” This too is a useful and plausible idea, provided that it also be applied to the funny coincidence that so many poems and novels are now understood to be about sexism, patriarchy, and racism. For the political, canon-making uniformity of postmodern academic perceptions is as much in need of canon-busting iconoclasm as the derogated critical imperatives of Matthew Arnold, an iconoclasm that should be applied to Chinua Achebe and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as passionately as it is to Joseph Conrad and Lionel Trilling. And how brilliant it would be to make this application now, rather than waiting twenty years until everybody and his/her graduate students have been socially constructed to put in their thumbs, pull out their plums, and say “Oh, what a good subject am I!”

A generalized professional self-criticism of this sort about what is “obviously true” or “natural” would give added potency to the observation made by Jonathan Culler, in his chapter on “Literary Theory,” that “the main thrust of recent theory, diverse though it is, has been the critique of whatever is taken as natural, the demonstration that what has been thought or declared natural is in fact a historical, cultural construction.” All of the major critical schools, from deconstruction to Marxism to feminism, he points out, share this debunking quality as they attempt to demonstrate that the God-given eternal verities have really been produced by men (and sometimes, women). But he cautions that once the notion of self-existing truths independent of mere human opinion has been demolished, “the recognition, which theory has encouraged, that all discourses, including those of theory, emanate from particular

subject positions (situated in a network of sexual, racial, national, class, and disciplinary structures) does not by any means solve the problem of false universality or unjustified presumption of universality.”

The failure to notice that oneself speaks from a “particular subject position” is also a worry to Naomi Schor, in her chapter on “Feminist and Gender Studies.” She confronts the problem head-on: “By identifying my own position—I speak as an American teacher of French whose postgraduate professional career developed along with feminist criticism and for whom gender studies is an intriguing yet problematic notion—I am already performing a feminist critical act, namely refusing to speak from a position of supposed neutrality and pseudoscientific objectivity.” But despite earnest efforts, she concedes, “assumed mastery and false universality constantly reassert themselves.” Reviewing feminist activities from Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir to Terry Eagleton and Jane Gallop, Schor traces the breakup of a relatively monolithic white, bourgeois, liberal, East Coast feminism that was “dangerously totalizing and exclusionary in its claim to speak for all women” and its recent fragmentation as African-American, Chicana, Native American, Asian-American feminisms. As a result of this fragmentation, “Questions of identity that had been dismissed as pretheoretical were reopened from the standpoint of subjects [i.e., people] unaccounted for by dominant theories. The utopian ideal of sisterhood was displaced by the realistic recognition of struggle.” Thus, “the very ground of feminism— notions such as a universal category of woman or the oppression of women by a universal patriarchy—began to heave and crack, and the temblor’s aftershocks continue to be felt today.” Yet Schor is alert to the equal but opposite problem of *too many sacrosanct subject positions* when she observes a bit nervously in her concluding paragraph: “There is struggle at the seminar table between increasingly fragmented constituencies, and *yesterday’s marginal subjectivities are always in danger of becoming tomorrow’s gatekeepers* [emphasis added].”

Fragmentation and marginality are two of the key concepts that haunt “identity politics,” one of the most problematical issues both for theory and practice in the 1990s. Though not developed at length by any of the *Introduction’s* authors, this

subject smolders throughout in the form of repeated attacks against “essentialism,” the universal practice of mistaking local customs and beliefs for facts of nature. The “dangerously totalizing” definitions of “women” of which Naomi Schor speaks are attempts to establish women’s essence by means of whatever particular description the describer happens to favor. Women are bitches or madonnas or the fair sex or the longer-lived sex or sirens, etc., depending on the era and cultural milieu in which they are described, as well as the interests of the describer. And this essentialism operates equally as well with respect to almost everything else: race, literary “works,” virtue and vice, ethnicity, etc., so that our perceptions of things are not, to use Richard Rorty’s term, “mirrors of nature,” but thoroughly value-laden interests.

This anti-essentialism is all very well until the need arises to engage in activist politics. Then such admirably philosophic sensitivity is apt to be supplanted by what is called “strategic essentialism,” that is, the convenient forgetting of the lessons of anti-essentialism in order to defend certain groups and interests for their “distinctive” but neglected or maligned characteristics, for—in a word—their *ascribed* essences, essences that reflect little more than garden variety bigotry when insisted upon in cases involving the interests of people you happen not to care about. Perhaps the movers behind a book as self-conscious as this *Introduction* felt that in order to exhibit MLA’s obsessive sense of egalitarianism (though some positions turn out to be more equal than others), it was incumbent upon them to include an utterly flaky specimen of essentialism at its politically correct worst, the very sort of thing one might have feared about this book as a whole.

The chapter in question is called “‘Border’ Studies: The Intersection of Gender and Color,” by Paula Gunn Allen, who (as identity politics requires) identifies herself—again and again and again—as a Native American woman (but whom I would identify as MLA’s designated Serb, brandishing her weapons for ethnic cleansing). The opening sentence is perfect: “Not only has little changed since I entered the profession in the 1970s, nothing much has changed since Irenaeus, nearly two thousand years ago. They’re still pontificating, excluding, and power-tripping, while we’re still resisting, dissenting, decon-

structing, and subverting.” Unlike many of the other contributors, who remark on the radical opening up of the academy since the sixties, Allen finds that little has changed since then, and “nothing much” for the past two thousand years, even though “we” are still resisting and dissenting, “we” consisting of the elect in general, Native American women in particular, and Allen herself in very particular. “Though I had marched, pamphletted, and taught for peace and social justice, for civil, women’s, and lesbian and gay rights” and many other things, the world simply refuses to get religion, and the academy remains reactionary. What shocks Allen above all is not so much that “nothing” has changed during the two thousand years before she was sent to save us but that her appearance has not immediately put an end to vice altogether (meaning all other “subject positions” besides her own). Though political correctness generally requires the worship of “Others,” for Allen the otherness of “They” has been completely preempted by the narcissism of “We.” “We still match personal experience and gnosis with canonicity, and those who tenaciously cling to the rotting pillars of Rome [e.g., those goddam Eurocentrics] dismiss us—or order us purged.”

“By 1972 I understood several things: If an issue concerned Native people or women, men, and queers of color, neither the academy nor the intelligentsia at large would have a word to say.” During her twenty years at the barricades, Allen “came to understand that the position of power for a true Warrior is the Void. It is from the Void that all arises and into the Void that all returns.” It is the outcasts who produce “the most profoundly *literary* literature. . . . It is we who are creating the shape of the new world from the strokes of our pens, typewriter keys, and computer keyboards.”

Allen’s gnosis knows a lot, especially about the Void “where reside the keepers of wisdom. Women of color are willing and well-equipped to approach the still, dark center of the heart of the gynocosmos where nothing at all exists and whence, paradoxically, all must emerge. Other writers [those pesky Others again], strangers to the source of meaning, have talked about that mysterious foreboding place, the dark heart of creation, but it is we [Native American women writers]—perhaps because we are nothing ourselves [i.e., undervalued]—who stalk

the void and dance the dervish of significance that is born through our parted lips and legs." And if this kind of messianic New Age strategic-essentialist moon-goddess identity-politics mishmash strikes you as insufficiently sweeping and categorical, then you need to know that "Native Americans are entirely concerned with relations to and among the physical and non-physical and various planetary energy-intelligences of numerous sorts," and if you happen to be a Native American, you damned well better believe it—if you can figure out what it means.

Apart from the merits of Allen's case for Native Americans, which admittedly has a few lucid intervals (even moon-goddess types sometimes deviate into sense), one wonders how it was possible, even for a multicultural MLA, to approve anything as remote from "scholarship" as these "strategic-essentialist" ravings.

It is unfortunate that Henry Louis Gates's chapter on "'Ethnic and Minority' Studies" was not positioned *after* Allen's rather than before. As one of the best essays in the volume, it would have pronounced a brutal judgment upon Allen's crude ethnic essentialism. Gates, himself previously an ethnic particularist engaged in unconvincing identity politics, has metamorphosed over the last few years into one of the most judicious, benign, and public-spirited of present-day intellectuals, a model of that declining breed, Russell Jacoby's "public intellectual."

Surveying the evolution of minority, but particularly black, studies in the academy, Gates observes, "Given the essentialist definitions of tradition at play in the construction of ethnically based canons and traditions, perhaps the search for manifestations of a collective ethnic unconscious or transcendent signifiers and signifying practices was inevitable," but he nevertheless sees such entities as fictions invented for political purposes. "The process of constructing a group identity, at the margins as at the very center, involves active exclusion and repudiation. . . . Ironically, then, the cultural mechanism of minority self-construction must replicate the cultural mechanism responsible for rendering it marginal in the first place." In other words, identity politics entails the same myopia and bigotry as any other politics. Or as Gates sharply puts it, "Where

the center constructs the margin as a privileged locale, you assume authority by representing yourself as marginal, and, conversely, you discredit others by representing them as central." Did Paula Gunn Allen really read Gates's essay in draft?

Gates concludes that "the ritualized invocation of otherness" is now played out and that the margin "may have exhausted its strategic value." What is now needed is "to forgo the pleasures of ethnicist affirmation and routinized resentment in favor of rethinking the larger structures that constrain and enable our agency."

The volume's epilogue by Gerald Graff, "The Scholar in Society," is a defensive apologia for the politically correct status quo, whose central thesis is that the humanities today are *less* specialized than they used to be and that attacks against their specialization are really right-wing expressions of fear about their political relevance. But while it is certainly true that the humanities today are more wide-ranging and interdisciplinary than ever before, Graff is deceiving himself if he really believes that *the discourse of the humanities* is anything other than an increasingly obscure specialized language, although he concedes that "this is the way such research still tends to *look* to nonacademics." And to blame the bad press given the humanities, as Graff insists, on poor self-advertisement on the part of academic humanists vis-à-vis the lay public is an act of desperation. "After all," he writes, "if the new theories and methods were merely specialized and obscure, it is doubtful that people would be getting so worked up over them." Somehow, then, either humanist studies merely *look* obscure but are in fact threateningly intelligible, or else the media make them appear threatening by distorting them into simple-minded slogans that misrepresent them while nonetheless conveying their essential validity!

To this useful book I would raise three substantial objections. First, that the *Introduction* provides only minimal hints of the fact that there are a number of strong alternate points of view operating in contemporary scholarship in language and literature. If the editorial board was determined to include something from the wilder fringes, the dissenting radicalism of Camille Paglia would have been much more instructive than the fatuous thrashings of Paula Gunn Allen, and at least Paglia has

a sharp sense of the ridiculous. The obstacle, of course, is that Paglia is not a member of the team, however “multicultural” its purview.

Second, identity politics and strategic essentialism, which some of the contributors *do* reject, require a more explicit and conscious philosophic inquiry than anything offered herein (except perhaps by Gates). Why, after all, stop at disabled, lesbian, third world women of color? Infinite modifications and interests can always be superadded until, finally, we arrive at the unique individual who represents an interest of One. Although I don’t necessarily agree with everything that is said by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (or with Paglia either—or anybody, for that matter), Fox-Genovese’s communitarian values are a necessary corrective to the infinite regress of identity politics, whose ultimate conflict would be a war of all against all in defense of each individual’s personalized kinks. When every possible color is rejected for traffic signals because every one of them will offend somebody’s nonexistent essence, nobody will be able to drive.

Lastly, the emphasis on textuality rather than literary works leaves no room at all for “art,” a concept that doesn’t even come up in the course of this entire volume, purportedly about “literature,” however broadly construed. Can the contributors really believe that “art” has been superseded by righteousness, that aesthetic values are no longer of interest to anyone but reactionaries, that poems, novels, music, sculpture and architecture are nothing more than social constructions, that aesthetic response is just a euphemism for ideology? Their failure to deal with art and aesthetics is simply a misrepresentation of the social and psychological realities with which they are otherwise so obsessed, a mistaking of academia for the larger world in which pleasure is more real and less deluded than transient theories applauded by a few thousand colleagues.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It’s worth calling attention to a recent essay by Gerald Graff in the September/October 1992 issue of *Lingua Franca*: “Disliking Literature at an Early Age.” It announces the unsurprising news that Graff’s aesthetic response to literature (and, I think, not literature only) has always been very weak. What turned him toward literature, finally, was his discovery that one could talk about books as ideas and politics. His current hobby horse (which has been ridden to the ground) is that literature departments should be less concerned with “literature” than with “teaching the conflicts” that are currently preoccupying politicized academics like himself. This is a program to which the MLA has given its benediction, as the present book makes pretty clear.

People (including authors) have been replaced by “subjects” and aesthetic creativity has been replaced by “subject positions” and “social constructions.” It’s all too glib, too easy, too simple. These readily naturalizable concepts keep the journals like *Cultural Critique* and *Social Text* in business (journals that often read like academic counterparts of Jehovah’s Witnesses’ *Watchtower*), but like all other dogma that purport to explain everything, they explain too much to be believable. As for art and the creative self, even social-constructionist critics continue to sign their names to journal articles and books, just like essentialist “authors” and “artists” who naively believe it is they themselves who produce their “works.” Greedy for prestige, social recognition for “their” creativity, and tenure for “their” achievements, these critics and scholars love their “socially constructed” selves as much as the rest of us love our obsolete “self-created” selves. But despite their disinterested pretensions, they are far from ready to take on the selfless, impoverished anonymity of stonecutters for medieval cathedrals.