

# TEACHING THE CONFLICTS

---

*Gerald Graff, Curricular  
Reform, and the Culture  
Wars*

*Edited by*  
William E. Cain

**GARLAND PUBLISHING, INC.**  
*New York & London / 1994*

---

## Establishing A Way in a World of Conflicts

*Harold Fromm*

Over the past fifteen years or so, Gerald Graff has served as a sober conscience for literary theory, a discipline often inclined to postmodern tricksiness and meretricious displays of sophistry masquerading as ethical highmindedness. Graff's austere integrity has functioned as a badly needed corrective to the commodification of culture against which "oppositional" theorists rail even as they themselves exemplify this self-same vice in their "race for theory" (to use Barbara Christian's expression). As the Spartan Ralph Nader of literary theory, Graff has embodied many of the virtues he esteems, so that if one were inclined to be a follower of gurus at all in this age of unbelief (an age nonetheless fatuously credulous of mountebank metaphysics), Graff would seem to be one of the few to be taken seriously.

Although Graff began to make his reputation in the seventies as a rebellious young, albeit somewhat liberal-conservative, Turk—a period culminating in his influential book *Literature against Itself* (whose oppositional mentality he now seems to be repudiating or historicizing)—his success in the academy has gradually subsumed him into the prevailing world of literary theory as one of its most serious, intellectually committed spokespersons. To sum up in as few words as possible, he has moved from an earlier "oppositional liberalism" into a sort of "domesticated radicalism" that in reality is the New Conservatism of today's academic literary Establishment. Thus,

by one of the ironies of finite existence in human culture (where no matter how open-minded you strive to be, you have to be one thing or another, and where consequently there is no way to avoid being kicked in the butt for being the wrong thing), he is now one of our leading Establishment patriarchs. Since Graff claims to be an enemy of patriarchal hegemony, this transformation (or the fact that some people see it as such) can only be a source for him of exquisite pain and a sense of betrayal.

Because Graff has always been an unusually selfless person, gladly writing detailed commentaries on other people's manuscripts, helping students and younger faculty to pursue their careers, and performing multiple tasks to aid our profession, and because his whole sensibility has always been focussed upon the "intellectual thing" in itself, rather than personalities and fashions, his recent move into pedagogy from "theory" has to be seen as one more example of his service-oriented character, his aim to make the world a better place, his continued belief in some sort of truth and virtue in an age where fifteen minutes of fame—but preferably half an hour—is one of the more potent desiderata.

Yet there is nevertheless cause for alarm, for in an imperfect world purity often breeds impurity, utopian schemes have a way of backfiring (consider the sorry case of Conrad's Mr. Kurtz, whose grim history has recently been taken up as a Graffian exemplum), and the turn to pedagogical idealism can sometimes become the last infirmity of a noble mind. This turn, as seen in Graff's essays, "Taking Cover in Coverage," "Other Voices, Other Rooms: Organizing and Teaching the Humanities Conflict," and "How Curricular Disconnection Disempowers Students," is an offshoot of the research he did for his 1987 book *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, in addition to the large number of talks and papers he has delivered around the country on the programmatic subject of "teaching the conflicts." Over a period of more than seven years during which these discourses were generated, the central ideas have developed and changed, but the consistent heart of the matter appears to be Graff's belief that departments of literature in American universities have dealt with innovations and changes in critical, historical, and canonical aspects of literary study by simply

incorporating them into new, independent, autonomous courses that will "cover" the most prevalent interests without causing open conflict. This accretion of specialist fiefdoms ruled by professors un beholden to their colleagues or to the structure of their departments is seen by Graff as a malaise detracting from literary studies in contemporary American higher education, "which has neglected traditional theoretical questions about the ends and social functions of literature and criticism" ("Taking Cover" [TC]). The "incoherence" and messiness of the period and genre distinctions that now compartmentalize course offerings need to be replaced with a more conscious and structurally apparent organization of literary study that would acknowledge, says Graff, that *everything* is ultimately based on a theory, even the apparent negligence that characterizes the current arrangement.

In his earliest treatment of this matter, Graff portrays the average undergraduate as a somewhat dazed, simpleminded innocent, staggering aimlessly from class to class while his various instructors spout incompatible dogma which the student is afraid, or too naive, to question. Although "the coverage model solved the problem of how to make the university open to innovation and diverse viewpoints without incurring paralyzing conflicts" (TC), the very suppression of such conflicts, according to Graff, contributes to student confusion because typical undergraduates see only parts of the whole picture of a profession in turmoil, parts that look arid and irrelevant. "Vigorous controversy did [sometimes] arise," Graff admits, "but usually only behind the scenes of education . . . where students derived little benefit from it" (TC). Because the conflicts were not publicly aired, the fiction of a coherent set of humanist beliefs and traditions could be peddled to both students and the population at large, a set of beliefs increasingly espoused by the political right in their attacks against the left-generated disarray in higher education. And because no consensus can be reached in a discipline characterized by conflict, the discipline is also marked by incoherence. But, Graff asks, "Must we have consensus to have coherence?" (TC) His reply is that the lack of consensus is itself the theoretical issue that would provide

coherence to literature departments if it were exploited as a subject for public scrutiny and debate.

In essence, Graff dislikes the idea that theory is being incorporated as just one more specialty to be "covered" inside and ignored outside the theory classroom. Instead of incorporation, he wants theory to become the "Master Discourse" (an idea that he intends, but a phrase that he demurs to use) that would, in effect, organize the literature department into a cultural studies department dominated by theory.

A few years later, in his "Other Voices" article, Graff is more ready to concede that "the conflicts" are getting pretty obvious, "openly taught in courses like women's studies, post-colonialism, cultural materialism," and elsewhere. Nor are undergraduates perceived to be quite as bovine as before. Now they "probably noticed discrepancies . . . but they were too polite to mention them"! Instead of raising challenges, these "polite" students resolve conflict by humoring their professors, giving them what they want—in a word, doing what students have always done to professors, even if Graff implies that there is something uniquely new in this response.

In "How Curricular Disconnection Disempowers Students," Graff expresses interest in "learning communities" where symposia, coordinated course offerings, shared themes, and the like would force students and faculty to come together to air important ideas and social issues rather than simply read in isolation. The suggestions made here are sensible and worthwhile, though nothing about them can be seen as earthshaking or unprecedented. Practices of this kind have been employed for years, albeit in more limited amounts than Graff would like. But there is no reason why more of them could not be included in almost any existing curriculum, adding richness and variety. What this program fails to acknowledge, however, is that the principal task in the teaching of humanities subjects to undergraduates is simply to get students to read a massive number of books, not only for "their own sake" but to provide foundations of knowledge on which to base future opinions—what we normally mean by "education." It is during these youthful, elastic, and formative years that reading, absorbing, and thinking are easiest to do and, indeed, produce their most

powerful effect. So for students to spend large blocks of this precious time arguing about current issues on the basis of very thin and extremely contemporary (i.e., trendy) knowledge could ultimately be intellectually crippling—impoverishing the storehouse of ideas upon which intelligent adult life is constructed. (Most people do not find themselves reading Plato or Machiavelli at age 50, though they may very well read Toni Morrison.) It is, after all, a common complaint that today's students know little or nothing about eras before 1945, getting most of their information about life and culture through *now*-oriented TV. Since one of the classical functions of education is to go against the grain of the student's narrow upbringing—a technique heavily dependent on reading—excessive emphasis on the contemporary (i.e., today's "conflicts") will only reinforce the misconception that reality began just after World War II.

As one views and reviews the arguments about teaching the conflicts in these three essays and the latter half of *Professing Literature*, one is persistently struck by their weakness, even as they are modified into newer but equally tendentious versions (presumably in response to criticisms raised at conferences and in published replies). Their rationales depend on imperceptive and "polite" students, theory-starved faculty members who need to attend conferences for relief from their respectfully zombified clientele or their professionally incommunicado colleagues, and conflict taking place behind (but also *not* behind) the scenes. A special weakness is Graff's failure to acknowledge the casebooks that have been classroom staples for the past thirty years—collections of critical essays on *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and practically anything else you would like, as well as Routledge's "Critical Heritage" series and the "Twentieth Century Views" from Prentice Hall, all serving to foreground the "conflict" that has always existed between competing interpretations of literature and culture and between professors conducting their own classes (a conflict that only the dullest of students could fail to observe, a conflict that is life itself). The best-edited of these did not fail to point out the "political" (as we now call it) underpinnings of critical conflicts, whether the conservatism of T.S. Eliot and T.E. Hulme or the radicalism of Leslie Fiedler, the psychoanalytic predisposition of the earlier

Frederick Crews or the myth-dependency of G. Wilson Knight. Books such as Morris Weitz's *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (which I myself used as a text when I taught history of criticism in the early seventies) explicitly addressed this multiplicity, if not in precisely today's heated terms. But these terms are becoming increasingly explicit both inside and outside the classroom, as Graff gradually concedes in his later writings.

These weaknesses, as far as I can see, are the result of Graff's own hidden political agenda (perhaps even hidden from him, though I would think he finds the charge familiar enough by now) and his wish for theory to achieve the status of Master Discourse in the humanist academy, a wish that is repeatedly presented by means of key words: "organize" (as in "Other Voices, Other Rooms: Organizing and Teaching the Humanities Conflict," and "The question is how the many different kinds of things professors do may be so organized as to begin providing a context for one another and take on a measure of corporate existence in the eyes of the world" [*Professing Literature* 251]); "connected" (as in "How Curricular Disconnection Disempowers Students"); "focused" (as in "But the university *has* failed so far to make a focused curriculum out of its contentiousness" ["Other Voices" (OV)]); "programmed" (as in "Individual teaching is arguably the least promising place to start in transforming education, since it is the aspect of the system that is most subject to idiosyncrasies of talent and inclination and thus least amenable to being programmed" [OV]); "thematize" (as in "The idea is to *thematize the semester*" [OV]); and so on. Although Graff might very well reply there is no favored *doctrine* he is trying to "program," that it is just the *discourse of conflict* that he wants to "institute," I have to admit that I wouldn't be able to believe it, for the evidence to the contrary is too strong.

To begin with, apart from the particular documents in question, Graff's general political position is well known to anyone who has read his recent writings or heard him deliver papers at the Modern Language Association meetings and elsewhere: it is the position of leftist orthodoxy or what is nowadays called "political correctness." This is at present the dominant position in the humanist academy, animating its de

facto Establishment, not necessarily through the sheer number of people who espouse it but through the powers that operate university presses, determine the nature of textbooks, establish the contents of graduate education at the most influential universities (the ones that in turn determine what books are read by graduate and undergraduate students everywhere and what sort of teachers they will become, even if what filters down to the hinterlands takes many years). Graff is by no means shy in pushing this agenda—and to suppose that he is not hegemonizing one would have to be even more naive than his putatively glazed and insulated undergraduates. Although Graff may say that his program is not prescriptive, in reality it bears more than a passing resemblance to the aborted program at the University of Texas that attempted to use a collection of civil rights cases about race and gender as a textbook in the required freshman composition course, while claiming complete neutrality.

If there were any doubt about this, a reading of the "Other Voices" essay would certainly dispel it. The essay begins with an imagined quarrel between an Older Male Professor and a Young Female Professor over the relative merits of Arnold's "Dover Beach." The OMP extols the poem as a great masterpiece of the Western tradition and the YFP denounces it as an example of male phallogocentric hegemony. Although in truth both of these characters come off as thoroughgoing jerks, the YFP is clearly the intended hero. And if we happened to miss that fact, Graff obligingly informs us that "there is no question of occupying a neutral position here: in my view, the shift from the traditionalist to the revisionist view of culture is very much a change for the better." Again, Graff might very well counter that while he is avowedly on the side of the YFP, he is neutral as far as the idea of teaching and debating the conflicts is concerned. That is, while owning up to his own political views, he could say that his interest in debate is not to push these views but simply to legitimize culturally diverse literary studies through a more open public discourse. But is it really possible to believe such a distinction? The obvious purpose of the imagined conflict between OMP and YFP is to embarrass OMP and push him to the margins (but given that he's such an idiot, he *deserves* to be