Criticism

Volume 32 | Issue 2 Article 6

1990

Book Reviews

Criticism Editors

Social Chaucer by Paul Strohm. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989. Pp. xiii + 236. $29.95.

Recent criticism of medieval literature has shown encouraging signs of movement away from the impasse marked (as Lee Patterson has recently argued) by debates between supporters of the anti-humanist project of Robertsonian exegetical criticism, on the one hand, and those who favor the liberal humanism implicit in New Critical explication in the style of Donaldson and Muscatine, on the other. The versions of Chaucer produced by these different approaches tended to mirror the values and concerns of the critic: a politically conservative, orthodox Christian poet according to the first method; a non-authoritarian, bemused observer of the human comedy according to the second. Paul Strohm's important new book is best understood in the light of recent attempts to open up Chaucer studies to the various historicist currents—Marxist, feminist, New Historicist, and so on—that are gaining momentum in the profession.

Strohm argues that rapid changes taking place in fourteenth-century England rendered increasingly obsolete the commonplace descriptions of medieval society (such as the theory of three estates) that were left over from an earlier period. Strohm's thesis is that "Chaucer's own poetry embraces a lively contention between vertical and horizontal forms of social depiction" (x). He contrasts the conservative view of society as a descending "hierarchy . . . of vertically arrayed estates" with an alternative view in the Middle Ages of society "as horizontally arrayed, communal, secular, and bound in finite time" (x). Strohm generally associates the vertical paradigm with feudalism, which was based on lifelong loyalties and ties of vassalage; he associates the horizontal paradigm with what he frequently calls "postfeudalism," a world based more on self-interest, contractual relations, and cash remuneration.

Strohm borrows this story of a "vertical" social structure that gradually gave way to a "horizontal" one from a discussion by M. D. Chenu of the "desacralization" of the political order that was taking place simultaneously with the proliferation of new social formations (the passage quoted by Strohm on p. 13 is incorrectly cited; for p. 65, read p. 265). While acknowledging that Chenu is discussing twelfth- and thirteenth-century France, Strohm thinks that signs of a transition from a vertically ordered society to a horizontally organized one, where social ties were often temporary arrangements based more on expediency than on traditional loyalties, are first apparent in England during the fourteenth century. We shall return to this historical thesis later.

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1, "Chaucer and the Structure of Social Relations," argues that the most detailed descriptions of the middle ranks of society during the later Middle Ages took place within the tradition that stressed horizontal ties. Chaucer himself occupied an ambiguous social position: though the son of a wine merchant, he had reached gentle status. After discussing the increasing appearance of "retaining by indenture," a contractual system that "sought . . . to perpetuate older values (such as continuity of service to a single lord)" (17), Strohm concludes that Chaucer's ties to his monarchs were characterized "by the complex mixture of residual loyalty and unabashed self-interest that united lords and their followers within the bastard feudalism of the late fourteenth century" (23).

Chapter 2, "The King's Affinity," sheds valuable light on the retinue groups forming Chaucer's immediate social milieu. Strohm manages to condense within a few pages the complexities of factional politics while stressing Chaucer's remarkable ability to survive the dangers which cost many of his associates their lives. His synthesis is useful, particularly for the discussion of the individuals who are generally thought to form the poet's immediate "circle."

The question of Chaucer's circle naturally leads to Chapter 3, "Audience," which extends Strohm's previous work on that topic. He promotes a model of literature as "communication." Here his main influence is the reception theory of Jauss, supplemented with the sociolinguistics of Voloshinov/Bakhtin. Strohm thus reads the *Book of the Duchess* as an instance of "social communication" (is there another kind?). There follows a discussion of the audience of *Troilus and Criseyde*. As Strohm rightly observes, the "poem presupposes an audience capable of embracing a mixture of styles and tones of voice and of managing abrupt transitions between them" (63). Chaucer could count on just such an audience during the years of his residence in Aldgate—"the period of greatest stability in Chaucer's life," the time when "he would have come closer than ever again in his career to participation in a stable social and literary circle" (63). In the *Canterbury Tales*, on the other hand, Chaucer creates the pilgrims as "a fictional audience" to supplement "the absence of a stable communicative situation" once he had moved from London to Kent (64–65). This possibility, while certainly intriguing, is hardly susceptible of proof. Strohm suggests that the "highly contrastive poetic features" characteristic of his poetry "are likely to appeal to those in ambiguous social situations" (71). This is a weak argument, and his attempt to bolster it somewhat by turning to Chaucer's short poems is not altogether convincing. The chapter closes with a valuable discussion of the work of Usk, Scogan, and Clanvowe, whose poetry suggests that they valued Chaucer's mixed genres, multiple voicings, and open poetic forms.

Chapter 4, "Selflessness and Selfishness," offers a discussion of the conflict between those motives in the *Canterbury Tales*. The section entitled "The Debased Language of Sworn Relations" provides interesting observations on metaphors of vassalage, though one might hesitate to see the many examples of false oath-swearing and the breakdown of *trouthe* as evidence of a historical shift whereby "sworn vassalage" [is] replaced by a variety of looser and more frankly self-interested affiliations" (93). When were lords and vassals *not* motivated by self-interest? Vassals were no truer to their word in the good old days of feudalism than in the fourteenth century. The section on "Opportunistic Brotherhood," however, is especially illuminating. A critique of misguided voluntary associations, as Strohm demonstrates, is of central concern not only to the *Pardoner's Tale* but also to the *Friar's Tale* and *Summoner's Tale*, all of which "suggest that the driving force behind the debasement of sworn relationships is the allure of singular or personal profit" (100); Chaucer appears very much the conservative moralist here. The *Shipman's Tale* emerges as Chaucer's most biting critique of "the extension of the mercantile ethos to all spheres of activity" (100). The breakdown of *trouthe* provides the focus of a valuable discussion of the "post-feudal society" figured in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Franklin's Tale*.

Chapter 5, "Time and the Social Implications of Narrative Form," is per-

haps the least convincing, for Strohm attempts to make some rather old-fashioned formalist criticism fit the bill of describing a "social" Chaucer, as the following sentence suggests: "Even in its most apparently aesthetic aspects, narrative cannot help being social, in the way its continuities and discontinuities speak to the purpose and meaning of human action in time" (112). By the same token, even the most apparently New Critical reading cannot help being social—but that observation is hardly illuminating. For a demonstration that Chaucer "asserts a social basis for ideas about time and narrative" (125), Strohm turns, predictably, to the contrast between the *Knight's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale*, narratives which "introduce and interrogate two differing constructions of reality: one hierarchical . . . vertical . . . and extratemporal in its aspirations; the other antihierarchical . . . horizontal . . . and temporal . . ." (139). Strohm suggests that Chaucer, whose gentle status was not based on hereditary land tenure, belonged to "the social grouping most extensively traversed by these conflicting versions of social reality" (142). Perhaps so; but even kings, who were great believers in "vertical hierarchy," regularly formed horizontal, this-wordly associations through marriage alliances with their European counterparts. The vertical/horizontal schema fails to convince if it must be selectively applied.

The final chapter, "A Mixed Commonwealth of Style," begins with the fruitful insight that the Canterbury fellowship is created through a "social contract." This produces a reading far more interesting than the "roadside drama" interpretation of yore. After a brief discussion of medieval political theories of the "natural state" that proliferated with the recovery of Aristotle's *Politics*, Strohm develops the analogy between the natural state and the imaginary "commonwealth" of *gentils* and *cherls* under Harry Bailly's government. Strohm writes suggestively of Chaucer's "capacity to reveal the self-maintaining processes by which a social body may act in time to accommodate new social groups, reconcile disputes, and chastise antisocial impulses" (152). He recognizes that Chaucer's "limited assertion of *coherentia*" is a "considerable distortion of factional and schismatic actuality" that forms "an ideologically constructed bridge between Chaucer and his predominantly *gentil* public" (157). He suggests that Chaucer's distortion is "self-interested" since his own social position depends upon the willingness of his superiors to receive "previously excluded" groups into their gentle ranks. Though Strohm admits that Chaucer's "solution" to the problem of social division is ideological, he finds it appealing nonetheless because it is "socially energetic"—whatever that means: his favorite trope seems to involve electricity ("ideologically charged" appears scattered at least a dozen times throughout the book). Strohm concludes the chapter with sections on "Hierarchy and Community," "A Literary Model of Social Diversity" and "The Silent Plowman and the Talkative Parson." These offer some of his most interesting discussions.

What, then, is the "social" Chaucer? As my summary makes clear, Strohm excludes any detailed consideration of kinship and marriage, the social production of gender, sexuality, the growth of English national identity during the Hundred Years' War, to name only a few important matters no less social than factional politics, class relations, or ideas of the state. Medieval spirituality was also a complex social phenomenon, as recent work by social histori-

ans such as Caroline Bynum demonstrates. Owing to these significant omissions, the author's idea of a "social" Chaucer seems less inclusive than the title might suggest.

A few words, however, need to be devoted to Strohm's historical thesis, which seems to waver between viewing the shift from a vertical to a horizontal paradigm as equivalent to the replacement of feudalism by capitalism, on the one hand, and as an "alternative tendency" (3) available throughout the Middle Ages (albeit much more prominently by the fourteenth century), on the other. Chenu saw the process of "desacralization" as a chronological development first evident during the High Middle Ages; Strohm, however, is less certain (see 173 for example). In any case, it is a mistake to call the horizontal paradigm "nonhierarchical or even antihierarchical" (3), for Strohm downplays the hierarchy implicit in the corporate metaphor of the body politic, over which the head must rule; there is nothing inherently antihierarchical about this theory (cf. the garden scene in *Richard II*).

If Strohm sometimes views horizontal social formations and ideologies as fast replacing hierarchical ones by the fourteenth century, we would be hard pressed to specify when the "previous era" of "the sacred bonds of vassalage" existed (101). As Susan Reynolds has argued in *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900–1300* (Oxford 1984)—an important book that does not appear in Strohm's bibliography—historians have been misled by the nineteenth-century invention of "feudalism" and thus have failed to appreciate the heterogeneous forms of community based on horizontal links that existed throughout Western Europe for centuries. (Reynolds even denies that the term "feudalism" is of any value to medieval historians.) Strohm fails, then, to take sufficient account of the variety of horizontal communities during the heyday of "descending verticality": fraternities and guilds, villages and parishes, urban settlements, and national or regnal communities. The point is that *any* social formation can be simultaneously described as vertical and horizontal. Strohm's historical thesis, while it enables him to describe a very real tension in Chaucer's professional and poetic career, is far too simplified to provide a convincing basis for his larger historical claims.

A second problem is that Strohm tends to blur the distinction between abstract political theorizing and real political practice. The literary historian will no doubt find the theories of a Marsilius of Padua or a John of Paris (see Strohm's discussion, 146–51) more accessible to scrutiny than the records of legal disputes, for instance, where mundane political conflicts are documented. The danger here is of succumbing to an idealist version of history where academic "thought" (see 147, bottom) is substituted for the less tidy realities of political practice.

Strohm's writing is frequently vague and imprecise. One example must suffice here: Chaucer responded to "a historically and ideologically charged moment" (143). There are occasional signs of careless editing. The retaining (*retinuimus*) mentioned in Richard II's confirmation of Edward III's grant of an annuity to Chaucer "is probably only in that implied sense in which *anyone* receiving a life annuity may be considered retained" (21, italics in original); by page 34 the same confirmation "clearly specifies that Chaucer has been retained ('*retinuimus*') . . . ." On page 188, note 5 erroneously suggests that thirteenth-century England knew counts as well as earls.

Strohm reveals in a telling note that he would "locate the principle conflict in Chaucer's poetry *where he seems to mean to put it*—between contending hierarchical and antihierarchical ideologies—rather than between a fusion of these elements on the one hand and a repressed ensemble representing a partially formed peasant consciousness on the other" (226, my italics). Some medievalists will doubtless be annoyed at Strohm's frequent emphasis on ideology; yet in Strohm's account, Chaucer remains a sovereign subject fully in control of his intentions in "communicative situations." For readers looking for a more radical critique, this book will be frustrating in its ambivalence towards its own political project. While Strohm seems comfortable enough with the notion of a former age of feudalism, he seems curiously reluctant to name the "rising, commercial counterhegemony" to "a fading feudal hegemony" (142) or the "cynical postfeudal arrangements" (109) as *capitalism*. This reluctance seems especially odd, given his initial passing reference to the on-going debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism (x-xi), his sympathetic references to the ideas of Marxist literary critics, and his investment in what he insists is a Marxist sense of mediation (see 172). Paul Strohm, like many medievalists nowadays, wants to avoid the pious orthodoxies of right-wing critics but is not ready to part company with their liberal-humanist opponents, despite his frequent reliance on leftist historians and literary theorists (see 186–87 nn. 1–4, 7–11).

Despite the reservations expressed in this review, however, *Social Chaucer* is a major accomplishment that will no doubt stimulate much further discussion. We should all be thankful to Strohm for showing in great detail the extent to which there is indeed a "social Chaucer."

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Wordsworth: The Sense of History by Alan Liu. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989. Pp. xvi + 726. $39.50.

Although it is possible that, by the time this appears, the following assertion will seem anachronistic, I will hazard it anyway: in romantic studies and in Wordsworth studies in particular, we are at present in a moment (I was going to say "in an age") of historicism. It is possible, of course, to regard this "moment" merely cynically: that "history" is the ready and easy way to expand a text in order to say something new and interesting about it. "Tintern Abbey" with the French Revolution superadded is, after all, a larger and substantially *different* text than the biographical, phenomenological or generic poem on which a host of commentators have already offered their interpretations. One can also, to be sure, regard the "historical turn" in a more positive light: as an indispensable corrective to a textually or artifactually-oriented criticism which, for all its apparent rigor and "objectivity," is motivated by a range of extra-textual initiatives, whose bearing is proven either in the way such imperatives are necessarily concealed or, worse, in the way they become dependent on the poetry for validation. The tenets of deconstruction, like those of humanism, are valid *in criticism*, it often seems, not because they are

always/already valid but rather because Shelley or Wordsworth effectively says so. Nevertheless, regardless of the way we characterize the turn to historicism in literary studies—whether as a turn from conventional literary history or as a swerving from more recent fashions of literary history—one thing about it is inescapably clear. And this quite simply is that it remains—in the term by which it has come to be known—a "new historicism." It is a movement, in other words, that not only would have been inconceivable a decade earlier, but a criticism that stands firmly if somewhat apostately on the shoulders of the very criticism—specifically poststructuralism—it apparently finds wanting.

By no means am I accusing the new historicism or any new historicist of bad faith. To make use of the work of one's predecessors and contemporaries is, after all, to be a responsible and responsive professional. Still, what is striking about the new historicism, particularly in romantic studies, is that although it takes as its *raison d'être* the dead end of deconstructive formalism, it nevertheless follows and even exceeds deconstruction's demystificatory project. In the hands of, say, Paul de Man, romanticism was merely representative of a western metaphysical tradition, whose arbitrariness romantic writing both suppresses and exposes. Although other literature would undoubtedly have sufficed for de Man, romantic writing, with its phenomenological bent, was apparently the literature that de Man knew best as well as the literature on which theoretically-based criticism had, at the time he was writing, focused much of its attention.

In the new historicism—despite often vigorous protests to the contrary—something very similar exists. Although romanticism is at issue now for what purports to be its own sake—because romantic writing remains, when all is said and done, a literature subject to conditions and to an environment materially different from our own—its demystification, or subjection to what one new historicist terms "deconstructive materialism," amounts still to a universal cure. Not only, in other words, does the new historicism attempt to heal or otherwise resuscitate romanticism by effectively writing or uncovering what romantic writing itself could not possibly bear or represent; it seeks, chiefly through massive doses of historical data, to foreground and to cure contemporary readers of a similar resistance of history which has apparently sapped them of the ability to resist what Jerome McGann has termed "the romantic ideology."

Indeed, like Napoleon, whose brilliant military strategy Alan Liu painstakingly describes, the new historicism always adopts a two-pronged method of attack: it attacks the liberal ideology of romanticism itself, where the recourse to quietism and emphasis on the individual merely returns romantic literature to the very hegemony it purportedly opposes. And second, and just as important, the new historicism attacks the contemporary reader, whose tendency to read romantic literature *as history*, as the representation of something or someone or of some sensibility, is problematized by the various ways in which the history that is "not there" in the poetry—for Liu's purposes the French Revolution and the social and egalitarian initiatives that cluster about it—is unfortunately the nothing or "absence" that also is.

I have indulged these opening remarks for two reasons: first, to give a general background to Liu's important study, and second, in order to emphasize

what I take to be a conflict that Liu's, more than any other new historical reading of Wordsworth—including, for example, James Chandler's *Wordsworth's Second Nature*, Marjorie Levinson's *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*, *McGann's The Romantic Ideology*, and David Simpson's *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination*—makes compellingly clear. And this is that while new historical readings are, by their own claim, more ethical than other modes of interpretation, the historicized Wordsworth who emerges in these readings is no more ethically *constituted* than the deconstructed Wordsworth of de Man or the deconstructable Wordsworth of Geoffrey Hartman, both of whom are in different ways poets of failure and contradiction. Thanks to the new historicism and to its brilliant practitioners, we undoubtedly know more than before about the road Wordsworth could not take or, more properly, about the Wordsworth who could not travel a road only recently demarcated. But whether such criticism, either as deconstruction, or as the reconstruction now of a suppressed politics, represents an ethical *alternative* to other modes of interpretation—either those sympathetic with Wordsworth in their putative denial of what, according to Liu, is "history," or to readings that are seemingly antipathetic in the way they merely marshal Wordsworth in a still larger skepticism—is, I think, open to question.

Liu, for his part, is acutely aware of this problem, and he naturally distinguishes his normatively based demystification of Wordsworth from a more purely theoretical deconstruction of Wordsworth's poetry on the grounds of "value." Deconstruction, Liu contends, is limited from "adequately finishing the task of correction or evaluation" in its unwillingness to "declar[e]" a "normative frame of reference upon which to secure the determination of value"—which it merely translates, he observes, "into ontological and epistemological terms." Deconstruction "cannot, that is, knowingly evaluate the transient motives, as opposed to timeless being or truth, of doctrinal position —of having a *"right"* position as opposed simply to plural *Positions*"—any more than it can "correc[t] the Word . . . in light of . . . the felt plenitude of history, the absence . . . that is constitutive of what we mean by cultural reality" (393–94).

Several things are clear from the above comments: that criticism, as Liu would have it, is indeed a corrective; that this correction is achieved by determining certain historical contingencies of value; and that such critical determinations are, of necessity, value-laden. Only a position with values, after all, with some ground at once tangible and ethical, can properly engage in the business of evaluation. Thus, in the very way that historical method establishes the transient motives behind a "right" or, in Wordsworth's case, "doctrinal position," so the methodized establishment of those motives, Liu suggests, is *itself* a "right" or a "correct" as well as a "corrective" position. This is so because of the historicist's willingness to take a stand, where deconstruction in its particular fidelity to "positions"—to the "both/and" rather than to the "either/or"—refuses, and more importantly, in the way historicization necessarily fills the "absence"—the nothing or indeterminacy that is always there in the poetry according to deconstruction—with the "plenitude of history."

Wordsworth: The Sense of History proceeds, then, to fill the absence through the rigorous application of a double-focus. That is, it sets about reversing the

trajectory of history denied in Wordsworth, and of the undecidability thereby fostered, not simply through its recreation of a discrete and remarkably nuanced political and social "reality," but even more significantly through witnessing—in what is now, of course, a critical act—the veritable destruction of this reality, which is Wordsworth's domestication of "historical emergency . . . in the form of its denial" (181). Liu manages this double-movement with a rigor and intensity—and with a virtual obsession with his material—that are indeed singular and are likely to remain a standard for this kind of analysis. Nevertheless, he conducts his investigation with an ethical fervor and excessiveness that at times hinders the authority of this still massively authoritative study, with its over five-hundred pages of text and an another two-hundred of apparatus.

The fervor is most evident in Liu's "sense of history" which, for all its success filling in the absence, cannot abide another absence or contingency that is also history: those very denials as it turns out—Wordsworth's negotiations as a mature, less than perfect, human who found himself under the compulsion to write—that are as much history in the end (and as timely a history I would argue) as the various other emergencies that were triaged along the way. Literary history as a discipline has long argued this point, and in reiterating it I do not mean to sound anachronistic. I mean to stress rather that, apart from a dauntingly fail-safe method that makes the seeming irrelevance or inapplicability of history to the poetry—for example the bearing of the family concept as it evolved in the eighteenth century on the constitution of selfhood in *The Borderers*—proof positive of its denial and hence of its centrality, there is the very real question here of whether a magisterial study of the not-Wordsworth—of what Wordsworth effectively left behind—is more necessary or, if you prefer, a more necessary study *regarding* Wordsworth than those studies (my own included) which continue to make lessons of the history that *is* poetry.

I do not pretend to have the answer to this, and I am less convinced, thanks to Liu and others, of the validity of a counterposition, indeed *my* counterposition. The only place, in fact, where such a position continues to gain a foothold is on the question of value, where reading one way is apparently more ethical now than reading another way. For it is precisely in those moments where Liu is most revelatory and, by his own assertion, most correct that he is most in need of correction. I do not mean by this that he is incorrect in a critical or purely literary sense, where his attention to textual particulars and to the bearing of history on those particulars is probably unrivaled; Liu stands to be corrected, rather, in the way that both writing, and the invariably imperfect, indecisive negotiations of which poetry (and Wordsworth's poetry preeminently) remains a record, are according to him incorrigible—or worse, corrigible only after the fact.

That is, for all its attention to history, including the particulars of Wordsworth's life, there is it seems to me insufficient appreciation in *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* of the quotidian which is also history—of being Wordsworth or for that matter anyone in time—of which Wordsworth's poetry is, for better or for worse, a representation. Because there is so much at stake in the "history" Liu narrates, the possibility of there being less, indeed far less, at stake in Wordsworth is simply inconceivable. It is not enough for Liu that

life, in unfortunate imitation of the Wordsworthian lyric perhaps, is a succession of moments—of negotiations, compromises, swervings and aporias—of, dare I say it, "spots of time." Rather it becomes necessary for Liu, and I would add uncompromisingly necessary, that life mean more and that its meaning somehow hinge upon its completability in the critical act. It is necessary in other words that narration annihilate description, that Wordsworth in time—a Wordsworth merely readable and fathomable—be always less important and always less a figure *in history* than the Wordsworth whose historicization renders him at once manageable and accountable.

I have said enough on this score and, in putative defense of way of a reading that some would call deconstructive, have paradoxically come out sounding like Matthew Arnold. What I wish to emphasize in what space remains (and what may already be surmised from the passion with which I have engaged it) is the importance and usefulness of Liu's achievement. Beginning indeed with a suggestive analysis of the Napoleonic resonances (and the revolutionary history behind them) in the Simplon episode of *The Prelude*, Liu proceeds, through remarkably nuanced and capacious discussions of both selected works—*An Evening Walk, Descriptive Sketches, The Borderers, The Ruined Cottage, The Prelude*—and their "history," to demonstrate the various, often oblique, ways history is denied in Wordsworth's writing as a condition of its realization. Furthermore, in what may strike some readers as surprisingly categorical, the history denied in Wordsworth, according to Liu, is essentially the French Revolution. Denied not only specifically, as the suppressed referent of the earlier loco-descriptive poetry and later as a referent variously screened in *The Prelude*, the Revolution is denied more symbolically in the resistance to specific political and/or social initiatives in formative works such as *The Borderers* and *The Ruined Cottage*. It may not have been Liu's intention to be this categorical, to equate all "history" in (or out of) Wordsworth with political good and the denial of history with apostasy and betrayal. But it is symptomatic of his fervor that things work out this way.

Thus, we move from a perspicacious reading of Wordsworth's early poems, including *Descriptive Sketches*, which describes Europe at the time of the Revolution but not the Revolution itself, to a treatment of *The Borderers*, where the "revolution" is denied in the way the bourgeois family unit (of which the self is an extrapolation) is defined by its isolation from moral taint. This taint, Liu argues, is figured in Wordsworth's play by the spectre of Matilda's illegitimacy and Mortimer's horror at its possibility, which in turn registers Wordsworth's own anxiety about, and ultimately his refusal to accept, the idea of a community or family of men. In the early descriptive poems Liu not only attends to textual particulars, for example the irruption of the Revolution or of a revolutionary consciousness in images and episodes which relate to and/or bear comparison with the representation of the Revolution as it developed in France; he is equally attentive to the politics of the picturesque, which is Wordsworth's mode here: both to the real politics of enclosure and its physical effect on the English landscape, as well as to the more displaced—but no less political (if somewhat liberal)—aesthetics of containment by which, as the poetry shows, the Revolution is expressed commensurate with its suppression. Nor is Liu at all reductive in his reading here or inclined along the path of least resistance. Sidestepping the obvious political thematics in *The*

Borderers, which cluster around the question of regicide and insurrection, he detects within the play a more elusive and, as its turns out, more palpable history: specifically, the evolution of the bourgeois family (and by extension the self) as a legitimate social unit removed, by self-legitimizing narrative, from an "impoverished," illegitimate "other" (252).

Liu is just as unpredictable and as informative in his discussion of *The Ruined Cottage*. Eschewing, once again, the conventional and somewhat self-congratulatory conception of the poem as a humane document forever in sympathy with its tragic subjects, Liu offers a brilliantly historicized analogy between the precarious condition of weavers (such as the poem's character Robert) and that of Wordsworth himself who had aspired to support himself by the labor of his writing. In this way, Liu shows precisely what is at issue in making rural tragedy the occasion of a lyric and richly symbolic representation. For in the "capitalization" of rural impoverishment in poetic meaning —or by what amounts, in effect, to poetic genius—the act of imagination (which in Wordsworth's case was to have been underwritten by an inheritance) has a peculiar parity with the very labor, to which it compares quite favorably now, and is thereby "valued on a par with any other specie of human work." In "Wordsworth's economy of lyric," Liu concludes, "[r]iches arise through sublimated denials of normal economy: though you have less, you shall have more; though you share, you shall own; though you merely imagine, you shall labor" (353).

With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that *The Prelude*, which marks the apotheosis of Wordsworth's "lyric" self, would also "celebrate the death of [the poet's] revolutionary spirit" (366) in "a discourse that affirms-in-order-to-deny the absences, differentiations, mutabilities, 'elsewhereness,' or *otherness* of history" (361). Far from representing history, and with it a revolutionary spirit, the books of *The Prelude* devoted to the poet's experience in France manage, more than say the early loco-descriptive poems (which by dint of sheer contemporaneity were at least responsive to the Revolution) to allow "'true history' to dematerialize" (377). With history rendered insubstantial there emerges "a new, transcendental authority of history: Wordsworth's 'I.'" The Revolution books—and hence the Revolution itself—are "recentered within a field of purely personal meaning" (384–85), within an "ideology of self" which, according to Liu, constitutes Wordsworth's "greatest denial of history" (388).

There is much more to Liu's analysis of *The Prelude*, including a quite remarkable anatomy of Wordsworth's politics of patriotism, reflected pre-eminently in the spots of time, whose paradoxical effect was to enable Wordsworth to imitate Napoleon (including Napoleon the strategist) in the very act of opposing him. And there is also, by way of conclusion, some careful and circumspect consideration of Wordsworth's later, more overtly nationalistic poetry as a vehicle for readmitting history and militating against lyric. As one who has also struggled to see something contestational about the later, anti-romantic Wordsworth, I can only applaud Liu's efforts to establish a continuity in Wordsworth's writing even if that continuity comes, as it does here, to something less than a recognition on the poet's part. *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* in fact elicits applause at every turn. It is thorough, stunningly well-researched (especially in the historical sections) and enormously intelligent.

Some readers will undoubtedly find it too intelligent or, as the phrase goes, too clever by half. But this, they should know, is an indulgence amply justified by everything else here (not the least being Liu's generous acknowledgment of the work of others), and which Alan Liu, on a more personal note, has clearly earned the right to, having toiled at this labor long before it was either fashionable or before it could be modeled on so decisive an achievement.

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Soundings in Critical Theory by Dominick LaCapra. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989. Pp. xii + 213. $29.95 (cloth); $10.95 (paper).

The widespread, contemporary interest in interdisciplinary research and curricula has produced relatively few academic scholars who defy disciplinary boundaries and address theoretical problems that cross the departmental structures of intellectual life in the modern university. Dominick LaCapra's work has therefore become both exceptional and increasingly influential through its self-conscious, interdisciplinary exploration of the connections between literature, history, social theory, psychoanalysis, literary criticism, and contemporary culture. LaCapra pursues the challenges of interdisciplinary analysis beyond the clichés of curricular review committees into the complex writings of modern Europe's most influential critical thinkers, all of whom relied on interdisciplinary perspectives and developed theories with interdisciplinary significance. This new collection of seven critical essays reiterates many of the themes that have appeared elsewhere in LaCapra's work (e.g., in *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* or in *History and Criticism*) and attracted the attention of a wide academic audience: the implications of poststructuralist theory for the study of history, the importance of a critical dialogue with the past, the complexity of internal contestations or dialogues within literary, historical, and theoretical texts, the intricacy of the interactions between texts and contexts, and the value of carnivalesque traditions for both social relations and literary style. *Soundings in Critical Theory* thus serves on one level as a restatement of LaCapra's earlier advocacy of a critical, dialogic intellectual history that draws on literary theory to develop new readings of influential texts and contexts in the Western tradition.

But this book also goes significantly beyond his previous work in its focus on possible directions for a transformative, critical theory that might help to change the ideologies, politics, culture, and institutions of contemporary societies. LaCapra has not lost his interest in history or literature, but his critical aspirations seem to have become more explicit and more ambitious. He is looking for an intellectual history that would change the present or the future as it reinterprets the past, though he recognizes (realistically enough) that intellectual history and other forms of critical, theoretical writing are relegated to the (harmless?) margins of our commodified, mass culture. What, then, can critical theorists/intellectual historians do to challenge a culture whose his-

tory generates the objects of their research as well as the limits and possibilities of their thought and action?

The answer to that question emerges gradually and somewhat unsystematically in the essays of this book, despite LaCapra's steadfast resistance to simple solutions that might suggest closure, totalization, essentialism or teleology. He typically approaches cultural problems through "dialogic interventions" rather than through the comprehensive order of a systematic treatise. Yet certain themes appear often in the book and provide some directions for critical theorists and intellectual historians who must inevitably remain uncertain about their future destinations. In simplest terms, LaCapra argues that the two-sided, critical project of the Frankfurt School (the attempt to reconcile Marx and Freud) has given way to a new, three-sided attempt to work through the critical connections between Marxism, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism. The complex, triangular interaction of these theoretical perspectives informs LaCapra's approach to history and shapes both the formal structure and explicit argument in this book; more specifically, each of these traditions is used to contest or supplement or extend the others. For example, the tendency of Marxists or Freudians to propose theoretical closures (economic determinism, castration anxiety) receives Derridean critiques of the displaced metaphysical desire for totalizing explanations, but then deconstruction receives criticism for formalist tendencies that radically de-emphasize what Marx and Freud have analyzed in the historical world outside of written texts. LaCapra's critical method and his suggestions for future work in critical theory/intellectual history thus rely on a triangular exchange that is never simply closed and never simply dissolved into synthesis.

In addition to the broad theoretical triangle (Marx, Freud, Derrida) that operates throughout the book, LaCapra refers briefly to contemporary historiographical triangles (class-race-gender) and also develops triangular debates within most of the specific chapters. His self-reflective "dialogic" style often leads him to explore history and theory by comparing the similarities and differences in pairs of well-known authors, but LaCapra always enters the dialogue to establish another triangle. This triadic pattern shows up most notably in a response to the ways that Roger Chartier and Robert Darnton interpret symbols, in an analysis of Romanticism and "the temporality of rhetoric" in works by M. H. Abrams and Paul de Man, in a comparative exploration of culture and ideology in the theories of Clifford Geertz and Marx, and in a reading of "Marx after Derrida." The variety of authors who are analyzed in these chapters points to the extraordinary range of LaCapra's interests as he follows his principal subjects into the works of Rousseau, Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Foucault, and others who supplement the exchanges. Although he carefully resists the conventional desire to bring these exchanges to satisfying conclusions, his movement toward a new critical theory comes back repeatedly to the triangle of Marx, Freud, and Derrida.

As LaCapra describes it, a transformative critical theory (or historical methodology) should focus on at least three recurring problems in modern culture: (1) the pervasive commodification of cultural artifacts, (2) the role of transference in the study of cultural objects or traditions, and (3) the distortions and dangers that accompany the reliance on binary oppositions in society and thought. Significantly, these issues coincide with prominent themes in the

works of Marx, Freud, and Derrida, though the main concerns of these theorists differ and mostly refer in each case to only one of LaCapra's three major themes. Marx points critical theorists and historians toward the economic dimensions of cultural life and continues to offer an extremely useful account of commodity exchanges in capitalist societies. Indeed, LaCapra suggests that no would-be theorist can ignore the role of the economy in a culture that is "mediated by the market and converted into a commodity bought and sold in accordance with market criteria" (141). The "commodified character" of modern, mass culture threatens all advocates of cultural transformation because "it is difficult to avoid the general conclusion that the level of commodification and capital investment in mass culture is so high that ideologically reinforcing or adaptive forces tend to be marked or even preponderant and that 'utopian' elements tend to be restricted to contained fantasy and wishful thinking" (3). Even the most daring aesthetic experiments are quickly taken up by advertising and absorbed into a commodity system that can still be critically analyzed with insights from Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism in the first volume of *Capital*.

The critical study of commodification, though, must move beyond economics to a self-analysis of "transferential relations." Drawing explicitly on Freud, LaCapra uses the term "transference" to describe "the manner in which the problems at issue in the object of study reappear (or are repeated with variations) in the work of the historian" (37). For the historian of capitalist social relations or commodity systems, this transferential relation could take the form of an archival fetishism in which the unselfconscious scholar obsessively collects and protects data with the entrepreneurial passion of a capitalist speculator (the data acquires the exchange value of other commodities). In contrast to an unreflective scholar-speculator, the critical theorist or historian might follow the Freudian analyst in developing an awareness of transferential relations (which exist also between scholars or between teachers and students) and in challenging the dream of "recounting the past purely in its own terms and for its own sake" (38–39). In other words, psychoanalysis offers a method for thinking about how the historian's voice enters accounts of the past and how the past enters the historian—somewhat like the analyst and analysand interact and disorient each other. Transferential interactions can never be entirely overcome (they are necesssary for all forms of analysis), but LaCapra wants them to be recognized and subjected to critique.

The transferential relation between historians and the historical "other" undermines binary oppositions (e.g., present historian/past reality) and leads LaCapra toward his third critical guide, Derrida. Among the many important perspectives that deconstruction brings to a reformulated critical theory, LaCapra finds the greatest significance in the critique of totalizing theories and binary oppositions. Both the desire for closure (metaphysical tradition) and the tendency to order the world in binary relations (logic of scapegoating) carry social and theoretical implications that LaCapra's critical theorist-historian will find highly objectionable. The danger of totalizing theories appears regularly in political systems, philosophies, and religions that deny the legitimacy of other voices, other possibilities, and other histories. This totalizing pattern is especially evident in state-sanctioned ideologies and faiths, but the use of binary oppositions or scapegoating can be found as often in democratic societies as in one-party states.

Here is the point at which LaCapra finds Derridean insights to be of greatest value in developing a critical theory that moves beyond Marx or Freud (without rejecting or ignoring their insights). "One of the most potent institutional implications of the poststructuralist critique of binary oppositions," writes LaCapra, "is a critique of the scapegoat mechanism. . . . The critical task is to work out alternatives to it. A different understanding of institutions as settings for the interaction of social individuals, marked by internal alterity yet committed or obligated to one another, is a necessary step in this respect" (24). The problem, as LaCapra recognizes, lies in the nearly universal tendency of cultures and societies to define their identity and their essence in opposition to unpure "others" who must be scapegoated and rejected. Binary thinking informs all nationalist ideologies and enters constantly into the political response to the complexities of social life. The American "War on Drugs," for example, relies mainly on binary oppositions (past purity/present decline, good Americans/evil, Hispanic drug lords, white/black, law/crime, Bush/Noriega, etc.) which vastly distort the nature of a significant social problem.

The preceding summary of three key themes in LaCapra's search for a new critical theory simplifies and narrates an argument that never takes this precise form. There is much more to be said about his "dialogue" with Marx, Freud, and Derrida, and there is even more to say about his responses to other contemporary critics, historians, and anthropologists. Yet most of his specific criticisms and programmatic statements (such as they are) draw in various ways on his concern with commodification, transference, and binary oppositions. Within this overall framework, however, *Soundings in Critical Theory* addresses a number of specific issues that I cannot discuss here. For example, LaCapra stresses the importance of historical contexts in opposition to formalists (Paul de Man receives particular criticism on this point), but he also wants to avoid all kinds of simple contextualism (he questions both the new historicism in literary studies and conventional social history). He repeatedly challenges the desire for closure in historiography and literary criticism (Robert Darnton and M. H. Abrams give him examples of the problem), but he also accepts the necessity of distinctions, hypotheses, and "articulations" in the study of history and culture (postmodernism's "indiscriminate reliance on techniques of fragmentation" [1] seems to be the danger here). He urges readers to think critically about canon formation and to situate such traditions historically (his critique of the sacralization of "great books"), and yet he simultaneously defends the importance of major works in "the tradition" because they carry contestatory, critical themes (i.e., he objects to "canon-busters" who simply condemn "great books" curricula). He questions the structure of academic and social organizations and favors the transgression of inherited institutional boundaries, yet he strongly affirms the importance of institutional life and the necessity of limits within which institutions must operate. He acknowledges Clifford Geertz's contribution to the study of symbolic meaning, but he calls for a more differentiated analysis of culture that might draw again on "a modified Marxist conception of ideology" (135) —that is to say a renewed attention to the links between ideas and social interests. He proposes a continuing engagement with Marx, but a Marx who offers the possibility (after Derrida) of a "supplemented dialectic" rather than

the teleological closure of Hegelianism or the scientistic closure of positivism. He advocates a close connection between critical theory and intellectual history, yet he notes the explicit resistance of many historians (his representative figure is J.G.A. Pocock) to forms of historiography that might also become forms of criticism.

This list of intersecting oppositions in LaCapra's book could be extended, but the pattern should be apparent. Although he subjects much contemporary scholarship and culture to critical analysis, LaCapra works with exceptional self-consciousness to avoid the scapegoating of what he criticizes in others and to go beyond the analytic level of critical reversals or inversions. He wants to develop a strong critical position without replicating traditional critiques that simply condemn their opponents as wrong. This alternative critical project thus escapes the mythmaking of simple solutions to complex problems, but it also runs the risk of a bland middle position (finding good and bad in all of the overlapping, analytic poles it identifies) or the risk of self-contradiction whenever it enters into controversies or debates (repeating the polemical tendency to scapegoat).

LaCapra's response to these risks stresses the importance of language in ways that make the prose style a crucial dimension of the critical project. He challenges the blandness of a middle position and the possible scapegoating in his own critiques of others by writing highly nuanced sentences and constantly limiting the claims of his arguments. This stylistic strategy clearly separates LaCapra's writing from the work of consensus builders who provide the comforts of a reconciling synthesis or describe the "good points" of all sides in order to propose the reasonable compromise of differences; LaCapra is not looking for consensus or common sense. In fact, he frequently criticizes historians and theorists such as Robert Darnton or Clifford Geertz for writing in a direct, commonsense style that glosses over critical problems. An extremely "readable" writer exemplifies for LaCapra the widespread cultural tendency toward commodification which undercuts the possible development of critical theories and critical histories. "Commodified language use extricates the 'symbolic' from the work and play of language . . . and makes it into the transcendental object seemingly conveyed in its transparent purity by an unworried, untroubled style" (82). The stylistic problem for would-be critical writers (as LaCapra notes) derives from the tendency of language to lose all critical force as it becomes simplified and commodified. The word "revolutionary," for example, comes to designate a new product, and the mass media reduce social, political, and cultural conflicts to the clichés of television "sound bites." And yet how does critical theory enter into political and cultural debates—the public sphere—if it does not rely on language that most people in the culture commonly use and understand?

The obvious historical example of accessible, critical prose would be the polemical works of Marx. Simplifying the intricacies of his theoretical writings, Marx's *Communist Manifesto* employed a direct, polemical language that helped to mobilize political movements and transform modern societies. LaCapra's prose (like Marx's theoretical work) is neither obscurantist nor incomprehensible, but its complex nuances do not generate slogans for a popular social movement. (A new, critical manifesto? Perhaps this: "Commodity consumers of the world might at times unite; you may have little to lose but

your transferential relations and binary oppositions!") The difference between a complex, critical language and an accessible, commodified language raises unresolved questions about how critical theory can support transformative action without losing its audience or reinforcing the culture it seeks to change. LaCapra does not really answer these questions, though he tends to see more danger in commodified language than in difficult prose.

The problem of comprehensible language is related to another problem for LaCapra's transformative critical theory: the appeal of binary oppositions. His work offers many perceptive warnings about the dangers of binary thinking and shows how this form of thought (like commodified language) can easily be assimilated into the cultural or political status quo; the simple reversal of hierarchies does not end repression or exploitation or scapegoating—as the history of political revolutions has demonstrated all too clearly. Yet how can a transformative social movement mobilize a popular political and cultural base without the appealing simplicity of binary oppositions? All "successful" historical movements or ideologies (e.g., Christianity, nationalism, socialism, fascism, racism, sexism, and even the Enlightenment) have depended on such oppositions and have sustained their identities through binary categories. This historical pattern suggests that a focused, critical, contestatory movement can scarcely avoid the need to define its opponents on some level as radically "other" if it is to attract the wide support that brings about change in modern societies.

LaCapra is acutely sensitive to the historical power of binary thinking, but he characteristically refuses to offer any simple alternatives or solutions to this pervasive social and ideological pattern. "In social life," he writes, "scapegoating provides instant purification and the ability to localize the source of contamination in an individual or group bearing the most recognizable difference from the ingroup" (24). This scapegoating process contributes much of the passion, solidarity and identity for social institutions and political cultures, and it poses immense problems for a transformative social movement that would reject the traditional recourse to binary oppositions. Indeed, the search for a non-binary social and theoretical model would seem to push LaCapra from the Western philosophical tradition toward Eastern traditions (not explicitly evoked) which recognize the overlapping, supplementary connection between all categories and their partial opposites.

These are only some of the problems that emerge in LaCapra's exploration of critical theory—problems that are raised but not solved. The open-endedness of his book is nevertheless appropriate for his own theory and method, and it also seems appropriate for the present historical moment. We do not need a new theory of closure. What we do need, however, and what LaCapra's important, challenging book offers, is some new ways to think about historical processes and ethical or political judgments. LaCapra distances himself in this book from some of his earlier affiliation with Derridean criticism, yet he continues to suggest ways in which deconstructive readings can be used to extend other critiques of society, culture, and politics. This imaginative, critical project helps to counter the charge that deconstruction leads toward a denial of history or the abandonment of ethical and political choices. On the contrary, the critique of transcendental signifiers, absolute groundings, and simple polarities renders the search for historical under-

standing and ethical decisionmaking all the more important because it rejects the possibility of a consoling or clarifying escape from history.

LaCapra comes close to summarizing the implications of his approach to history and his critical "soundings" in a concise passage that suggests why this book (like others he has written) will be important for a wide range of intellectual disciplines:

> The approach I am suggesting refers critique to a discursive and argumentative context that itself has no absolute or ultimate grounds—a variable context that cannot even be labeled "pragmatic." This approach has the minimal value of making explicit what processes of inquiry and argument have always been, and it does not pretend to any transcendental or fully systematic (or "totalized") perspective. Rather, it insists on, indeed affirms, the problematic connection of scientific inquiry and ethicopolitical judgment. This approach further implies that the notion of unity or order is limited, contextually variable, and internally contested; but it does not simply eliminate that notion. Nor does it invalidate the idea of accuracy in propositions or the role of hypothesis testing. (151–52)

This description of "critique"—with its emphasis on language and contexts, its rejection of absolute grounding and transcendental perspectives, its attention to historical processes of inquiry that "have always been," its insistence on complex links between science and ethics, its challenge to and limited reaffirmation of notions of order, and its acceptance of propositions and hypotheses—indicates why Dominick LaCapra's work should continue to attract attention from both analysts and critics of history, literature, culture, and contemporary society. *Soundings in Critical Theory* will not change the world, but it should stimulate the thinking and analysis and even the action of those who still turn to books to criticize or redefine or alter the history in which they live.

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Professing Literature by Gerald Graff. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987. $24.95.

Professing Literature is a breakthrough book, the first full-length effort to describe the history of literature instruction in American colleges. Starting with nineteenth-century predecessors of English departments and concluding with the 1980s debate over theory, it's full, timely, and pertinent. In the short time it has been out, Graff's provocative book has been forcing scholars, critics, and teachers to rethink their relationship to the profession of English.

Such a reexamination is precisely Graff's aim. His book is history with a purpose; he believes that since English as a discipline has never been adequately conceptualized, English departments have never had a real sense of what they stood for. Graff wants English to deal with its conflicts by teaching them, making the disputes over ends and means the actual subject of scholarship and pedagogy. He shapes his book around the struggles that he re-

gards as formative for the profession: classicists versus modern language scholars in the mid nineteenth century; research investigators versus generalists at the turn of the century; historical scholars versus critics in the twenties and thirties; New Humanists versus New Critics in the late thirties and forties; academic critics versus literary journalists and culture critics in the sixties; and finally critics and scholars versus theorists in the 1970s and 80s.

One of Graff's most telling points is that many of these disputes were never really resolved. The spectacular growth of English meant conflict could be avoided by the expedient of adding another specialist. Thus when women raised tough questions about the canon in the 1970s, departments hired more women to "do" literature from a female perspective. Graff claims that this pattern was fully established at the turn of the century, when the dispute between philology and literature was "solved" by hiring literature specialists, not by removing philologists. The field coverage model of English studies, subject of some of Graff's strongest attacks, has permitted English departments to finesse the tough question of priorities.

What makes *Professing Literature* so successful is the acutness of Graff's analysis. His powerfully sympathetic intelligence allows him to understand and appreciate the points on both sides of burning issues. For instance, his brief account of the historians' attacks on the critics (e.g., Rosamund Tuve vs. T. S. Eliot and Douglas Bush vs. Cleanth Brooks) is a marvel of insight. Graff can explain complex polemics cogently and gracefully. And behind the shrewd and impartial analyses of the controversies lies Graff's irenic purpose; he genuinely wants tolerance rather than rancor, and his attempt to understand the conflicts, is fair, rigorous, and consistently interesting.

Also valuable is the attention Graff pays to important yet poorly understood figures in English studies: Joel Spingarn, a dazzling critic and scholar who gave up on the profession in the teens; Norman Foerster, whose presence was felt throughout the 1920s and 30s (Foerster's impact on composition studies remains an unexplored link); and R. S. Crane, whose difficult later criticism benefits greatly from Graff's sympathetic and informed analysis.

One question occasioned by *Professing Literature* is whether it is what Graff terms it on his title page, an "institutional history"—that is, the history of the English department as an institution—or whether it is instead a history of critical trends and practices. The book seems much more like the latter, since it makes no attempt to present either a comprehensive or a carefully selected portrait of English departments within the context of higher education over the past century and a half. The colleges Graff refers to are almost all elite, a justifiable choice in a study of key ideas or leading trends, but hardly likely to provide a true portrait of the full range of literature studies.

Professing Literature makes its readers realize how much remains to be learned. For instance, the question of who became English professors seems crucial, connecting as it does with a pronounced Anglophile strain running through American life. Anglophilia explains more than just gentility and a taste for pipes, sherry, and tweeds; it has often determined what gets studied and how: the Walpole industry at Yale; Johnsonians; Janeites; certain medievalists; some of the admirers of Henry James; devotees of Bloomsbury. Similarly, very little is known about numbers of teachers and of majors, of how academic careers changed over time, and of relations between English departments and secondary schools, to name just a few key areas.

It would be unfair to demand all this and more of a first look at a complex subject, yet sometimes such information would strengthen Graff's arguments. For instance, Graff points out that those who attacked theory in 1970s and 80s used many of the same terms that the humanists of the 1920s used against historical study of literature: pseudoscientific; against established standards; stifling of creativity; impossible to handle in the classroom; pretentious. The recurrence of such complaints helps make Graff's point about foregrounding conflict. But without context a reader can form some misleading impressions. The attack posed by theory in the 1970s and 80s came at a particular time and place: when English Departments were beleaguered, enrollments dropped almost everywhere, new Ph.D.s couldn't get jobs, and new pressures were coming from women, blacks, Latinos, and gays. Just at this time a group of young leftish intellectuals started promoting a new kind of reading, a whole new set of names (Foucault, Derrida, Barthes, Kristeva, Iser, de Man, Lacan, etc.), a new set of key texts by Rousseau, Nietzsche, Plato, Loyola, and Rilke, writers perhaps not unknown to English professors but who were rarely the subject of faculty room conversation. Thousands of English professors (at elite and not so elite colleges) saw a threat to their way of doing things. At a time when departments were shrinking, the battle over theory placed jobs and livelihoods at risk; careers were made or ruined. The context is essential for understanding the whole story of the reaction to theory. And one wonders if earlier conflicts would take on different dimensions and richer shadings if they too were presented in context. (Graff and Michael Warner have helped provide such context themselves in their followup volume, *The Origin of Literary Studies in America* [New York, 1989], a welcome book that reprints key statements from many of the major figures mentioned in *Professing Literature*.)

One benefit from writing the first book on the subject is that one gets to set the terms of the debate. Graff has written that book and we have every reason to be glad that he's so intelligent and judicious. We'll continue to discuss his themes, and no doubt disagree with him over many of them. (One of the disadvantages of going first!) *Professing Literature* is welcome as much for the way it frames the issues as for how it engages them. What will follow will be filling in, reshaping, contextualizing. Many scholars will certainly want to add much more about the crucial battles between literature and composition, theater, speech, linguistics, journalism, and other closely related fields. Others will test Graff's claim about resolving problems through adding faculty by examining how changing course requirements for Ph.D.s and for majors connected with hiring practices. And some will no doubt ask if lack of coherence within English is such a bad thing, and whether the problems English faces have much connection with issues now being discussed within history, psychology, philosophy, and a host of other human sciences. It is a tribute to Graff's perception that we are left with such a rich lode of questions to explore. One hopes that this exceptional book will inaugurate a series of equally interesting studies that explore the history and present state of the discipline of English.

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