

## Review · Brian W. Shaffer

*Criticism in the University*. Ed., Gerald Graff and Reginald Gibbons. Northwestern University Press, 1985. 234 pp., \$9.95.

*The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation*. Charles Newman, with a Preface by Gerald Graff. Northwestern University Press, 1985. 203 pp., \$7.95.

Conceived for general readers and academic specialists alike, *Criticism in the University* and *The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation* make superb companion volumes for reading and discussion. While the former collects fourteen essays by writers of various persuasions on the current state of academic literary criticism, the latter is an analysis, by a single, albeit seemingly “renaissance” mind, of contemporary American literary culture. Both volumes, without being reductive, “systematic” or narrowly ideological, offer fresh examinations of recent alignments in American literary culture.

In the Preface to *Criticism in the University*—published in conjunction with *TriQuarterly*—the editors invoke Jonathan Culler’s (unbeknownst to him) “unsettling” suggestion that, instead of offering healthy debates, academic critics, confined to the “apparently incompatible activities” of “structuralism, reader-response criticism, deconstruction, Marxist criticism, pluralism, feminist criticism, semiotics, psychoanalytic criticism, hermeneutics, [etc.] . . .” labor acrimoniously, without engaging each other. Moreover, Graff and Gibbons charge academic critics with ignoring “culturally grounded” criticism. They have forgotten that “criticism was formerly part of a ‘literary culture’ much broader than the University, and . . . that literary critics were once . . . men (and too rarely women) of letters . . . [who] wrote either for general readers or for the community of imaginative writers, rather than for a coterie of specialized professors and graduate students . . .” (8).

Calling for an approach to literature that is more balanced—one that includes the participation of “a Leavis, a Trilling or a Howe, as much as a Derrida or a Lacan”—the editors insist that “it is not necessary to restrict theory to a sort of inquiry that is ahistorical and outside questions of

evaluation and literary culture generally. “‘Theoretical’ need not mean ‘isolated,’ ‘unhistorical,’ ‘self-referential’ . . . ” (10). Further, Graff and Gibbons seek the creation of

a structure in which the sum of what academic critics do can add up to a dialectical whole instead of an inconsequential series of isolated activities. In other words, the point is not to rule out specialized study, but only to ask that it *participate in the creation of a larger context of contemporary intellectual and social life*. (10), emphasis mine)

To this end, the editors appeal for “a fusing of cultural inquiry and the most scrupulous textual attention . . . to restore to criticism a constructive role in the literary culture” (11). Other contributors to the volume follow suit: most essays close with suggestions, pedagogical and otherwise, for revitalizing academic criticism.

I belabor the editors’ Preface in order to emphasize their (for the most part) judicious handling of the project: while the volume is not representative of as full a spectrum of positions as one might like, contributors are nevertheless united by the reasonable desire to see academic criticism as of broad cultural significance once again, but not necessarily in the same old ways.

In his own contribution to the volume, Gerald Graff argues that the university “prevents” as much as it “promotes” culture. Graff illustrates the close proximity of traditional critics and critical theorists to each other, as opposed to generalists and journalists who speak the language of general readers:

The goal of Faulkner studies is to “cover” the as yet undiscussed “areas” in the field, like so many stains in a rug, and, when the old areas have been covered, to create new ones. Naturally, Faulkner studies, like all other academic fields, formally pretends that, in covering its terrain, it is contributing to a larger national and international “literary culture,” but this is obviously little more than a polite fiction. Indeed, what makes literary theory seem so outrageously different from standard research and explication is that by flaunting its difficulty and esotericism it shows it has simply abandoned the sentimental pretense that it has an audience outside the field. . . . (65)

Incapable of correlating the numerous fields in its midst, the university, for Graff, *inhibits* effective cultural debate.

Wendell Berry, Graff's ally in these issues, argues for a criticism that is holistic in orientation. In his familiar, morally engaged, vaguely missionary tone, Berry also decries the overspecialization of the modern university which has grown, in his nice metaphor, "not according to any unifying principle, like an expanding universe, but by the principle of miscellaneous accretion, like a furniture storage business" (207).

Reminiscent of Paul and Percival Goodman in *Communitas*, Berry urges that the university seek its proper *means* through an examination of its rightful *ends*: "underlying the idea of a university—the bringing together, the combining into one, of all disciplines—is the idea that good work and good citizenship are the inevitable by-products of the making of a good, a fully developed, human being" (208). When the departments of a university are too specialized even to communicate with one another or with the majority of their own students, then, Berry argues, the university has "displaced" itself from its rightful functioning in the world. By insisting upon the objectivity of, and maintaining "scientific" distance from, the knowledge it imparts, the university, according to Berry, encourages "teachers and students [to] read the great songs and stories to learn *about* them, not to learn *from* them" (209).

*Criticism in the University* also includes contributions from writers *not* associated with Graff's well-known ideas. In the volume's single "discussion," Graff interviews Sandra M. Gilbert, co-author of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, as to the place of feminist criticism in the university. For Gilbert, who cites the baleful disappearance from American culture of poet-critics such as Emerson and Eliot, the problem with the specialized structure of the university is that it has "fostered a schism between the right brain (the creative writer) and the left brain (the critic), which leaves both halves of the communal mind engaged in activities that often seem partial, passionless, even pointless" (11). While minimizing Graff's "worried postulate about 'academic' criticism," Gilbert nevertheless suspects that "an intensification of professionalism is both cause and consequence" of this rift.

While Gilbert admits that feminist critics are subject to the same forces as other critics, and hence must join the "academic assembly line," producing the standard professional fare to survive, she rejects Graff's fear that feminist criticism will become "as hackneyed as the other (male) in-

dustries.” This, continues Gilbert, is because feminist criticism is far less likely to become “alienated labor.”

*Criticism in the University* also includes two focused debates which are “acts of antagonistic cooperation” in the most salutary sense. William E. Cain and Frank Lentricchia exchange views on the value and proper use of critical theory, while E. D. Hirsch, Jr. and Timothy Bahti debate the validity—“difficult” or “impossible” to come by?—of objective historical interpretation.

In one of the most valuable essays in this volume, Patrick Colm Hogan links the recent proliferation of deconstructive criticism to the need for “salable,” as opposed to culturally responsible, literary criticism. Of a more “occasional,” but nevertheless substantive, nature, William D. Pritchard offers his academic autobiography in explanation of his critical sensibility; Donald Davie laments the decline and demise of the belletrist in this country, identifying “the most heinous failing of all current literary criticism” with “the drastic foreshortening of historical perspectives back from the present day” (174); and Reginald Gibbons, poses the question: “If the highest goal of the novel is still to discover our existence to us, in our present historical conditions and in a way which is possible only for a work of art, then why should not the task of criticism be to discover the ways in which the novel does this?” (22).

Overall, an element of consensus is evident in *Criticism in the University*, best represented, perhaps, by Gibbons’ nagging question. For to the degree that contemporary academic discourse triumphs in its liberating play of ideas, in its hard-earned philosophic sophistication and in its scrupulous attention paid to close reading and detail, it finds itself less able to consider literature within a “worldly,” more broadly cultural, context (as Bakhtin, for example, endlessly argued). Nevertheless, the inclusion of an essay by an unabashed deconstructionist or post-structuralist—a conspicuous omission—would have given this volume a wider appeal.

If the preceding volume confronts the practices of current academic critics, Charles Newman’s *The Post-Modern Aura*—originally published in *Salmagundi*—takes on the intellectual pretensions of an entire culture. True to its subtitle, *The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation*, Newman’s guiding metaphor for describing our cultural predicament is economic: “inflation affects the ideas exchange just as surely as it does commercial markets” (8). A novelist himself (*White Jazz* most recently), Newman demonstrates his

ability to synthesize an immense body of learning with trenchant wit and inexhaustible humor.

In his Foreword, Newman identifies the Post-Modern as “. . . a particularly sensitive and elusive *Geist*, a cluster of dead ends which are nevertheless accumulatively pertinent” (36), “. . . one of those concepts which must be pursued very deeply to discover how calculatingly superficial it is” (16). It is “neither a canon of writers, nor a body of criticism, though it is often applied to literature of . . . the last twenty years” (5). During these two decades, observes Newman, we have seen both the most explosive period of economic growth and the worst inflation in American history. The author deems inflation a cultural malaise of dire proportions because it “renders obsolete the very notion of voluntary exchange, as both buyer and seller are under the pressure of an anticipated price rise” and hence both parties have “little way of determining the *value* of anything” on the market (167).

Noting the continuous inflation of cultural discourses which vie for our attention but speak little, if at all, to one another, Newman claims that we are witness to “an unprecedented nonjudgemental receptivity to Art” which “finally amounts only to indifference” (9). For example, although more novels have been published in the last 30 years than in any other comparable period in history, “no age has been less sure about what a novel is, or more skeptical of the value and function of ‘imaginative’ literature” (9). The “primary sensation” of our time, he continues, is “the overwhelming sense not merely of the relativity of ideas, but of the sheer quantity and incoherence of information . . .” (9). Thus the post-modern novelist must define his or her work, to its own detriment, “against a blindly innovative information society” (10).

Newman seeks to explode the myth of modernism’s revolutionary arrival upon the scene—à la Virginia Woolf’s claim that “on or about December, 1910, human nature changed”—and replace it with an evolutionary, historically based understanding, beginning with Flaubert’s elitist disdain for his audience, on through the early or “high” Modernism of Joyce’s period, and into the present era where the hostility of the writer for his audience is the most profound and “destructive” yet. What *does* distinguish us from the Modernism of a Flaubert or a Joyce, for Newman, is Post-Modernism’s canonization and fetishizing of Modern ideas, which renders “‘the Contemporary’ the indubitable cultural reference point”

(27). Further, the effect of this cultic worshipping of Modernism leads to Post-Modern art's characteristic "loss" or "truncation" of an historical dimension.

Newman also attacks the authenticity of the American Avant-Garde, deeming its activities simply "bourgeois self-criticism" (52). Because "the Avant-Gard defines itself historically by the rigidity of the official culture to which it opposes itself," and since there is presently no such "true adversary community with a coherent, even consensual, point of view" (46), and only "proliferating subcultures" (47), there can be no genuine Avant-Garde. Thus, the adversarial stance of the American Avant-Garde is mere posturing: what has been in Europe a culturally and politically revolutionary movement is in America today merely an aesthetic one—"a technical reform of syntax, vocabulary, and tone . . ." (46).

Newman additionally takes on the widely accepted notion of "textualism," which he calls our "determinism" (as "history" was for Marx, and "the psyche," for Freud). As literature's influence in society drops, he continues, so our fascination with textualism rises. Textualism holds that language is not only "constitutive of reality but is its *own* reality" (81), "a symbolic net which cuts us off from our origins, a series of analogies with no instrumental relation to the world" (82). Admitting that we are "circumscribed" by language, Newman nevertheless eschews the notion that reality must therefore be a "fiction." Further, if we are fundamentally bound by language, how can "textualists" say with certainty anything about it?

There are those who *choose* to be lost, locked into an "ontology of nothingness," though we ought not to forget that reports from "the void" are just as unverifiable as those from safer regions, and probably less so. . . . One cannot make assertions about language or nature from a hypothetical vantage point outside them. That is why it is nonsense to postulate an "entrapment within language," since there is no vantage from which anyone could possibly know that. (66).

Further, this vogue of textualism is for the author both a reflection of, and an excuse for, our oddly celebrated "alienation of consciousness itself" (85).

Newman brings up-to-date and across the Atlantic C. P. Snow's notion of "two cultures." For him, our "two consciousness industries" are the conventional communications industry (the increasingly merged media businesses), and the academy sponsored culture of little magazines and professional journals (which collectively constitute ". . . a constellation of infinite but mostly hapless energy which . . . has no apparent force of its own . . ." [50]). Newman further makes a connection between "academic" and "media" culture: the Post-Modern novelist avoids straightforward plot with a vengeance precisely because the media (and particularly television — doyen of the entertainment industries — which Newman refers to as "total Aristotle") thrive on ". . . the exaggeration of dramatic conflict, skeletal events as history, the focus upon a single stimulus or metaphor as the index to reality . . ." and so on (130).

In a chapter on the economics of publishing, the author argues that inflation serves to "censor" which books will be read. A totalitarian society enacts censorship at the production point; our oligopolistic democracy enacts "censorship" at the distribution point: "If a book deserves to be printed and is refused because it won't sell 10,000, that is censorship. If a novel is denied its potential audience because it is not reviewed, promoted, or in stock, that is censorship" (158). The effect, for Newman, is in both cases the same: an audience denied and a potential community lost.

In the last pages of *The Post-Modern Aura* the author offers suggestions as to how we can rid ourselves of our "cultural idolatry" (our obsession with art and criticism that is "self-reflexive, involuted, solipsistic, cerebral, hermetic") and again produce art which imparts value to life. "It is about time," charges Newman, that "the American writer ceased confusing his peripherality with freedom of expression, and began to find out where he fits into productive and social relations of the world which most affects him" (67). Citing the real causes of our current cultural predicament as concentrations of economic and political power, careerism, boredom, intellectual cynicism and audience bewilderment, Newman, in one of his most incisive statements, writes: "If the Post-Modern were capable of setting itself an obvious task, it would be the recombining of 19th century emotional generosity with the technical virtuosity of the 20th" (202).

For all of Newman's insightful pronouncements, however, the work is not without its problems. Why would anyone who ridicules (and wisely so) Post-Modern culture for its "terroristic terminology" riddle his own

work with expressions such as “autarky,” “seignory,” “ideocracy,” “epidemia,” “orismology,” “ludic,” “noetic,” “proleptic,” “prosedemic,” “eponymy,” “aposiopetic,” and so forth? Further, there are moments when Newman clearly lapses into hyperbole, redundancy, and even plain bad judgment (such as when he dismisses Poe as a “brainless writer,” 126). Additionally, one could argue—his brilliant and detailed treatments of William Gass and Saul Bellow aside—that far too many of his claims are inadequately substantiated (especially when he considers contemporary poetry without reference to a single poem). Further, for the wealth of his pejorative, and quite amusing, comments on contemporary culture, one nevertheless wonders what, if anything, Newman *approves of*, or if he is like one of those critics who makes a career out of antagonism to everything.

Some readers will also charge this book with being “disorganized,” but its form, as it happens, is actually one of its great strengths. Less a sustained linear argument than a salmagundi of criticisms which collectively comprise an immense thesis, *The Post-Modern Aura* is successful precisely for its “open-ended” inclusivity, and not for any narrow, logical rigor. To be honest, however, one will finally either revel in the scathing contentions of this polemic or despise them as ranting. This is pure Newman:

The 20th century is an irruptive open site characterized by a radical reflection upon language, and the tendency of all disciplines to assert their autonomy and supremacy by an increasingly technical commentary upon their own procedures. But this once exciting pluralist disputation has by this time degenerated into a monolithic linguistic determinism as our central revisionist commonplace, displacing any sense of literariness as a *natural* aspect of human cognition, and banishing the novelistic from human experience. (99)

In short, Newman finds the phenomenon of Post-Modernism far too clever, but not nearly wise enough.