

The American Scholar Revisited · *Kenneth Cmiel*

IN THE LAST FEW YEARS, professors of literature have embarked, to use Winnie the Pooh's word, on a "long explore." Hermeneutics, deconstruction, feminist criticism, reader-response theory, the politics of canon-creation, the new historicism, theories of narrative—all vie for the attention of literary scholars. From the outside (I was trained as a historian and work in a department of history), nothing looks so intriguing, so perplexing, and so potentially frustrating, as the hothouse atmosphere within English Departments, for the swirl of critical methods has created both a sense of liberating promise and nervous defensiveness within them.

Each of the three books under review attempts to answer the question: how did literary studies get to where they are today? Kermit Vanderbilt's *American Literature and the Academy* recounts the efforts to make American literature a university subject from the late nineteenth century to the 1940s. Richard Ohmann's *The Politics of Letters* is much broader, looking at popular literature, mass market magazines, advertising, and the publishing industry, as well as discussing modern academic literary study. Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* is a study of the profession of English in the American university from the late nineteenth century to today.

Vanderbilt's book, the thickest in pages, is a rather pedestrian account of the rise of the subdiscipline of American literature within the university. The way he fails is worth some comment. His work exemplifies a point of view about professional humanistic research that was *au courant* sometime around 1955. His presumptions open a window on the past.

The story Vanderbilt tells is one of triumphant professionalism. From the sour beginnings in the nineteenth century, he traces the steady incursion of American literature into the university and the growing sophistication of American literary scholars. His endpoint, one that reflects a fully "mature" profession, is *The Literary History of the United States* (1948), edited by Robert Spiller, among others.

Kermit Vanderbilt, *American Literature and the Academy: The Roots, Growth, and Maturity of a Profession*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986. Richard Ohmann, *Politics of Letters*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987. Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

What exactly does Vanderbilt mean by scholarly professionalism? He gives no clear definition, but certain things stand out. He alludes to the sub-discipline's capacity for "candid self-criticism." And he notes that by the 1950s, graduate students greeted the *Literary History of the United States* with the "sense of now belonging to a profession with a confirmed identity and the critical success of a cooperative scholarly labor achieved in three formidable volumes." Vanderbilt considers it a plus that each literary sub-discipline has its discrete field to cover, associating professionalism with autonomous experts who can police themselves and maintain standards. No doubt he would find me a poacher in his patch.

Vanderbilt's unguarded faith in a mostly naive professionalism leads to a number of problems. He has no good way to integrate non-academic critics into his story. He discusses the 1920s work of Lewis Mumford and Van Wyck Brooks and then drops it. More importantly, Vanderbilt's profession-mongering leads to shaky thoughts about the nature of literary judgment. Why, for example, should one generation of professionals be believed over another? If, like Vanderbilt, you believe in a progressive sense of history, there is an answer—succeeding generations will produce better and better literary judgments. But if you discount the whole notion of a progressive drift to history, and one so closely tied to twentieth-century professionalism at that, then Vanderbilt has given us *no* reason to celebrate the academics.

And he has given no reason why somebody like me (who is not a literary scholar) should pay the least bit of attention to a professor of literature. Why, one may ask, is "maturity" connected with professionalism? Vanderbilt's approach implies that a model of expertise appropriate to the maintenance of autos, the deciphering of contracts, or the formatting of software is also applicable to the evaluation of literature. But even practically, the analogy is flawed. I go to literary criticism for a "judgment," not a "service," and so I can ignore literary critics in ways that I can't ignore auto mechanics, lawyers, and computer programmers. And, I suspect, producers of literature can ignore academics almost as easily as a consumer like myself. Vanderbilt is utterly oblivious to how his model of professionalism, applied to the academic humanities, can breed irrelevance.

Richard Ohmann has a very different outlook. *The Politics of Literature*, a collection of essays, clearly comes out of the disputes of the 1960s. Ohmann is disdainful of the kind of complacency Vanderbilt exemplifies and

suggests a Marxist path out. Ohmann looks at literary production in the broadest sense. Magazine writing, popular literature, advertising, and college compositions are all discussed along with elite culture. He acidly debunks journalistic clichés about declining literacy. And he has intelligent things to say about the ways in which literature is judged successful. Ohmann does not fall into the trap of overestimating the power of English professors. Literary classics, as he describes them, are made by reviewers, editors, publishers, and academics combined. Moreover, Ohmann connects these actors to the society, events, and climate of the times. Included in this book are good discussions of Updike, Vonnegut, Salinger, and Bellow, all with the aim of locating them in the literary and political culture of the day.

While this book is far more imaginative and wide ranging than Vanderbilt's, it is no more satisfying in analyzing literary judgment. Indeed, for Ohmann, literary judgment does not exist. The very idea, he writes, "implies the existence of external standards by which works are to be judged. Of course there are no such standards: there are only the social processes through which some people are able to win hegemony for their responses." If Vanderbilt can only talk about literature wrapped up in a professional cocoon, Ohmann cannot talk about aesthetics.

At times this refusal limits his otherwise engaging analysis. Ohmann tends to haul in giant background forces (the Cold War, the emergence of managerial capitalism) as explanatory devices. While this strategy works in his essay on the appearance of mass market magazines, at other times it seems forced. When Ohmann casually alludes to the Korean War and containment as part of the background of *Catcher in the Rye's* reputation, I rub my eyes. This provocative contention certainly needs more argument than Ohmann provides.

Ohmann's Marxism verges on the vulgar, which will please some readers but annoy others. His tone, which is needlessly belligerent, will produce similar reactions. This is unfortunate, for his book develops many insights.

Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, should be read as an addition to the recent discussion about critical theory. That the book is a "history" itself tells us something about Graff's perspective, given Paul De Man's attack on the very possibility of literary history. Indeed, the book continues Graff's earlier efforts to come to grips with post-

modernist culture. In a controversial work several years ago, *Literature against Itself*, Graff defended more sober and traditional forms of literary expression and critical estimation than others were suggesting at the time. Here Graff continues his effort, arguing that history and critical judgment need to be balanced, a position that sets him off from both Ohmann's version of Marxism and De Man's version of deconstruction.

Professing Literature is first-rate intellectual history. It is a very lucid study of the different schools of literary criticism as they crisscrossed America from the 1880s on. Graff proceeds by picking and choosing exemplary texts to represent schools of thought. He does this well. His analysis cuts to the core of the thought, respectfully yet critically. Anyone wanting to know how literary theory has evolved in America will be well served to take Graff as a starting point.

But Graff's book is also an argument about the present. Graff contends that English departments are torn apart by their sub-disciplinary focus. With the birth of the modern university in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the brand new English departments began to hire people to cover "fields"—get a Shakespeare scholar, an Anglo-Saxonist, an eighteenth-century expert, and so on. Graff does not hide what was left out of the early academic notions of English literature—contemporary writing, American literature, women, and minorities. But Graff's larger point is about the residual, long-term effects of breaking up the discipline into separate sub-fields. It allowed all concerned, Graff contends, to merrily go their own way, without having to understand or know anything else.

Covering fields meant that any particular innovation, no matter how subversive to the normal course of literary study, could be integrated into the system. Despite any initial hostility, everyone would eventually move over and make room. Here is Graff's most telling point. The modern university has an enormous capacity to assimilate change and render it "friendly" to the course of things. Nothing ever dies out in twentieth-century intellectual life—it just gets its own journal.

Graff suggests a turn away from the preoccupation with covering fields. English departments *should* look to theory as a way out, he argues, but he does not want any theory to triumph. Graff rather hopes that theories can create a point of coherence for literary scholars. Theoretical disputes can provide a common frame of reference for experts in Chaucer and Chandler, Shakespeare and Stowe. Let a thousand theories bloom!

Alas, here Graff loses me. Whether this prospect would “solve” anything is unclear. It is, in the end, a solution that leaves the professional locale secure. It is a solution that demands English professors continue to speak with other English professors. Graff’s answer, while far more sophisticated than Vanderbilt’s, still looks a bit too much like it.

This is a shame, because Graff clearly understands what is at stake. Early in the book, he approvingly cites the British critic Terry Eagleton on the need to connect literary studies with the world outside. Literature must be about more than itself, Graff suggested in *Literature against Itself*.

One reason Graff misses is because he relies upon faulty secondary scholarship to claim that the study of literature entered American higher education when English departments were created in the late nineteenth century. This position denigrates older rhetorical study as anti-literary. In fact, early nineteenth-century college students who read Hugh Blair’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* studied “literature” in a far more capacious sense than did late nineteenth-century “specialists” in the new English departments. Shakespeare, Hume, Shaftesbury, the King James Bible, Addison, Milton, as well as classical orators were all covered. Textbooks like Blair’s were meant to connect the study of literature with the responsibilities of public life. Literature was a vehicle for public debate. When criticism was about the world at large, it made no sharp division between belles lettres and social criticism. Graff does not see that the late nineteenth-century move to professional study of literature was tied to the collapse of the “civic” sense of literature, which Eagleton’s *The Function of Criticism* explains very well in the British setting.

Ohmann understands this problem better than Graff. His essay, “The Function of English at the Present Time” wonderfully catches the odd position of professional humanists in a technocratic civilization. Ohmann explains how professors of literature can hold to certain values, teach them to their students, and have them used in completely different ways by the corporate workplace. The students get functional skills from English classes, adaptable to a business world that easily ignores *all* literary values, whether they be traditionally humanist, Marxist, or deconstructionist. Ohmann’s essay is the best single piece on the social role of the professional humanities that I have seen.

The culture of expertise puts us all slightly off balance. We are all are experts in our own field but hopeless novices elsewhere. This division of

labor is not likely to change soon. We get angry at the “experts” at times, but almost all of us deeply enjoy the creature comforts that the system generates. (I *like* the computer I’ve written this on. I’m *glad* there are experts to keep it in repair.) Yet this raises problems for the humanities, which in the late nineteenth century were swept into the profession-building currents of the day. The kind of professionalism that Vanderbilt talks about, one divorced from the public, handing down the “latest” research on literary topics to the next generation of graduate students, seems unacceptable. Ohmann understands that one way out is to talk about more than literature—something that critics of earlier eras routinely did. But unlike earlier critics, he would have us ignore aesthetics, denying it even a provisionally independent status. Graff nobly comes to terms with the crisis of literary theory and tries to find room for both historical and aesthetic judgment, but he blinks at the end, and lapses into a solution that reinforces the insularity of literary scholars.

The proliferation of theory in recent academic literary studies suggests a number of things, but one thing it suggests is the presumptive power of professionalism. It tells us that the discussion is about how academics should study literature, instead of how literature is about life. Emerson would be sad.