

Introduction

Teaching Literature, Changing Cultures

BIDDY MARTIN is associate professor of German studies and women's studies and associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Cornell University.

WHY DEVOTE a special issue to the teaching of literature? Why literature? Why now? The topic may strike readers as timely or outmoded, neutral or polemical, depending on their positions in the contentious debates over the status of literature and its relation to culture. I take a broad view of what literary studies entails, but the current shifting of literature departments in North American institutions to cultural studies makes me worry about the fate of the reading practices that the term *literature* invites, permits, or requires, the fate of reading that suspends the demand for immediate intelligibility, works at the boundaries of meaning, and yields to the effects of language and imagination. Like many of my colleagues, I chose to make a profession of teaching literature because the subject seemed to authorize broader and more imaginative questions, objects of study, and methods than other humanistic disciplines did, because it promoted interdisciplinary concerns and interests, and because it addressed the affective as well as the cognitive dimensions of the “life of the mind.” Over the past twenty-five years, there have been a host of conceptual and methodological innovations, including transformations of literary canons, that have helped us expand our practices in new directions.¹ Now institutional and budgetary pressures put limits on how expansive we can be and promote frantic efforts to make literary studies more “popular.” This is an opportune time for reflections about what the teaching of literature contributes to intellectual life and to the effort to build more-vigorous and more-critical cultures. We need to make thoughtful decisions about the forms that literary studies should take in an educational world of shrinking resources and utilitarian imperatives and in a technological climate of opportunity and threat. To avoid merely reactive or defensive postures, we have to remain flexible in discussing how the study and teaching of literature can be open

and intellectually vital without abandoning the forms of attention, even submission, that reading entails. In this introduction to the essays selected by the *PMLA* Editorial Board for the special topic, I review different responses to the dilemmas in literary study and suggest over and over that the tensions between the political and poetic dimensions of culture and those between the subjective and objective aspects of reading must be kept alive—and the shifting boundaries between those dimensions and aspects analyzed—no matter what changes occur in the field of literary studies. In the end, the most important question we face may be our relation, the relation of reading, to time.

I begin by discussing some of the conflicts that characterize debate about literary studies and consider their implications for graduate education. I then use one of my teaching experiences to reflect on the tight web of the affective and intellectual dimensions of teaching, subjecting my positive account to potential critiques from the left and the right. I also examine the efforts of some members of the profession to make the study of literature more objective and scientific against other teachers who claim a passion for unruliness and great art. I suggest that the attempts to “objectify subjectivity,” on the one hand, and to jettison historical and political concerns in favor of a passion for great art, on the other, both turn critical tensions into disabling *doxa*.

Literature and the Literary

Some of the essays in this issue reveal an apparent split in our profession between literary and cultural studies, between a fictional past when scholarly and pedagogical objects were clearly delineated and a present when the boundaries of literature have been eroded by expanded definitions of culture. In the gap, some literary theorists scramble to position themselves against both sides. To some, literature seems to have become one of many sites for exploring the discursive productions of particular historical formations—an irrevocable shift that need not devalue literature but can have a leveling effect. Seeking to ensure that poetry does not vanish from our curricula as the field moves to broader conceptions of culture, Carrie Noland’s essay in this issue makes poetry integral to cultural studies. Noland argues that Blaise Cendrars’s work reflects on its involvement in discourses that exceed it, that it acknowledges its own commodity form and blurs the boundaries between advertising and aesthetic languages. On her reading, Cendrars gives no epistemological priority to literature or to the division between a symbolic and a commodity market, the “distinction . . . on which literature depends.” Cendrars is daring for his recognition that literary value is “a commodity that, like any other, requires promotion,” writes Noland, who credits the poet with demonstrating “that lyric discourse is not the creation of a single subject but rather a confection of heterogeneous found languages.”

In “Reflections on a Manual,” a 1969 talk presented here as part of *PMLA*’s Criticism in Translation series, Roland Barthes upholds the performative dimensions of literature, asserting that the literary is by defini-

tion unruly and antinomic to the manual or the discipline. Learning to read requires suspending the demand for automatic intelligibility. In “Rereading Flaubert: Toward a Dialogue between First- and Second-Language Literature Teaching Practices,” Betsy Keller quotes Matei Calinescu’s question “Is it not through rereading that one becomes aware of the openness of the text . . . and of one’s . . . role in shaping and articulating its meanings?” to emphasize the importance of rereading in the teaching of literature. Keller argues that graduate students training to be teachers of literature could make good use of the pedagogical tools developed for foreign language teaching. Cross-training in language teaching can help teachers open “a space of signifiers in eruption,” as Sandy Petrey, in his introduction to “Reflections on a Manual,” characterizes Barthes’s conception of literature.

Twenty years after Barthes wrote his comments on textbooks, Frank Lentricchia bemoans the “flight from literature by those who refuse to take the *literary* measure of the subject” and instead see life “as an imitation of sociology or philosophy” rather than “an imitation of art” (65). To explain his conversion from political critic and graduate mentor to literary enthusiast, Lentricchia cites classroom incidents in which his graduate students issued blanket condemnations of works and authors as “racist.” Lentricchia explains that he had long maintained a more innocent love of literature with his undergraduates, who remained open to literary “transport” into unfamiliar imaginative and affective realms. He emphasizes the “unruliness” of great literature, its resistance to being pinned down by political judgments, and its defiance of pedagogical efforts to provide students with exacting methods or theoretical maps. Attacking contemporary literary criticism as a form of “xeroxing” that makes literary texts into copies of theoretical argumentation, Lentricchia describes his new pedagogical stance as that of the rhapsode, who recites aloud from aesthetic heights to the students still willing to accept the literary measure of the subject (64–65).

There is probably not a single teacher of literature who does not share Lentricchia’s frustrations with the excesses of the critic who reduces a text to terms or principles identified before the reading. Still, we should not assess a critical trend by its most extreme or most impoverished manifestations. The literary and the political or social measures of a subject need not be polarized in Lentricchia’s polemical way. Experiences in the classroom often show us how a trend can become a disabling simplification of the many dimensions of literature. Lentricchia’s examples show that some graduate students at Duke University feel pressured or authorized to classify specific works or authors as racist, but he does not provide enough evidence to clarify how, why, or whether such judgments become the only word. Such judgments often announce students’ passionate engagement with a text or an author and would catalyze many of us to try to help students work with their resistances and the limitations of the “already read” so they might yield to the text’s complexities without necessarily abandoning their political or ethical claims. Our responsibility as teachers is less to the author or text than it is to the students’

capacity to suspend control long enough and thoroughly enough to allow the text its agency. Lentricchia's essay constitutes a political intervention under the guise of a withdrawal "from all that," and as a performative gesture, it can provoke us all to think collectively rather than competitively about the shift from the teaching of literature to the teaching of culture. If the essay is not read performatively, it sounds close to the conceptions of literature from the turn of the century reprinted in this issue under the title "Teaching English in American Universities—1895."

Lentricchia's flight from predoctoral teaching raises important questions about graduate education. Graduate students are burdened by the horrible injunction to know everything before they have had the opportunity to learn anything well, which robs them of the humilities and pleasures of being students, not to mention the time to give themselves over to what they do not know or understand. Most graduate students enter foreign literature departments needing to read the canonical texts and the related commentary traditions, to perfect their language skills, to learn to integrate the canonical with the noncanonical and literary with other media, to master close reading, and to acquire enough background in literary theories to use concepts accurately. The students are also expected to do in-depth study outside their disciplines to develop innovative objects and methods. At the same time, they must provide cheap labor for the university, teaching fundamental courses. In addition, more and more colleges and universities expect graduate students to have delivered conference papers and had work published when they apply for jobs. They should do this in five years, often without guaranteed support or sufficient funding and never knowing whether there will be any teaching positions for them when they complete their studies.² As teachers and mentors, we must take responsibility for alleviating the institutional pressures on students to *master* material at the expense of being affected by it. In my view, graduate and undergraduate education easily becomes too focused on teaching students about literature, about interpretation, and about theory without developing pedagogical strategies that encourage students to do for themselves what we put on display—complex, deep, imaginative thinking. There is so little time for lingering or dwelling.

Lacking the resources and influence to change immediately the institutional and economic forces that drive this drama, we should at least develop strategies that will reduce the anxieties surrounding graduate study and professionalization and will help students discover what genuinely interests them. Moreover, we need to build an intellectual culture that includes graduate students and demystifies the stakes in different theoretical approaches, in canon debates, and in definitions of our proper objects of inquiry. How do we organize undergraduate and graduate studies to ensure that our students have the flexibility to pursue new objects or to undertake interdisciplinary work but also acquire the depth of knowledge they need to do sound work on the objects they choose to study? Without a core of texts, we rob students of what most of us have had—the opportunity, as Geoffrey Hartman puts it, to join a sophisticated commentary tradition (388). Without an education in literary theory, stu-

dents have little chance of thinking clearly and with complexity about the assumptions that guide what we take to be interpretations of texts or about the stakes in different definitions of reading.

It also seems crucial that we encourage and enable students to educate themselves in other fields, a goal that requires us to be more flexible about requirements and loyalties to home departments. We need to avoid the imperial narcissisms that make us think we can move out of our disciplines without acquiring stores of knowledge in other fields. Interdisciplinarity is still the academic rage, but institutionalized interdisciplinarity is not necessarily the only or always the best means to invigorate intellectual life. Interdisciplinary studies are anti-intellectual, for example, when they merely apply the tools of one discipline to the objects of another, or when scholars contribute their various approaches or knowledges unhampered by one another. Genuine interdisciplinary work involves scholars from different fields who not only explore common objects from different perspectives but also represent to one another the limits of each methodological or disciplinary approach. Programs such as women's studies, for example, bring together scholars from a range of disciplines but once institutionalized cannot always accommodate the kinds of intellectual questions that we and our students want and need to pose. Sophisticated intellectual exchange requires that interdisciplinary formations remain mobile so that new objects of study can emerge. As teachers of literature, we need to identify and remove the educational barriers to complex, creative thought that are built into institutional structures, departmental requirements, and pedagogical approaches.³

I am not known on my campus for teaching straight literature courses. I can be something of a rhapsode about the intellectual and imaginative journeys that theoretical writing offers. I did graduate work in German in the late seventies at the University of Wisconsin with faculty members who advocated forms of literary study that were close to what is now classified as cultural studies. Jost Hermand used the study of popular culture not simply to supplement the analysis of literature but also to expose the political investments in the assignation of high and low literary value. Klaus Berghahn taught eighteenth-century aesthetic theory using Habermas's work on the public sphere. Evelyn Beck added women's writing and lesbian culture to the German studies curriculum. In David Bathrick's courses on Weimar culture, film and other emerging forms of popular culture were as central as painting and literature. The rhetorical and figural dimensions of putatively logical languages constituted the core of Elaine Marks's course on American and French feminisms and changed the way many in that class read feminist theory. All these teachers had a strong sense of the historical and political implications of literature but debated openly with one another over the relations among historical context, political investment, and aesthetic values. The lively disputes convinced many of the students that these questions were complicated, irreducible to any final resolution, and worth discussing forever.

I still hold strongly to the notion that the issue of the relation of literature to other media or to the political dimensions of culture can have no

once-and-for-all answer. A performative theory of literature in culture requires us to think about what counts, and for whom, as literature or culture in a specific time or place. As educators, we must provide students with the historical and methodological knowledge necessary for reflecting on the conditions under which writing becomes literature and for using literary texts to explore how aesthetic objects relate to other discursive objects or to broader social formations. Students are the most telling skeptics of our efforts to teach them how to mediate between literary texts and other discursive forms. Their welcome interest in reading literature with and against medical, psychoanalytic, or legal writing often leads them merely to juxtapose different media or fields or to forget form and thus to subordinate literature to the authority granted other discourses. On realizing these problems, they look to us for some coherent answer to the difficulties of relating varied cultural objects. None of us has—or should have—the one and only answer, but we need to develop forms of intellectual exchange so that these kinds of questions can be addressed and are not foreclosed by polemical turns such as Lentricchia's, which seem to aim at restoring the compact between great works and great critics who share a single horizon. Let us continue to foreground for students a range of critical activities demonstrating the dimensions of our individual reading practices and encouraging students to develop their own. In teaching students the art of critical thinking, we must show them how to keep questions open and convince them that meaning, agency, and value are not in one place, not in the author's intentions or unconscious motivations, in the text's context, formal dimensions, content, or unity (or lack of unity), in a particular theoretical principle, in political *doxa*, in the critic, or in the teacher. The development of complex thinking requires not only methodological and theoretical training but also knowledge that can only be acquired slowly and through reading texts of all kinds, notably literary texts.

Teaching as a Question of Time

In 1992 I cotaught a summer seminar, *Women Writers*, in which the only readings were novels by Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, Christa Wolf, Marilyn Robinson, Dorothy Allison, Amy Tan, and Alice Walker. The class consisted of eighteen gifted high school students between their junior and senior years. Asked to introduce the students to the intellectual rigor and excitement they could expect from university education, my colleague, Lisa Moore (in the English department of the University of Texas, Austin), and I wanted to develop their reading skills by focusing on form, rhetoric, and style, providing them with some tools for analyzing how meaning and value are made. We also wanted to educate them well enough in ongoing debates about politics and aesthetics to permit them to participate in discussions over the legitimacy of a category such as women's literature. We knew we needed to create an atmosphere that encouraged them to combine rigor and precision with humor and spontaneity and to take intellectual risks. The eighteen students lived to-

gether in a dormlike setting upstairs from the seminar room. As the summer wore on, they became more and more exhausted and familiar with one another. The classroom inevitably developed intellectual, emotional, and sexual intensities. What prevented it from becoming a Gordian knot was the combination of intense contact and the at least temporary boundaries the students observed in the classroom. They seemed to feel permission for both exchange and withdrawal, for keeping the switch on and for checking out. They enjoyed the rapid-fire exchanges and collaboratively built analyses often associated with good discussions, but they also took pleasure in retreat, lassitude, and lollygagging. In short, we spent enough time and had enough contact for the class to develop rhythms, including engagement and open solitudes, neither of which dominated the other. In the first part of the course, Lisa and I demonstrated as many ways of approaching, analyzing, or using a literary text as we could. We had the luxury of spending hours on as few as three passages, even on punctuation and its effects. The students worked in small groups on short text passages. Since the students were both competitive with and fond of one another, they tried hard to come up with imaginative and carefully demonstrated readings. Particularly stunning presentations were often greeted with applause and laughter. Over the summer, we heard and read increasingly sophisticated analyses of literature, or so I like to think. Many of the students worried about the tensions between what they were learning and what some of their high school teachers had taught them about authorial intentionality and meaning in literary works. Helping them, on the one hand, not to search for authoritative or true interpretations and, on the other, not to assume that all readings are equally valid was our hardest job, and we had only partial success.

Because of the large amount of time we spent with so few students, we were able to see what an anxious, if exciting, process reading can be when readers suspend their need to know and to control. If the meaning of a text does not finally reside in the author's intentions or life story, historical events, the content of the narrative, the formal dimensions of the work, the language or its slippages, the reader's interpretive access to the text's horizons of meaning, the reader's projected imagination, the teacher, another student, a separate set of rules or of theoretical ordering terms, on what grounds do different readers claim to have found it? I do not advocate that we paralyze students with compulsive reminders about the absence of ultimate foundations. I suggest that we teach them to reflect on what guides their readings and interpretations and to offer their guides up for exchange and debate rather than turn them into dogma.

Neither the intensity nor the necessary solitudes of that summer are easy to reproduce in the classes we teach as part of our normal institutional responsibilities. The absence of time; large class sizes; the obligation to cover particular periods, authors, and canonical or noncanonical works are among the many structural constraints on what and how we teach. Limits arise from undergraduate students' needs to attend to four or five competing courses, disincentives to collaborate and coteach, the devaluation of literature in relation to other disciplines, and institutional

and state pressures. Too many administrations fail to recognize the importance of investing in innovative intellectual and pedagogical ventures even in hard times; such ventures can reap benefits in faculty and student morale and institutional prestige. There is little institutional support for forms of teaching that do not fit into the regular scheduling patterns, but many of us find the teaching we do in tutorials, independent-study arrangements, and reading groups to be among the most rewarding.

In a talk at Cornell in 1994, Lauren Berlant argued that efforts to build programs and initiate innovative ventures are related to institutional “speedups” and streamlining and to the university’s need to attract students in new ways. Many of us, she argued, perhaps especially the most progressive, are “saturated with institutionality” and consequently have little time for reading, much less for lingering over textual details. We are caught up in frantic institutional narratives about what each of us needs to do to stay relevant—in some places, to remain employed. Contrary to representations of college teachers as eggheads who get a lot for doing almost no useful work, most members of our profession are paid relatively little and work too hard. Even those who occupy privileged positions at major research universities not only do their required work but also direct additional independent study projects, offer extra tutorials to help students gain the theoretical vocabulary that their classmates have already learned to use, take on further graduate students, agree to serve on too many committees. We spend our days in meetings to change the curriculum, devising new programs that we then agree to run without additional compensation. And when we are not teaching; holding office hours; meeting with graduate students; supervising dissertation-writing groups; preparing syllabi, bibliographies, and reserve-room reading lists; generating effective assignments; grading papers; writing commentaries on dissertation chapters; reading colleagues’ manuscripts; attending departmental colloquiums, lectures by outside speakers, student-organized conferences, and our own conferences; writing letters of recommendation; going to departmental meetings, departmental committee meetings, interdisciplinary program meetings, and university-wide committee meetings; and evaluating manuscripts for presses and for journals, we have time to do research, for our publications or for updating our courses. Not only are most of us not underworking, most are overfunctioning to a degree that leaves nonacademic friends and partners wondering whether we are entirely sane about “our work.” While it would be self-serving to represent these efforts to make the university more effective and inclusive as noble and progressive, it would be reductive to see them according to a version of the cultural-capital argument, as serving only to insure and reproduce our jobs, hierarchies, and values.

My account of the summer seminar, a nice story about the teaching of literature, does not mention the ways in which the course failed the students. My colleague and I relied too heavily on the novels, providing too little historical material and analysis. And we neglected to raise the strategies we tried to teach to a level of abstraction that would have allowed the students to begin articulating an approach they could assume

provisionally as their own. Of course, little of what we did that summer would work as well in any other situation. Our failings are more serious judged from a certain position on the left, informed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.⁴ What did we do other than function as a credentializing service that allowed a few “traditional” and more “non-traditional” students to help reproduce existing institutional and macro-political hierarchies? On this view, any hope that the teaching of literature and culture might change individuals and institutions for the better represents self-deluded romanticism. Still, many of us continue to believe that teaching can have positive effects that are not negated by sociological reasoning and are not predictable or controllable, even though these effects may be small in comparison to the consequences of granting credentials that sustain entrenched social divisions.

Some positive effects of the summer course occurred because the students read about imaginative experiences that they had never encountered in a school text and that were related to their own backgrounds. The class was drawn in not by what Gayatri Spivak would call the “personalist” pleasure of seeing one’s identity reflected in ways that make it unassailable but by the cognitive and emotional pleasures of expanded knowledge and perspectives. Seeing something of one’s experience rendered valuable and complex can lead to more-capacious rather than more-identitarian approaches to the world and self and to examinations of how value is created, assigned, distributed, and appropriated and how it can be recoded or reconfigured.

Canon revision, an important part of what we did that summer, expands what teachers and students consider their cultural legacies and possibilities. For some right-wing critics, the syllabus we used would represent an attack on traditional values and the substitution of politics for great works. The fact that the reading list contained works only by women would signal an intent to indoctrinate students in feminist correctness. But our goal was not to reduce the literariness of the novels to political formulas or to create a countercanon, particularly since some of the books were already canonical in United States and German literature. The list does assume the importance of provisionally reversing the hierarchical oppositions between valuable and unimportant. It also assumes that students should read “minority literatures,” not only for what the content and its formal presentation do to unsettle limited knowledge of the world but also so that the students become cognizant of the dynamics of value coding. The syllabus assumes that traditional canons of literature have been shaped by exclusions based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality and that those exclusions produce structures of intelligibility, legitimacy, and value that do not include all kinds of experience. Having more and different perspectives and experiences of transport can be better than having fewer and more familiar ones, and contact with more than one history of commentary and more than one community of readers and critics can promote the keeping open of literary questions. My colleague and I assumed, then, that fiction could be a powerfully

effective medium, particularly since its study implies an insistent focus on how meanings are made and pleasures produced.

It is easy to overestimate the importance of canon revision, which, as Michael Bérubé puts it, “involves nothing more radical than the dissemination of the principle that the university is a cultural institution, like the museum, that is entitled to take an active role in the creation and maintenance of its exhibits” (79). Still, Bérubé argues that “the specific content of an assigned text *can* make a difference to someone’s education,” that “academic literary critics are a decisive force when it comes to keeping books in print,” and that it “cannot but be a politically progressive act—in the radical democratic sense—to provide students and other readers with access to advanced literacy” (252–53).

Critical Thought, Reading Literature, and the Question of Affect

Critical thinking, open-mindedness, and flexibility are easy to celebrate as the goals of teaching. As Bérubé observes, few persons object to the goal of critical thinking in the abstract. But critical thinking involves what Bérubé calls positive propositions, and it has affective and psychological dimensions that both traditional aesthetic education and more-contemporary objectifications of literary study tend to obscure.⁵ Literature appeals to the imagination and the emotions, as well as to the intellect. Reading literature is a practice that allows for what Spivak calls the “fraying of logic” with “rhetoricity” (180). When the need for logic is suspended, experiences of fraying can produce new, more-capacious modes of apprehension or open the space of nonlogic. “If we emphasize the logical at the expense of these rhetorical interferences, we remain safe,” she writes about translation, but safety is not what Spivak values:

[L]anguage is not everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries. The ways in which rhetoric or figuration disrupt logic themselves point at the possibility of random contingency, beside language, around language. Such a *dissemination* cannot be under our control. Yet in translation, where meaning hops into the spacy emptiness between two named historical languages, we get perilously close to it. By juggling the disruptive rhetoricity that breaks the surface in not necessarily connected ways, we feel the selvages of the language-textile give way, fray into *frayages* or facilitations. Although every act of reading or communication is a bit of this risky fraying which scrambles together somehow, our stake in agency keeps the fraying down to a minimum except in the communication and sharing of and in love. (180)

I quote Spivak not to celebrate risky fraying as literature’s essence or exclusive value. After all, there is no risky fraying without logic. I quote her because there is no more passionate advocate for analyzing the political processes of value coding or for finding the means to redistribute or recode value. Fundamental transformations of the structures of value coding require what Spivak calls love and Lentricchia might call transport. Spivak’s formulations suggest less control over the affective and

psychic dimensions of fraying than Lentricchia's invocations of the rhapsodic do, but both imply the suspension of intellectual mastery and psychological defense.

Hélène Cixous's "Poetry Is/and the Political" and Geoffrey Hartman's "The Fate of Reading Once More" both make the case for risky fraying, for something Cixous calls "the poetic approach." Cixous suggests that the ability to read Rilke's poems is crucial to the capacity to resist the lure of the mass media, upholding a boundary between the popular and the poetic that Carrie Noland challenges. For Cixous, however, the relative intrinsic value of each of the two terms matters less than how they are braided in our approaches to cultural objects. Noting that close reading "survives today as a human-size technology," Hartman argues, "To abandon its kind of evidentiality in order to acknowledge the enormous pressures of the present is misguided, mistaken, and useless" (384). Hartman invokes Stephen Greenblatt's form of new historicism as a primary example of the human-size technology he wants to save, quoting Greenblatt on "wonder": "Wonder has not been alien to literary criticism, but it has been associated (if only implicitly) with formalism rather than historicism. I wish to extend this wonder beyond the formal boundaries of works of art, just as I wish to intensify resonance within those boundaries." According to Hartman, the critic in this "postsymbolist" age operates as a "free trader, who improves the circulation of expressive energies and shows how discursive domains intersect," who destabilizes what too easily gets institutionalized and stabilized as symbolic capital benefiting those with power, and who rejects the traditional effort to make the text sacred but who also searches for a "principle, of a noncanonical but also nondeconstructible 'building of the metaphor,'" a principle of concentration, preservation, intensification, and wonder (386–87).

Neither Cixous nor Hartman suggests that a particular set of close-reading strategies need prevail or be attached to a specific theoretical system, but both write against positivism and the idealistic desire to apprehend the formal unities of the work of art. For them, reading entails tools or skills that can be learned but also the affective, ethical, and political relations of the reader to the literary object. What remains distinctive about literature is not a canon of works so complex or fine that their meanings can never be exhausted, as Hartman observes:

The classic work of art is so hard to discredit because we learn interpretation not from a separate set of rules but primarily from a number of great books within a commentary tradition that has become their integral rather than adventitious frame. . . . Milton survives, not because he is endlessly open to interpretation but because he has become exemplary for it. (388)

Emphasizing commentary traditions over specific works or authors points to the potential and the responsibility we have as critics and teachers to intervene in and reconfigure, but also to build, such traditions.

Cixous's text, written as an intervention in radical feminisms of the late seventies in the United States, makes Kate Millet's trip to Iran an

offering of unsolicited advice to Iranian women that exemplifies killing appropriation. “*Time is needed,*” she writes. “But we are submitted in our times of massmediatized thinking, of screen-thinking, to the imbecilization imposed by the precipitate rhythm of the media. The trap is the precipitation” (1). Cixous emphasizes that she does not mean that “we have all the time in the world” to address political urgencies. She concludes, “Slowness is needed: all the time that we need for *approaching.*” “*The approach is political,*” a point that she literally and figuratively underlines throughout the piece. “It is the direction, it is the living space that one must not cover with a bound: the between-us that one must take care to keep: have the humility, the generosity, not to precipitate.” For Cixous, time is a matter of attention, of attending, of “receiv[ing],” which she calls a woman’s art. Referring to the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, Cixous writes not of wonder but of astonishment:

From astonishment to astonishment, at once completely astonished and without any astonishment, childhood clarice lets herself be borne, leads us to the garden of primary time, where all the varieties of *instants* grow. And there, there is the treasure of events: we have only to love, to be on the lookout for love, and all the riches are entrusted to us. *Attention is the key.* (5)

Punctuation does the work of slowness in Cixous’s text, as colons and semicolons create separations and hesitations. The repetition is mesmerizing, and the grammar allows passives to become active and grants animate and inanimate objects agency. For Cixous, agency is exerted all over the universe of things, near and far, so that readers, critics, free traders become effects in a less self-propelled or detached sense than much traditional aesthetic education permits. Our “art” includes receiving the effects of objects, not simply giving virtuoso critical performances. Discovery becomes a passive and an active art, a combination that is hard to envisage in the face of the productivisms that organize our time and approaches to work. “Primary time,” where for Cixous “all the varieties of *instants* grow,” interrupts linear time, the source of logical causes and effects; primary time restores to reading the time of the unconscious and a nonprecipitous logic. Where, if not in our approaches to literature, in our aesthetic values, are such interruptions to be treasured for their intellectual significance?

Teaching, Subjectivity, and the Autobiographical

When the search for a principle of concentration or for a nondeconstructible “building of the metaphor” is confused with the search for unimpeachable political identities, the projects of dissemination and intensification are stymied. In “Let It Pass: Changing the Subject Once Again,” in this issue, Pamela L. Caughie criticizes identity politics in the name of a “culture studies” that has changed the subject. In the era of culture studies, changing the subject does not mean changing from one identity to another or even creating multiple identifications to character-

ize oneself; it means accepting fluidity and nonidentity as a more adequate representation of the subject. Caughie sees positive implications for teachers in the recognition that we only “pass” for beings with specific, stable identities and consequently with secure knowledges. In a specific classroom situation she discusses, a student with anxieties about potential political challenges to her identity as a white woman experiences an exemplary unsettling of her perspectives and sense of self. Another student, who came into the class armed with strategies for finding racist and sexist discursive constructions in fictional works, is less open to change and to disturbances of what she thinks she knows. I take Caughie to argue that the skills for reading the subtle constructions of racism and its convergence with misogyny should not be packaged principles swallowed whole and reiterated for the teacher. Curiosity about and tolerance for the complexities of reading, its objective and subjective dimensions, its disseminations and intensifications make literary study a field in which thoughtful scholars and intellectuals could feel free to put their minds to work on the full range of problems raised by particular cultural objects or by culture in general.

David Simpson’s provocative study of “the academic postmodern” laments that the bad forms of postmodernism in the university merely move the romantic notions of subjectivity, interiority, and individualism from literature, with which they are traditionally associated, to everything else. For Simpson, too, Greenblatt is an exemplar, but of problematic trends. Citing Greenblatt’s 1980 use of story and anecdote in *Shakespearean Negotiations* and his 1988 statement that “he wanted to speak with the dead,” Simpson argues that too many critics who “claim to be convinced of the end of history as anything more than just performance” resort to narrativity, storytelling, and autobiographical anecdote as means of providing false closures (177, 179). Narratives are also unsatisfying to Simpson as ways to deal with the performative nature of history and language:

It is the same desire for a sense of the real that conspicuously informs the standard new historicist narrative as it plays between hermeneutical skepticism and highly wrought empirical detail (dates, times, everyday trivia), juxtaposing the desire for each with that of the other without bringing the problem to the point of confrontational negation, and preserving thereby the warm-blooded temporality of the critical present itself. (176–77)

Simpson reserves his harshest criticisms for scholars who resist the “objectification of subjectivity” and resolve the need for theories of reality with autobiographical and experiential writing. This resistance to the objectification of subjectivity reproduces the most traditional bourgeois literary values and hinders efforts to build the knowledge necessary for the next century.

In this issue of *PMLA*, David R. Shumway offers his own criticism of the use of autobiography by literary critics. Shumway contends in “The Star System in Literary Studies” that the personal voices of the most visible critics have assumed the authority once held by claims of

“objectivity.” He worries at least implicitly about what we have to offer students when all forms of authority except those that emanate from stars have been successfully challenged. Literary study, which increasingly diverges from the natural sciences, where authority “is rooted in a consensus about [structural and intrinsic] norms,” elevates reputation or fame over “a knowledge grounded in communal interests.” Shumway acknowledges that there has never been an absolute foundation on which to assess the soundness or merit of different approaches or interpretations, and he suggests that earlier hierarchies may well have been more insidious than the ones that have emerged in the star system. Shumway also reveals contradictions in the history of this system. For example, he sees the rise in the popularity of literary theory in the seventies, at the same time that cross-institutional peer evaluation of scholarship became common, as a sign of the desire among literary critics for forms of intellectual exchange that specialization had eliminated. Literary theory promised a kind of discussion in which anyone could participate but helped create a new and highly visible elite far separated from the other members of the profession. Shumway stresses the potentially deleterious effects of literary theorists’ visibility, particularly given the personalization of the stars in their work and in representations of them by others. Of course, the prominence of professors of literature outside the university, which seems to have largely been controlled by conservative, antiacademic forces, has not had only negative effects. There are ways in which we all benefit from publicity that may help bridge the enormous gap between intellectual life in the university and public debates outside. And much of the negativity that permeates gossip about stars has its source in resentment, which masks envy and a will to power with moral outrage and claims of victimhood. In my view, the star system chiefly harms graduate students, for whom visibility and sensational presentations of material and of self may seem keys not only to fame but also to employment.

Shumway is concerned about the foundations for assessing merit. Is literary studies a meritocracy that rewards soundness and adequacy of representation, or is it a commodified field where visibility counts more than good work? I include myself among those who treat the university and literary studies as if they were a meritocracy, while at the same time remaining deeply skeptical that they are. Any assumption that we work in a meritocracy has to be accompanied by untiring vigilance and constant informed evaluations that recognize how university life is shaped by hierarchies of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, field, and other factors. We have to build less hierarchical intellectual cultures that reward knowledge and creative, subtle, complex, engaged thought about the widest possible range of objects and issues, including the immediate and everyday. Extreme subjectifications in the form of authoritative rhapsodies, on the one hand, and extreme objectifications that discount the affective dimensions of the study and teaching of literature, on the other, are both misguided. For every foray into the autobiographical mode by one critic, there is another critic waiting to decry the intrusion of subjec-

tivity into scholarship. It is important to distinguish among different uses of autobiography, for some are remarkably effective and compatible with the call for objectifications of subjectivity while others seem to add little to the analysis in which they appear. The subjective and the objective should be conceived in their complex braiding with each other, not as antagonists in the battle for solid ground.

In endorsing “the alternative postmodernity imagined by the exponents of technoculture,” who replace the terminologies of the literary by the languages of science, David Simpson cites Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” as a positive example of the effort to rethink subjectivity, to offer “a socialized and deindividuated model of the self . . . well clear of the rule of literature” (166). In more recent essays (e.g., “Promises”), Haraway proposes the idea of the “artificial body” in contrast to both the natural body and the socially constructed one, using her knowledge of biomedical science, especially immune-system research, to emphasize the importance of rethinking the boundaries of the body as well as those between human and nonhuman “actants” and energies. A number of critics objected to Haraway’s appropriation of the “woman of color” as model subjectivity in “A Cyborg Manifesto,” considering the use a re-entry of the humanist subject through the postmodern back door. More troubling than humanism, in my view, is Haraway’s use of “women of color” to exemplify or figure deindividuation. Pathologizing inwardness, withdrawal, and boundaries as aspects of paranoia, she writes that “[p]aranoia is the belief in the unrelieved density of connection, requiring, if one is to survive, withdrawal and defense unto death” (“Promises” 325). Cixous analogously criticizes Rilke’s poetry for drawing into safe containment protected from what Rilke calls “ugliness”:

There are poems that keep the poet sheltered from the real, closed-in poems. Such as those of Rilke, poems that contain. And there are poems like open palms, women-poems that give way(s), that act as windows, poems ever open, that give onto the real. Rilke, like Clarice Lispector, is a worker of space, but the space that he develops is interiorized in him. (3)

For Cixous, there exists narcissistic closure but also a working (through) of the space of the self that opens onto the real, to Spivak’s *frayages* of selvedges. Just as poems have boundaries and result from intensifications and perhaps condensations, there can be no “giving way” without a gathering together, no effective turn outward without an inwardness that remains open to the shift from what it makes figural to what has become ground. Cixous pathologizes the effort to keep oneself narcissistically immune from giving way to the effects of the object world.⁶ Opening out to the world requires attachment to the form of concentration and intensification we call the self. Learning requires the deep engagement of that self in the pleasures of thinking elsewhere. Like postmodern evacuations of psychic life, the resistance to psychoanalysis leaves little space for discussions of pedagogy, where questions of transference and countertransference are unavoidable. I do not mean to

suggest that psychoanalysis or any particular psychoanalytic theory monopolize our analyses of the classroom or of the profession. However, too many students have mastered the theoretical languages we use to challenge the bourgeois subject and individualism and can generate seemingly sophisticated formulations at will without seeming to have integrated the challenges intellectually or psychologically. Without integration, there can be no effective translation between or among levels of analysis, no risky fraying at the boundary between theoretical truths and pedagogical or intersubjective processes. Attention to that boundary will always expose how difficult and complex a critique of the subject or of individualism is, how exciting its implications can be. Externalizing the question of the subject or the concept of self and exposing its discursive construction help students see what assumptions buttress notions of autonomy. Yet to insist that subjectivity can be adequately treated through a more or less scientific discourse analysis is to erect and indulge another kind of psychological and intellectual defense. The best work will always be the work done at the boundaries,



Louise Pound, MLA president in 1955, at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Reproduced by permission from *The Cornhusker* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska, 1940) 14.



Houston A. Baker, Jr., MLA president in 1992, at the University of Pennsylvania. Photo: Tommy Leonardi.

in the space of difficulty and limit, where dogmatism and potential transformations vie for our pleasures and desires.

We cannot afford to limit the subject, of literature, to an objective study of discourse. I worry, on the other hand, that in ostensibly leaving politics behind by foregoing questions of authority and of the desire for it, the kind of undergraduate teaching Lentricchia promotes in his essay potentially only carries on politics by other means. Rhapsodies about what we love in literature are not unpolitical, but neither are they reducible to politics. Only critical and pedagogical practices that make students mindful of the tensions, contradictions, ambivalences, and pleasures in reading and teaching measure up to what is required for even the loosest meritocracy.

Given the vast attention now paid to the performativity of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nation, literature, it is surprising that there is not more writing about pedagogy and the construction of knowledge in our classrooms and in our daily interactions with one another and with undergraduates and graduate students. In the seventies, there were agitated discussions among feminists about radical pedagogies. Some of the discussions oversimplified teaching by imagining the “student-centered classroom” to be the only model for feminist teaching. More-subtle analyses of the production and use of authority also emerged from those debates but have since lost their urgency or coherence. We need to put pedagogical concerns at the center of our professional and literary exchanges again. Analyses of teaching require both the objectification of subjectivity and the use of anecdote and autobiographical experience. Pamela Caughie suggests that culture studies provides the modes of attention to the subject that promise more-sophisticated teaching. A

source of new genres of writing, culture studies may well have the potential to develop appropriate forms for the discussion of pedagogy. But any new forms will be effective only if we as a profession engage them collaboratively.

Notes

¹Throughout this essay, *our*, *we*, and *us* generally stand for college and university teachers of literature in North America.

²Over the past five years, the graduate school of Cornell University has moved in the direction of reducing the numbers of admitted students in order to support them better and longer. The graduate students all receive the same support package, which includes five years of guaranteed assistance. Such policies diminish the material hardships commonly faced by graduate students, as well as their dependence on individual faculty members for support.

³In recent years, groups of graduate students in German studies at Cornell University have taught the faculty a great deal about cooperation and support. The students have set up dissertation-writing groups without faculty supervision. They read one another's work carefully so that by the time their advisers get their essays or dissertation chapters, the texts have already been edited and improved. The students form groups to prepare job letters, curricula vitae, and writing samples, revising one another's work even when they are applying for the same jobs. They have initiated their own professional projects, which include organizing conferences and sharing information about funding sources and calls for papers. Their practices challenge us to do what we can to curtail insidious forms of competition for faculty approval and favors in and outside the classroom.

⁴One of the best Bourdieu-inspired studies of American universities is Guillory.

⁵Bérubé makes this point in similar language (247). I take the term *objectification* from Simpson, who uses it to mean "a socialized and deindividuated model of the self," a "challenge to the organic individual and to the identity politics that comes with [it]" (166, 14).

⁶Haraway attacks the psychoanalytic thinking that Cixous uses, which challenges the insular subject and its putative coherence without evacuating psychic life or abandoning the pleasures of individualities.

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