

Gerald Graff
LITERATURE
AGAINST
ITSELF
Literary Ideas
in Modern Society

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Preface to the
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In retrospect, *Literature Against Itself* turns out to have been one of the opening shots in what is now called the "culture wars." Twenty years before *The Closing of the American Mind*, it charged that post-1960s cultural radicalism had trivialized culture by confusing truth with oppression, thereby paving the way to relativism. Unlike Allan Bloom, however, and the conservative tracts that have followed his, I was criticizing the Left from within the Left—or so I thought. As it turned out, I was praised and assailed as a conservative, though more alert readers saw clearly enough where my political sympathies lay.

The main concern of *Literature Against Itself* was to show the weaknesses of grounding literary and cultural criticism on the logic of "guilt by association" that I described in the introduction:

... a great deal of our critical and cultural argument operates on a principle of guilt-by-association. Realistic and objectivistic ways of thinking about language and thought are persistently identified with things nobody would want to be associated with if he could help it: with amoral science, positivism, mechanism, venal commercial calculation, stifling respectability, inhuman technology, class exploitation, imperialism, manipulative propaganda and advertising, bureaucracy, regimentation, in short, just about everything anybody ever found to dislike about "bourgeois culture," as characterized in the crudest sociological stereotypes. (p. 24)

In other words, critiques of literature, criticism, and culture based on this logic were confusing rationality and objectivity with their *misuses*, thereby tossing out the baby with the bathwater. The confusion becomes especially damaging when the emergence of an "avant-garde" consumer culture trivializes the traditional oppositional strategies of the cultural avant-garde.

The most prominent targets of these criticisms were deconstruction and poststructuralism. I now think the criticisms are directed more properly at vulgarized versions of deconstruction and poststructuralism than at these theories and practices at their best. Much of my writing in the 1980s and 1990s has been devoted to sorting out the differences between the more useful and the more fatuous versions of postmodern theory and practice.¹ At the same time, the confusions I described in 1979 seem to me still pervasive in 1995, particularly the self-defeating idea that there is something politically emancipatory about subverting "realist" or objectivist models of truth and inquiry.

Indeed, this idea proved particularly unfortunate for the academic Left once critics of "political correctness" began with a vengeance to spread untruth about the newest trends in scholarship and teaching. When Dinesh D'Souza writes in *Illiberal Education* that American universities are "expelling Homer, Aristotle, Shakespeare, and other 'white males' from their required reading list,"² the only proper response is, "That's demonstrably false." When Christina Hoff Sommers in *Who Stole Feminism* identifies most of "feminism" with the view that all males are evil, that women alone are capable of understanding other women, and other such doctrines, the only proper response is, "That's a gross misrepresentation." But it's awkward to call something "demonstrably false" or a "misrepresentation" when you've been maintaining that the very concepts of true and false representation are complicitous with patriarchal oppression. Such concepts may be old hat, but there are times when you don't want to leave home without them.

Today it is the Right that defends the virtues of disinterested scholarship while the academic Left debunks disinterestedness in the name of politics and power. This is paradoxical, since arguably it has been the academic Left that has made the most enduring contributions to humanities scholarship over the past generation, profoundly influencing other fields such as law, architecture, anthropology, and the social sciences. Those who have produced the most important scholarly *knowledge* declare the inescapability of political partisanship, while those who defend the integrity of scholarly knowledge do no scholarly research themselves and mostly produce partisan political polemics.³

Nevertheless, I take encouragement from the fact that the critique of cultural radicalism I made in 1979 has become not only a familiar one but one that comes as often from the Left and Center as from the Right. Thus Martha Nussbaum, in a recent issue of the *New York Review of Books*, writes from a profeminist position in attacking "the assault on reason" mounted by some feminist thinkers. Typically, according to Nussbaum, these feminists start from the indisputable observation that "males who wish to justify the oppression of women have frequently made a pretense of objectivity and of freedom from bias in sifting evidence. . . ." "More than a little perversely," however, they then proceed to blame "this behavior on the norm of objectivity itself, rather than on its abusers."

In other words, these antirationalists are confusing reason and objectivity with certain historical *uses* and abuses of reason and objectivity. As a result, Nussbaum argues, such feminists end up undermining their own political critique of male oppression. Once reason and objective truth are discredited as oppressive, the wretched of the earth have nothing to appeal to against tyranny and genuine oppression. "What the weak seem to require," Nussbaum writes, "is a situation in which reason prevails over force, and is given special respect."⁴

Like Nussbaum's remarks, the argument of *Literature Against Itself* is a largely negative and cautionary one. Latent and implicit in the book, however, is a more constructive and positive approach to the politics of knowledge and its problems. There is an important element of truth in the argument that knowledge is always political. Certainly no idea has been used in more ideologically suspect ways than objectivity. When the Vatican declares, as it did recently, that homosexuality is "an objective disorder," it does more than an army of literary radicals to discredit objectivity. What confuses the issue on all sides, however, is the failure to distinguish between knowledge and the social uses of knowledge.

This failure occurs when it is assumed that the political consequences of a body of knowledge inhere in the body of knowledge itself, as if the modern physical sciences, say, could be either "progressive" or "conservative" in themselves. True, as the current maxim has it, "everything is political," or "everything is ideological,"

yet the specific way anything operates politically cannot be predicted in advance or *a priori*. The physical sciences become progressive or conservative—and sometimes both at once—only when they become imbedded in specific social situations.

The same can be said about theories of literary representation or interpretation—realistic or nonrealistic, objectivistic or antiobjectivistic—or for artistic conventions and practices. Whether such theories or practices reinforce or challenge the social status quo depends on how they operate in specific social contexts. Fredric Jameson has argued that the novelistic realism that perhaps reinforced the dominant bourgeois culture of the nineteenth century may have become, in the decentered postmodern culture of the late twentieth, an oppositional counterdiscourse.⁵ Such a judgment, however, requires empirical investigation of *how* different theories and practices of realism functioned in specific historical and social situations. The recent habit of inventorying texts for traces of “decentering” or “closure” and then assigning them political plus and minus points is certainly a labor-saving way to do literary and cultural criticism but has little else to recommend it.

Distinguishing between knowledge and the social uses of knowledge makes it possible to examine the ideological functions of knowledge without falling into a skeptical rejection of the possibility of truth. An example suggested by Terry Eagleton helps make the point. Eagleton cites the statement “This cathedral was built in 1612” as the sort of proposition that we have been conditioned to think of as inherently nonideological: the proposition simply states a fact, whose factual status cannot conceivably depend on whether we come to it from the Left, the Right, or the Center. It is just simply true—is it not?—independent of who we are or what our social and political orientation may be.

Eagleton, however, asks us to imagine the statement about the cathedral being said by an Englishman to a foreign visitor, and the visitor asking in reply,

Why . . . do you keep telling me the dates of the foundations of these buildings? Why this obsession with origins? In the society I live in, . . . we keep no record at all of such events; we classify

our buildings instead according to whether they face north-west or south-east.⁶

The example helpfully illustrates how a statement can function “ideologically” without being false. While possibly true, the assumption that dates of origin are more worthy of mention than other possible factors is connected with a social system that rewards those who possess certain kinds of factual information, as well as one in which an ancient pedigree confers social legitimacy. Insofar as “This cathedral was built in 1612” is really a way of saying, “We British are older and therefore better than you are,” the statement performs an ideological function without necessarily being untrue.

Dissociating questions of truth from questions of how truth functions socially is necessary if the debate over the politics of truth is to advance, much less be resolved. This debate has not progressed in twenty-five years; today the opposing sides continue to talk past each other without hearing what’s being said. Given the political investments involved, advancing the debate has become less important than humiliating or routing the opposition. But many of us seem to be tiring of polarized name-calling and pseudodebates in which the need to save face prevents potential agreement.

In fact, the debates that *Literature Against Itself* got me into left me with a sense of how difficult it is to achieve the minimal agreement on terms and assumptions that might enable genuine disagreement to begin. Then, too, if one takes seriously one’s responsibilities as an educator, one ultimately cares less about winning debates than about clarifying them for students and others. My work since *Literature Against Itself* has been increasingly directed toward that educational project which I call “teaching the conflicts.” The outlines of that project are already sketched out here on pages 123–127, where I suggest that the university curriculum can hardly become politically “radical” “until it first becomes coherent.”

I was here anticipating a point whose implications I continue to pursue, that the warfare between academic radicals and traditionalists will be largely beside the point as long as the terms of the conflict remain obscure or uninteresting to students. What difference will it make if objectivists or antiobjectivists win the current skirmish if stu-

dents continue to be alienated from terms like "objectivism" and the intellectual conversations they presuppose? *Literature Against Itself* took sides in this debate, as it is always necessary to take sides, but it was also a step toward teaching the debate itself.

Notes

1. See particularly my forthcoming volume (with Evan Carton) on American criticism since 1940, in the *Cambridge History of American Literature*; see also "Is Reason in Trouble?" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 137, no. 4 (1993), 680–688.
2. Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: Free Press, 1991), p. 20.
3. I make this point in "A Paradox of the Culture War," in Jeffrey Williams, ed., *The PC Wars: Politics and Theory in the Academy* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 308–312.
4. Martha Nussbaum, "Feminists and Philosophy," *New York Review of Books*, 41, no. 17 (October 20, 1994), 60–61.
5. Fredric Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion," in *Aesthetics and Politics: Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukacs, Bertold Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno* (London: NLB, 1977), p. 211.
6. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 13.
7. See *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992). See also Graff and James Phelan, eds., Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Bedford Case Studies in Critical Controversy (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1995); *Gerald Graff, Curricular Reform, and the Culture Wars*, William E. Cain, ed. (New York: Garland Press, 1993).