Confessions of the Critics: North American Critics' Autobiographical Moves

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Self-Interview

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Q. You became known as a polemicist in your early work, and now you're associated with the idea of "teaching the conflicts." So would you say that combativeness is a deep *personal* motivation of your work?

A. Partly but not entirely. People think I must *like* conflict because I promote it as a pedagogical and curricular strategy. In fact I dislike conflict as much as anybody. In an odd way, my interest in conflict and polemics has always been tied to a longing for community. I just don't think a democratic community can be sustained by papering over its divisions. "Teaching the conflicts" for me is a way to get beyond the conflicts. My assumption is that the more we avoid confronting conflicts the uglier they can only get.

Q. What do you mean by your "longing for community"?

A. When I was first contemplating graduate school back in 1959, I sought advice from one of my professors about "the profession," which seemed pretty nebulous to me. "The great thing about this job," he said, "is nobody bothers you." His remark has stayed with me all these years so I guess even then it must have struck me as odd. What an ambition for a profession—not to be bothered! And what a commentary on an institution that calls itself an academic "community"!

It's the isolationism of the academic ethos that I've always disliked and struggled against, both in my work and personal life. That's why, after years of being a solitary professor, I jumped at the chance to become a department chair and later a university press director, mostly just to have somebody to talk to.

Q. But aren't you exceptional in seeing this as a problem?

A. Well, another writer who does is David Damrosch, in his new book *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University*, an excerpt from which has just appeared in *Lingua Franca* (January/February, 1995). Damrosch argues that the university is dominated by an "ethic of alienation and aggression" that "has bred isolated and peripatetic professors, estranged from their colleagues on campus and from the communities in which they live." Well said!

Q. Yet surely there is plenty of "community" on campus—black studies, women's studies, neoconservatives, all sorts of groupism.

A. Yes, but these communities tend themselves to be isolationist. Damrosch writes that "all too often the groupings that form within departments and within fields actually function as anti-communities: small coteries who band together as much to ward off outside influences as to foster collaborative work." He adds that such scholarly "anti-communities" are "essentially defensive in nature, a bonding by which an insecure subgroup tries to gain a sense of self-worth at the price of learning from divergent views."

Q. But if academics cherish their isolation as much as you say, how could you hope ever to change things?

A. As Damrosch points out, academics are often tremendously ambivalent about "the pleasures of isolation" that they cultivate. Why else have academic conferences and symposia become so pervasive if it isn't that they answer to a longing for community that isn't being satisfied by their home campuses? You can sense this longing in the hyperexcited atmosphere at such events—suddenly, for a few days, here are people you can talk to about your work —metonymy in the Elizabethan lyric, or cross-dressing in the eighteenth century, or what you will. These are conversations you aren't likely to have at home because anybody who shares your interests is probably by definition disqualified from being your colleague—they've already got *you*who does that!

Equally pathetic is the abyss of local silence and indifference into which we academics send our publications. When we publish an article or book, you'd think our departments or colleges would look for an occasion to discuss it publicly or in a course or two (our colleagues' research is vastly underutilized in our courses, for example). Instead, the "publishing scholar" is made to feel almost embarrassed about committing a public act, even as he or she is rewarded at salary time. Again, when you go to a conference, your publication becomes a reference point, but to make it a reference point on your home campus would be like making one out of your sex life, or your religion.

Q. Why do you think this academic "ethic of alienation and aggression" has taken root, if in fact it has?

A. Damrosch hints at a reason when he speaks of the "insecure" status of the academic subgroups that bond together against the threat of outsiders. Academic culture is grounded in insecurity and fear—as any environment would be where the rules are revised so frequently that nobody can be sure where one stands, where in fact revising "the paradigm" before your competitors do it is the name of the game. Students fear professors, those distant and unfathomable beings whose arbitrary laws change from course to course without notice; professors fear students, who can humiliate them by their mere silence and passivity; professors fear their colleagues as rivals and competitors. Because the university provides no institutional arena for discussing these fears out in the open, they get channeled into the self-protective, isolationist behavior Damrosch describes. Of course, all this could be as readily said about American culture as about academic culture.

Q. What about administrators?

A. It's their job to manage the economy of fear while also being objects and subjects of it. When American universities became large bureaucratic and professionalized institutions at the turn of the century and the relatively common culture of Christian gentlemen was replaced by specialized disciplines that were largely opaque to each other and to the public, academic administration emerged as the art of neutralizing fear and contention by keeping potentially clashing groups separate. This usually means appeasing clashing individuals and groups by giving each their separate space—a new course, a new department, a new program, eventually a new building. The administrative premise is that professors are brilliant children who obviously can't be expected to cooperate with one another and have to be kept apart. Consequently, professors tend to behave like children, if not always brilliant ones.

Q. This begins to sound like the accounts in your books of the origins of the "cafeteria counter" curriculum.

A. Yes. The American curriculum has evolved in very much the same way as the American city: when a threatening innovation appears, it is neutralized by the device of adding a new "suburb"—the new course, department, building, or whatnot. This conflict-free method of assimilating change goes hand in hand with a tacit philosophy of armed truce: I won't interfere with what you want to teach or study if you don't interfere with me. Since frank public discussion across the differences is assumed by definition to be impossible, this state of uneasy peaceful coexistence has to be held together by bureaucratic administration, which becomes a substitute for intellectual community. The bureaucratic art of crisis management aims not to create a vital community out of the academy's controversies, but to keep clashing factions isolated so they won't wash their dirty linen in public.

Q. For example?

A. A recent case in point is the celebrated battle over the "Cultures, Ideas, and Values" requirement at Stanford, which was "resolved" by creating separate course-tracks for traditionalists and revisionists so that no communication need take place between the two. When Stanford revised the requirement it was widely reviled by conservatives like William J. Bennett for caving in to pressure from multiculturalists and other insurgent groups. But if Stanford "caved i n " to pressure, it caved in to pressure from *all* the factions involved, including the conservatives. In a familiar academic "Let's Make a Deal" game, a more or less multicultural track was established to satisfy multiculturalists while several more or less traditional tracks remained to appease traditionalists. I oversimplify, but I think I fairly describe what took place.

The dispute was resolved, in short, by creating separate but equal curricula, or separate but not so equal, depending on which faction you talk to. By evading the issues that divided the community Stanford managed to neutralize them for a while, but now, five years later, the whole battle has predictably erupted again.

The excuse for this kind of refusal of community is that it at least preserves peace and quiet, but it really does so only in the short run. In the atmosphere of repressed conflict, poisonous fear, hatred, and paranoia build and erupt periodically, as we see in recent flare-ups over hate speech, demands for ethnic studies programs, and political correctness. And of course now a shrinking

economy is depriving universities of the luxury of avoiding fear and conflict by adding new "suburbs."

Q. How is all this related to your critique of what you've call "the course fetish"?

A. For me the academic *course*, which so frequently idealized in the rhetoric of community, is in some ways the ultimate expression of Damrosch's anticommunity. The academic course does create a kind of community, but it does so at the expense of another, given the structural requirement that no course be aware of what goes on in any other course, that the left hand not know what the right is doing. That is, instructors must not know that the signals they send to students conflict in all kinds of ways, for again, dealing with such a recognition would require confronting repressed fears and accepting the responsibility of community. So it's important that we stay safely inside the protection of our courses. Of course, students have no such protection, being exposed every day to their teachers' conflicts in a way that their teachers are not.

Q. Your call for community makes you sound at times like Jane Tompkins, who has been writing (in essays like " Me and My Shadow" and "Pedagogy of the Distressed") about the competitive individualism and lack of community in academic institutions.

A. Yes, and I share Tompkins' complaint up to a point. But I'm not attracted to the kind of community Tompkins seems to want, which is emotional or physical rather than intellectual. For Tompkins intellectuality-argumentation, debate, analysis, reasoning-seems to be inherently selfish, competitive, and antithetical to the emotions and the body, part of the problem rather than part of the solution. For me the antidote to Damrosch's academic anticommunities lies in reconstructing rather than abandoning *intellectual*community, which need not and should not exclude emotion and the body.

Q. What about the view of some feminists that that model of aggressive argumentation is essentially male?

A. It's interesting that those feminists don't hesitate to use aggressively "male" argumentation in asserting that view when it suits them. Like Tompkins, such feminists (who do not speak for all feminists by any means) assume that community and intellectual argumentation are inherently incompatible. As if to make the critiques of demagogues like Christina Hoff Sommers look respectable, this thinking produces touchy-feely classrooms in which students get in touch with their own "voices" instead of learning to analyze, criticize, or make an argument. Teachers who practice this species of feminist pedagogy (which again must not be confused with feminist pedagogy as such) are in effect withholding from their students the cultural capital of argumentative discourse that they themselves command.

Q. But haven't womens' studies programs established alternative models of community to the isolationism you attack?

A. They've made a start, to be sure. But unless womens' studies programs themselves are put into regular dialogue with other sectors of the university, they become another of Damrosch's anticommunities, closing themselves off from threatening outsiders. It's unfair, however, to

single out womens' studies and other new "revisionist" fields for "separatism," since these new fields are merely copying the time-honored, respectable separatism of established academic departments, whose maxim has always been: consolidate your own turf and wall yourself off from anybody who might disagree with you. In other words, my problem with the new politically oriented fields is not that they're acting like subversives but that they're acting like traditional academics.

Q. Are you suggesting a change in the culture war strategy of the academic Left?

A. Yes. The Left has achieved an impressive degree of academic power and solidarity (though nowhere near as much of either as its critics attribute to it). But the power and solidarity on the Left have been achieved by circling the wagons and talking primarily to itself rather than to outsiders. "Cultural studies," for example, has become a euphemism for Left Studies, meaning in effect that no admirers of Matthew Arnold need apply. Quite apart from the dubious ethics of such behavior, this strategy of preaching to the already converted may be successful awhile longer within the university, but it seems disastrous outside, where the Left is losing the struggle for the middle to the Right.

I think it's time therefore that the academic Left reopened negotiations with the rest of the university instead of occupying positions of "oppositional" purity. It's in the interests of the Left, in other words, to help create a real academic community (not just a subcommunity of opposition), in which it would be able to speak to others besides itself. Now that the main opponent is the Christian Coalition and the Contract with America, even academic "traditionalists" and "radicals" may have interests in common.

A. It's all well and good to talk about "community," but wouldn't such community seem intolerably coercive to those academics who unequivocally *like* their privacy or isolation?

Q. I wouldn't deny privacy to anyone. I just don't see why the whole university has to be organized to suit the people who want to avoid having a discussion!