

# Day Late, Dollar Short

## *The Next Generation and the New Academy.*

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### A CONVERSATION WITH GERALD GRAFF

*Peter C. Herman*

PETER C. HERMAN (PCH): I'd like to begin by asking your view on the existence of the next generation. Given that most of the theories presently dominating the profession have their roots in the '60s, what do you see arising from critics who came later?

GERALD GRAFF (GG): Perhaps one way in which what you call the "next generation" could stake out a project that would be very different from that of its elders would be by paying attention not just to whatever defines the cutting edge in scholarship, criticism, and theory, but also to how well such work is understood and assimilated by undergraduates and other nonprofessionals. To put it baldly, what difference will it make if tomorrow's paradigm setters establish some really original new ground if the questions they raise remain as nebulous to 99 percent of American students and other citizens as today's new (or for that matter old) academic work?

One would think such a question would have surfaced more prominently by now in a profession that claims in theory to be dedicated to educating everyone, not just a minority. In my experience, however, few either inside or outside the university, including few who call themselves progressives, really believe that more than a small percentage of the student or adult population is capable of profiting from or becoming interested in academic-intellectual concerns. I think this assumption is becoming anachronistic in an information economy in which humanistic skills of argumentation, analysis, and critical thinking are increasingly recognized to be a crucial form of cultural capital. Here, then, it seems to me, is a big potential opportunity for the next generation, to identify itself with the realization of democratic mass education, in the sense not only of democratic access to a college degree but real access to intellectual culture, which despite all our talk of "empowering" students still remains a minority culture.

To be sure, the academic reward system has notoriously discouraged us from taking education seriously in the way I suggest. But the reward system has always proved capable of being modified and stretched in order to accommodate vanguard trends, so blaming the reward system for our failure to take our educational mission seriously seems an excuse. Historically the

academic profession has been very good at telling itself why it can't change, and it will be too bad if the next generation continues such rationalizing.

PCH: The previous generations made much of their impact through theoretical interventions, such as the new criticism, deconstruction, and new historicism. What do you see emanating from the next generation?

GG: Again, I'm proposing that taking education seriously rather than making theoretical breakthroughs is one way the NG can make a name for itself, though this in itself would constitute a theoretical breakthrough. Are your doubts about whether the NG will go in this direction or about whether it ought to? Whatever the case, there are a few signs that it may already be heading that way: a new journal called *Pedagogy* has been established that figures to do a lot to make teaching/learning/curriculum respectable as a research field (and thereby overcome the research/teaching gap), and it would appear to be led by next generation people.

PCH: Clearly, some of the next generation think so. David Galef, in his chapter in this volume, also argues that writing and creative writing programs are the wave of the future. In a sense, both you and he suggest that what theory was to previous generations of critics, teaching will be to us.

GG: I'm encouraged to hear that there are other flakes out there who share my hunch that teaching (and the teaching of writing) may be the emergent paradigm, though the teaching of exposition is far more crucial to me than the teaching of creative writing. I have doubts that "Expressivist" models of writing are ever going to appeal to more than a marginal minority of compositionists, though I admit that I may be succumbing to wishful thinking there.

PCH: Concerning the movement of next generation Ph.D.'s into high schools, one problem is that the hiring track and credentialing for those positions is very different from the one for postsecondary education. For next generation Ph.D.'s to start moving in that direction will start turf wars, as it is likely that the education faculties producing their own students for these jobs will resent and resist giving Ph.D.'s any ground. Additionally, there is the problem of research as there is little allowance in post-secondary education for scholarly publishing. Certainly, there's increasing outside pressure for postsecondary institutions to become more directly involved with secondary education, mainly, though, from administration. The faculty at UCSD, for instance, rejected the chancellor's proposal to create an on-campus high school by a significant margin.

GG: Thanks for the information about UCSD. I have no illusions about the resistance colleges and universities will put up to involving themselves with high school education. Many university professors would rather dig ditches than have contact with high schools. All I would suggest is that a significant groundswell of interest in collaboration of various sorts has been developing among college faculty and high school teachers, and that some of the financial and other pressures on both camps make it likely to continue. Though it will be difficult to induce some professors to enter into contacts with high schools, it will also be difficult to prevent those who wish to do so, and these are a growing number. Who knows what the outcome will be, but the mere fact of a conflict like the one you report in San Diego suggests that something is changing. As for the turf wars you predict between education schools and other departments over who gets to do high school credentialing, we are already seeing cooperation between these units. See the new book just published by MLA, *Preparing a Nation's Teachers*, which describes several such projects.

PCH: What do you think has changed in the profession that might cause such a shift?

GG: Outside forces: money, jobs, public pressures. Rumor has it that high school teachers are going to be in great demand, fuelled in part by demographics and in part by the public groundswell for improving secondary education. If such job opportunities are indeed opening up, they are doing so at the moment of an unprecedented surge of interest—backed by foundation-grant initiatives—in both the school and college arenas in curricular and pedagogical mergers. As high school teaching becomes less isolated from the university research culture (and as it continues to pay well in some schools at least), the attitudes that have stigmatized such teaching figure to weaken. Persuasive challenges to such attitudes are already being made—see the cogent essay in the 1996 issue of *Profession* by Alison T. Smith about the financial and intellectual rewards of high school teaching for people with doctorates.<sup>1</sup>

You say a move toward education doesn't fit the publishing paradigm, but I think that's no longer the case. And though it's true that high school teachers up to now have usually had neither the time nor inclination to publish, I believe this situation is changing as high school teaching is becoming more professionalized and many high school teachers seek to move closer to the culture of the university. New interactions are occurring between high school and college instructors that could vastly redefine the way these roles have been conceived.

For example, I finished a project last year that involved bringing over four hundred high school students and their teachers together with volunteer students from my undergraduate class to debate traditional and colonialist readings of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. I never would have imagined five years ago that I'd be doing this—it goes against all the supposedly iron laws of the profession that you mention—but I am. Basically, in your response you invoke the old rules, but I think a shakeup is taking place which is changing the rules and I'm dedicated to advancing that process. (And speaking of things I would not previously have imagined, a few months after we concluded this interview I was offered and accepted the position of Associate Dean for Curricu-

lum and Pedagogy at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where a major part of my responsibility will be coordinating teacher-education programs.)

PCH: What about the NG's continuance in the critical pathways of previous generations (for the most part); that is, the lack of a voice that alters criticism's direction the way that Fish, Greenblatt, and Derrida did, might stem from a different set of priorities?

GG: Perhaps you can tell me what priorities you have in mind. To me the "continuance" you mention reflects the tremendous normalizing force of the residual institutional model, which makes it very hard for people to recognize that the model may in fact be crumbling. Despite our well known penchant for casting ourselves as subversives, our profession is deeply wedded to the story that nothing really can change.

PCH: For most of us, the primary, overarching priority in graduate school was not to change the world but to land one of the ever-more-elusive tenure-track positions. Consequently, taking on our teachers in print, going in a completely different direction, entails taking a considerable risk. Also, another impediment to privileging

teaching, including going into high school teaching, is the way this profession divies up rewards. Upward mobility in the humanities is made possible through prestigious publications, not through teaching. Doubtless, Professor Graff, you are an exemplary teacher, but my guess is that you moved from your first positions to the University of Chicago in large part because of your exemplary publications, such as *Professing Literature*. Consequently, for the next generation to embrace pedagogy means foregoing the usual means of professional advancement. As for the new journal (which I admit I have not seen), my guess is that it is not so much aimed at English and literature departments as for the nascent field of comp/rhet studies (which is in the fascinating position of just beginning to define itself as a discipline and is presently going through the same processes that you outlined for English in *Professing Literature*).

GG: You say I made my way by publishing *Professing Literature*, not by my teaching. But *Professing Literature* is a book about teaching. And hasn't teaching become a growth industry as a publication and research topic? Many books and essays that formerly would have been solely about literature or criticism are now about teaching as well—books that have done very well like Diana Fuss's *Essentially Speaking* and Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs*. The educational debates of the culture war have made teaching a boom subject for journals, presses, and conferences, and while comp/rhet leads the field it does not completely monopolize it, as the names listed above demonstrate.

As for your original question about what's next, I don't think critical work is tapped out, but I do think the next generation ran into a change in the nature of academic-intellectual publishing that I've seen set in during my academic career. I'm thinking of the vast increase in the number of academic books from the late '70s or early '80s on that has made it easier to get published but harder to get attention. I don't have statistics to back me up, but my feeling is that people of roughly my age published our work in a far less saturated and competitive publishing market than those who have come after us.

When I started at Northwestern in 1966 a colleague of mine had the whole yearly output of Princeton University Press on his shelves and he seemingly kept up with it. Nothing like that would be conceivable today in the wake of the publishing explosion of the last few decades. After us the deluge, or so it seems. And it's not just that there have been increasingly more books to compete with but a diversification and fragmentation of the audience, so that it's more difficult today than it once was to write the sort of book that "everybody" in the profession feels he or she has to read or at least know of.

PCH: What do you think the effect of this dispersal will be on the kinds of criticism that the next generation will produce? Do you see next generation critics as deliberately aiming at an increasingly small segment of the general audience? Are they trying to broaden their audience? Or settling for a much smaller one? And what will the effect of the economic downturn in publishing be?

GG: In the old days, when men were men and a field was a field, there were one or two major journals in each period and everybody "in" that period was supposed to subscribe to and read them. In the wake of postmodernism and other detotalizing trends that have undermined or blurred field definitions, there are many more journals but no single one that you can count on everyone reading if you get in it. There's a good essay by the sociologist Howard Becker, by the way, on this phenomenon of journal proliferation in the social sciences.<sup>2</sup>

PCH: I agree that there are many more journals today than in the past. On the other hand, prestige still counts, and I've seen search and tenure committees look askance at articles in very small journals and nonuniversity press books. But granted that there are more outlets for tenure-earning publications, what do you think the overall effect of these smaller, less-read, and less-subscribed-to journals might be on next generation critics. Are we moving into an era of coterie scholarship?

GG: Yes, I guess we are, though members of coteries are obviously less likely to publish if they can't get jobs. True, the prestige of the journal can still make a difference. But historically,

hiring, tenure, and promotion committees have eventually yielded to the broadening of what counts as tenurable research and publication. Go back far enough and you'll get to a time when such committees would have looked askance at someone who published criticism in *Kenyon Review* or *Sewanee Review*, or at someone who published creative writing or produced paintings. But gradually, and unevenly, such forms of professional production eventually got counted as "research." (I have an essay on this process of change: "The Scholar in Society.")<sup>3</sup>

PCH: Yet I wonder how the economics of the present situation will affect this. I have in mind the fact that many libraries are cutting back on journal subscriptions rather than keeping, let alone increasing them. So, while it is true that there are an awful lot of new journals out there (e.g., *symploke*, which first published several of the chapters in this collection), fewer and fewer institutions can subscribe to them. And with no distribution, the journal cannot become known and gain prestige. Which means that the already established journals, like *ELH*, *Representations*, and *PMLA*, continue, and with increased submissions. Yet also, we are speaking here about print journals, which leaves alone online ones such as *EMLS*.

And that brings me to another question. What do you think the effect will be of the World Wide Web on scholarship? And do you see any differences between critics such as yourself who were trained and established themselves in a pre-Net world, and next generation critics who, for the most part, grew up taking computers for granted?

GG: I guess I can't measure the differences yet, but I'm sure that some are emerging as the use of the Net alters our practices. I know electronic communication has already had a big impact on my own teaching now that my classes are online and students can go on conversing after class with each other and with me.

The Net threatens the basic rule of the academic world, which is I won't mess with what you do (in your class, office, department, etc.) if you don't mess with me. That is, it threatens the structure of carefully programmed ignorance of each other that allows us to tune out colleagues who might say things we don't want to hear and thereby preserves a certain civilized Balance of Mutual Fear, at least among those of roughly comparable power. As the educational historian Veysey put it, the modern university is founded on ignorance, and the Net challenges that foundation by making it much more difficult not to know things about each other.

PCH: OK, but do you think that computers will actually effect a paradigm shift in how we do scholarship, or will they just speed things up—that is, we do the same things, only we can do them much more quickly?

GG: My idea of what a significant "paradigm shift" would be may be different from that of others, since as I noted above my interest is in changing institutional structures and not just "how we do scholarship."

To me, a true paradigm shift would be an institution in which contestation and debate (including that over political issues) becomes the central, everyday agenda instead of being marginalized and channeled into self-reinforcing, self-flattering discourses. Yet the outcome of this contestation and debate would not be predetermined or easy to predict. I think this view puts me at odds with current pedagogical radicals of the Paulo Freire stripe, who in effect say, "It won't count as a paradigm shift unless the good guys (ourselves) win."

In any case, I think electronic technology may in and of itself have a tendency to force academics out of our protected zones and into engagements with those we would prefer to tune out. But it's hard to predict that this will actually happen. Already, as Ellen Willis said at a recent conference at my university, the result of email seems not to be a new macropublic sphere but a proliferation of minispheres that (as I would put it) do not communicate with each other and so reinforce in-group self-righteousness. Do the email exchanges of the National Association of Scholars circulate to the Marxist Literary Group and vice versa? There has recently been an interesting list-serve exchange over the "Sokal Text" scandal over "science studies" in which antipost-moderns like Norman Levitt, Paul Gross, and Alan Sokal himself engaged with Michael Berube, Bruce Robbins, and others more sympathetic to postmodernism.

Predictably, these debates were not very good—parties talking past one another rather than to one another. Still, I thought the exchange showed that a discussion across the battle lines could at least be started, but others may have seen it as proof that it can't happen. Whatever the case, the exchange or nonexchange would not have taken place at all were it not for electronic communication.

PCH: To move to another topic, In his article, Jeff Williams puts into question the movement toward increasing public access, arguing that its effect is to create a "star system" that most of us dream about while "at the same time socio-institutional conditions make that dream more and more fantastical." What's your response?

GG: Jeff Williams's attacks on the star system seem to be rooted in a fear that professors will someday become comprehensible to more than a handful of students and others and will then become co-opted by corporations, which will schmooze and disarm us even as they downsize us. In Jeff's view, evidently, the only thing more disastrous for higher education than being defunded by corporate America is being funded by corporate America. In other words, there's a contradiction or double bind in his argument somewhere. I much prefer the argument you yourself make in a recent PMLA Forum, in which you write that we academics "need to learn how to justify ourselves in the language of the McDonald's mentality."<sup>4</sup> (Of course what this Egghead McMuffin language would look like is not something anyone can prescribe in advance.)

This in a way is all that I was trying to say above when I suggested that the big opportunity for the next generation is to take seriously the mass-education mandate—the democratization of intellectuality—to which American education has always given lip service but never tried to put into practice.

PCH: I think Jeff's point is the power inequity between us and corporations, meaning that there will never *be* an equitable negotiation between partners of unequal power.

GG: This is a council of fatalism, then, since unequal power is a structural feature of all human situations. Jeff and the academic Left want a risk-free situation in which a level playing field is provided before it deigns to enter into a public debate. My assumption, by contrast, is that the only way disempowered groups are likely to level the playing field is by entering into unequal negotiations and then doing whatever can be done to displace and transform their terms.

PCH: My point, though, in the letter, is that we need to start appealing to corporate values (rather than simply denouncing them) in order to further precisely the intellectuality that you are talking about. Which brings us to what I think is the primary difference between the material conditions affecting the next generation and previous generations: the corporatization of the academy—that is, the application of business models and business values to higher education. What's your opinion of this, and how do you think it will affect the next generation?

GG: See what I said above in response to Jeff Williams's blanket condemnation of any compromise by academics with corporatization—as if we even have the option of compromising! I think higher education, which has always been dependent on corporations in any case, has no choice but to seek corporate support. Rather than rail in our ritualistic way against corporatization, we would be wiser to begin distinguishing between retrograde and relatively progressive forms of corporatization. If Christopher Newfield is correct in his essay "Recapturing Academic Business,"<sup>5</sup> corporate culture is itself deeply split between pure bottom-line managers and those who take the public interest seriously. So Critical Corporatism (as we might call it) seems a better option for academics than the knee-jerk bashing of business that either flattens our academic sense of superiority or consoles us for our powerlessness.

PCH: Yet the knee-jerk bashing also comes from the opposite side. For example, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* quotes James F. Carlin, chairman of the state's Board of Higher Education, as asserting that "'Professors should teach more than 12 hours a week,' and 'meaningless research' should be banned; 50 percent of research outside the hard sciences was 'a lot of

foolishness."<sup>6</sup> Nor are such sentiments rare among administrators, let alone the general public. How do you think this will impact the next generation's teaching and research?

GG: I hardly agree with Carlin, but if the next generation is content just to react defensively to such views or merely to shrug them off it's likely to find itself outvoted. It doesn't take a rocket scientist, as they say, to see that probably more than half of the sum total of humanities research put out at any moment is indeed "a lot of foolishness" (yours and mine excepted, of course), almost by definition. What makes Carlin's complaint unfair is that probably an even higher percentage of the research in the hard sciences is even more vacuous and useless than the research in the humanities. This is hardly news to anybody. National Public Radio recently did a feature about a doctoral dissertation in which somebody has calculated the statistical possibilities of your getting a parking space at your local supermarket. Some of our recent race-class-gender-obsessed research in the humanities may be silly, but at least it's being silly about important things. You can't say that about the huge amounts of drivel churned out by the social and physical sciences, in which volumes of statistical data are marshalled to demonstrate stupefyingly trivial conclusions.

So if it comes down to a pissing contest over whose research is more jejune, the scientists should be made to answer for their own well-documented record for empty sterility, and they should feel the defunding axe as much as we humanists do, unlikely though this may be. But it would be better to avoid being defensive about our own record or getting into a competition with the sciences over whose research is more jejune. I think academics on both sides of the science-humanities gap should start acknowledging that academic research can no longer expect to be publicly supported unless it can justify itself in some terms—not necessarily narrow or vulgar ones—that the public can understand and whose relevance to undergraduate teaching can be established. I think we're going to be held accountable to such a public standard whether we like it or not—so get used to it!

PCH: True, but to return to the earlier point, what I have in mind is less corporate sponsorship of universities as the adoption of corporate models by administrators. Part-time workers are obviously a lot cheaper than tenure-track assistant professors (about \$1500 a course, no benefits), and according to the *New York Times*, only a quarter of America's 1.2 million professors are tenured, only about 40 percent are tenure track, which is a drop of 20 percent from twenty years ago.<sup>7</sup> Given the creation of this migrant labor force of "freeway flyers," how can the next generation make your program of "teaching the conflict" its project? How can it make *anything* its project?

GG: In most colleges and some high schools, many faculties have enough autonomy to implement the sort of cross-course and cross-curricular debate that "teaching the conflicts" entails. Nor would part-timers need to be excluded. It can happen, that is, if those faculties—or at least a critical mass within them—can be convinced that this way of teaching is more effective

with students, enjoyable, and rewarding, and more stimulating (because more collegial) to their intellectual growth.

I think these teachers, full or part time or what you will, will need to be convinced that teaching in a more connected and collective way (as my model entails) is ultimately not in conflict with their long-range self-interest—that is, that the community of debate such a way of teaching can provide will help them get socialized into the profession, stimulate them to more and better publication, and be more effective as careerists. In other words, the supposedly self-protective, careerist strategy of dealing with administrators who don't respect your teaching by dropping out, becoming an internal emigre, and tending to "your own work" is not really good careerism.

Also, I would like to think that the kind of solidarity that develops in a faculty that talks through its differences can make it a stronger collective bargaining force. The habits of isolation in which most of us are used to teaching may contribute materially to our weakness in labor negotiation. Working within a culture of debate with our colleagues would figure to make us more effective in arguing for our interests than we have been. Or so it says here.

#### Notes

1. "Secondary Education: Still an Ignored Market," *Profession* (1996): 69-72.
2. "What's Happening to Sociology?" *Doing Things Together: Selected Papers* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1986), 209-20.
3. "The Scholar in Society," Joseph Gibaldi, ed., *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*, 2d ed. (New York: Modern Language Association, 1992), 343-62.
4. In this letter, I propose that dismissing the corporatization of the academy by blithely saying "That means the triumph of the McDonald's mentality" ("Teaching Literature in the Academy Today: A Roundtable," *PMLA* 112 [1997], 112) dangerously underestimates both the degree to which education has been commodified and the threat this poses to education. Furthermore, I suggest among other strategies, "we need to explore making the case that our work is not hopelessly alien to the values and aims of the corporations and marketing consultants hired by many universities. Whether we like it or not, we need to learn how to talk about literary studies in the language of those who see little use for us except as teachers of technical writing. Otherwise we risk being 'clown-sized'" (*PMLA* 112 [1997], 442).
5. *Social Text* 51 (1997): 39-66.
6. Patrick Healy, "A Take-No-Prisoners Approach to Changing Public Higher Education in Massachusetts," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 5 (December 1997): A41.
7. Brent Staples, "The End of Tenure?" *New York Times* 29 June 1997: Section 4, p. 14.

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