

GERALD GRAFF'S LITERARY AND EDUCATIONAL

PRAGMATISM

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For the last three decades the new pragmatism in American literary studies has been commonly associated with several prominent critics including Steven Knapp, Walter Benn Michaels, Stanley Fish, Steven Mailloux, Giles Gunn, and Richard Poirier. From a neighboring discipline, such philosophers as Richard Rorty, by claiming that philosophy and literature do not differ in essence, have offered literary scholars vigorous encouragement to draw on the pragmatist heritage.¹ And yet many of those who have been recognized as leading literary neo-pragmatists² – such as Walter Benn Michaels and Stanley Fish – remain silent about their actual attitude to philosophical pragmatism and deny their own writings any substantial consequences.³

¹ Rorty emphasizes the parallels between philosophy and literature in many of his writings. One of the most interesting discussions of those parallels is to be found in an interview which he gave to E. P. Ragg in 2002. See Richard Rorty, with E. P. Ragg, "Worlds or Words Apart? The Consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies: An Interview with Richard Rorty," *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 26 (2002), pp. 369-396. Elsewhere, Rorty goes so far as to claim that philosophy is in fact a literary genre. See Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre," in: *Philosophy as Cultural Politics. Philosophical Papers, Volume 4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 91.

² The first book-length publication which announced the emergence of neo-pragmatism in literary studies was *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985) edited by W. J. T. Mitchell. This collection of essays includes "Against Theory" by Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp as well as critical responses to their seminal text followed by Michaels and Knapp's rejoinders.

³ This is best exemplified by Stanley Fish's essay entitled "Consequences," in which he argues that his (and anyone else's) views on theory entail no practical consequences whatsoever. See Stanley Fish, "Consequences," in: Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989), pp. 315-341. I take issue with

Interestingly, even "Against Theory" by Michaels and Knapp, the pioneering text of literary neo-pragmatism, which came to be identified as a manifesto of the movement, seems to owe very little to the most influential pragmatist thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its central point – that interpretation of literature need not (and should not) rely on a prescriptive theory of any sort – is empiricist through and through, and as such it draws on an epistemological position which considerably predates the emergence of pragmatism. In fact, the closest Knapp and Michaels get to aligning their perspective with philosophical pragmatism is when they refuse to separate knowledge from true belief; however, at no point are they prepared to acknowledge that their argument is informed by the views expounded in the works of Charles Sanders Peirce or William James. Therefore, "Against Theory" may be described as anti-theoretical, but not necessarily as pragmatist. Whether it is genuinely pragmatic⁴ also remains an open question.

Gerald Graff's works belong to a different category. Although like his close friend, Stanley Fish, Graff has never declared himself to be a pragmatist, on closer inspection most of his writings on literature and liberal education, unlike Fish's, reveal both pragmatist inspirations and far-reaching pragmatic ramifications.

Fish's position in *Disciplining the New Pragmatism: Theory, Rhetoric, and the Ends of Literary Study* (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, New York, Paris, Wien: Peter Lang, 2006), especially pp. 129-135.

⁴ Throughout this essay I maintain a distinction between the two adjectives – pragmatist and pragmatic – even though they are both semantically related to pragmatism (from Gr. *pragma*: action, a deed, an affair) and may be treated synonymously in another context. I use 'pragmatist' to refer to the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philosophical tradition, which is either explicitly or implicitly invoked in some contemporary writings, while 'pragmatic' implies practice, action, and a matter-of-fact, forward-looking attitude characteristic of those who seek to transform their immediate environment. In the case of most of the literary and educational criticism I discuss here, 'pragmatic' (or 'neo-pragmatist') seems to be a more adequate qualification of its practice-oriented, empirical thrust. Accordingly, I reserve 'pragmatist' for a possible description of its philosophical provenance.

Therefore I find it somewhat surprising that so far Graff has not been included in the ranks of the most prominent neo-pragmatists either by his adversaries or by his supporters. My claim is that the majority of Graff's works do deserve the label of pragmatism, perhaps even more so than most of the texts produced by the card-carrying neo-pragmatists. Not only does his position on pedagogy emerge as a creative and intelligent interpretation of John Dewey's views presented, *inter alia*, in *Democracy and Education* but also, perhaps more importantly, Graff's contributions are predominantly practical, rather than theoretical. They shy away from purely philosophical speculation and are meant to make a real difference, at least within the academic world. Consequently, as I argue here, even though there are few direct references to Dewey's corpus in Graff's works,⁵ it is still possible to read his markedly non-philosophical writings as contextualized applications of Dewey's general views on progressive education.

One of the most significant pragmatist tenets which Graff subscribes to involves the notions of knowledge and communication. For Dewey knowledge is not a matter of a faithful representation of some external reality but a mode of social practice which crucially depends on interaction with other human beings and our environment: "If the living, experiencing being is an intimate participant in the activities of the world to which it belongs, then knowledge is a mode of participation, valuable in the degree in which it is effective."⁶ If the acquisition of knowledge involves participation, then the essence of education lies in developing communication skills. Consequently, as Gert Biesta has it, Dewey's theory of education is a theory of

communication.⁷ In the context of contemporary academia, this translates into Graff's contention that we live in an argument culture and the mission of the university should be to prepare its students for participation in public life. More specifically, by exposing them to intellectual conflicts, educators should develop their students' critical and argumentative skills. That imperative underlies Graff's model of 'teaching the conflicts,' which I discuss at length further on in this essay.

Another crucial issue raised in *Democracy and Education* concerns the status of the student. Unlike many traditional pedagogical approaches which conceive of the student as the *object* of educational efforts on the part of the teacher, Dewey's progressive position may be described as learner-oriented. His notion of the process of education, which, as I have already indicated, relies on participation, communication and mutual engagement of both parties (i.e., the student and the teacher), precludes the possibility of forcing anything upon or into the learner because, by doing so, the teacher may "distort and pervert human nature."⁸ Therefore, it comes as no surprise that, according to Dewey's commentators, "[s]tudents as intentional, independently capable, autonomy-deserving persons are at the core of [his] work."⁹ Among Graff's recent writings, *Clueless in Academe* is a very eloquent reminder of how important it is to take the student's perspective into account in humanities education. What is particularly valuable about Graff's work (and, at the same time, emblematic of his pragmatism) is that he addresses the most burning questions in the contemporary academy by looking at the effectiveness of university education from the point

⁵ In my view, Graff's arguments do not necessarily require a philosophical validation to be effective. It is not his priority to make them appear philosophically sound; what matters is that his writings successfully address the key dilemmas connected with the tasks and functions of the contemporary humanities.

⁶ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (A Penn State Electronic Series Classics Publication, 2001), p. 345.

⁷ See Gert Biesta, "'Of All Affairs, Communication Is the Most Wonderful': The Communicative Turn in Dewey's *Democracy and Education*," in: *John Dewey and Our Educational Prospect: A Critical Engagement With Dewey's Democracy and Education*, ed. David T. Hansen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 26.

⁸ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 30.

⁹ Gary D. Fenstermacher, "Rediscovering the Student in *Democracy and Education*," in: *John Dewey and Our Educational Prospect*, p. 97.

of view of 'a generic alienated student.'¹⁰ He invariably analyzes those questions (which I discuss at length in Sections II and III) with a view to eliminating misunderstandings and unnecessary complications. Moreover, Graff's writings envisage a future in which a reformed and improved humanities education will realize its potential to make students' and teachers' academic experience meaningful and satisfying.

Graff's pragmatism is also reflected in his choice of the epigraph for *Literature Against Itself*, the first major statement of his position on literature and its functions. By adopting Lionel Trilling's observation ("I think this is the great sin of the intellectual: that he never really tests his ideas by what it would mean to him if he were to undergo the experience that he is recommending"¹¹), Graff stresses the necessity of correlating intellectual reflection with practice. I highlight the correlation throughout this essay; however, I begin with Graff's general views on literary studies and education at large, and it is not until I reach Section II that I focus on more detailed academic issues that he considers particularly urgent. Finally, Section III is concerned with Graff's constructive suggestions and solutions, which he proffers in the hope of finding answers to some of the crucial problems of the humanities education and research, including those which currently beset literary studies.

I

Graff's status in the academy can hardly be described as that of a theorist of literature, culture or education, although in his writings there are numerous passages which explicitly address theoretical, philosophical and social issues. Still, their thrust is usually subordinated to a practice-oriented agenda. The presence of ideological

and methodological statements in his books varies considerably, his early publications being more consistently programmatic in this respect. Published in 1979, *Literature Against Itself* is definitely a case in point. There, Graff engages in polemical discussions with poststructuralism, New Criticism and a score of other positions that deny literature's entanglement in history, politics, and social conditions which have inspired it and affected its shape and message. In that polemic, he elaborates a critique which obliges him to clearly define his own perspective. This is not to say that in his later writings he avoids identifying his stance on many key theoretical questions. Most of those, however, occur in specific contexts, in discussions which are not primarily intended as contributions to the broadly defined discourse of theory.

What follows in this section is an overview of Graff's chief assumptions about literary studies, cultural studies, education, intellectualism, and democracy. The very fact that those assumptions are less and less forcefully articulated in his recent books is testimony to their non-dogmatic quality and Graff's open-mindedness about various views and critical positions. This is illustrated by a telling passage in the introduction to his 1992 book, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*. There, he acknowledges that in *Literature Against Itself* he underappreciated the value of the views he was attacking and acknowledges that by studying them closely he has learnt more from his adversaries than from his allies. Thereby, he issues a warning against "clos[ing] ourselves off from new ways of thinking."¹² When critics of his writings find fault with Graff's apparent inconsistencies over the course of his long and

¹⁰ See Gerald Graff, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 130-131.

¹¹ See Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 1.

¹² Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), p. viii. From the vantage point of the present, it seems surprising that in the early 1990's Graff should have been accused of being doctrinaire – see Harold Fromm, "Establishing A Way in a World of Conflicts," in: *Teaching the Conflicts: Gerald Graff, Curricular Reform, and the Culture Wars*, ed. William E. Cain (New York and London: Garland, 1994), p. 72.

eventful academic career, they miss a crucial point about its value. Namely, it has never been his intention to develop a new comprehensive system; rather, his avowed aim has always been to contribute to improving the *status quo* by ameliorating the effects of current educational practices.

At the very outset of Chapter One of *Literature Against Itself* Graff explicitly declares his assumptions about literature and its scope, his position being clearly antagonistic to all sorts of formalist approaches. In a particularly plain and articulate manner which will come to define his rhetoric in later writings, he opens his discussion of cultural and literary issues with an explicit announcement of what his book is going to be about and what he is going to argue in it. He declares his interest in how "both literature and our ways of talking about it have been conditioned by social pressures and how they have in turn influenced social life."¹³ Against the arrogations of latter-day aestheticists who want to detach the fine arts from their historical and political contexts, Graff maintains that "[m]ost theories of the nature of literature are more or less concealed theories of the nature of man and of the good society."¹⁴ Accordingly, he ascribes an instrumental function to literature and its discussions; literature is defined by its relevance to, and influence on, moral and social questions. In other words, talking about literature should not be an end in itself, but a means to an end. And the end is firmly embedded in our reality, in the daily human transactions which, once inspired by literary themes and patterns, stand a chance of being enriched and refined.¹⁵

¹³ Graff, *Literature Against Itself*, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁵ There is an obvious congruence here between Graff's views and William James's notion of meliorism. For penetrating discussions of James's meliorism see Scott R. Stroud, "William James on Meliorism, Moral Ideas, and Business Ethics," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, vol. 45, no. 3 (2009), p. 379, and Henry Jackman, "James's Empirical Assumptions: On Materials, Meliorism, and Eternalism," *Streams of William James*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2004), p. 25.

Literature Against Itself is first and foremost Graff's plea for recognizing the value of realism and referentiality in literature. In the face of concerted attacks on the referential status of fiction, he stands by the traditional assumption that one of the primary functions of literary discourse is to reflect and represent something outside of itself. Crucially, nowhere in his book does he claim that works of literature are simply iconic images of reality; rather, well aware of the complex nature of artistic conventions, Graff merely emphasizes the impossibility of completely divorcing the literary signifier from its signified. To expose the faulty logic of anti-realists, he reconstructs their argument about the increasingly 'unreal' quality of contemporary reality: "Proceeding from the valid insight that something has happened to the sense of reality and that modern technological reality is in some profound sense unreal, many writers and critics leap to the conclusion that literature must for this reason abandon its pretensions to represent external reality and become either a self-contained reality unto itself or a disintegrated, dispersed process."¹⁶ To their objection that the mimetic perspective seems excessively naïve, Graff responds by noting that the problem lies in the absence of a good up-to-date critical vocabulary which would be sophisticated enough to do justice to the intricate relationship between the fictive and the real.¹⁷ He concludes by putting a premium on the "critical and explanatory power"¹⁸ of literature, which is dependent on external validation.

Another crucial premise which defines Graff's position on literature is closely connected with his major claim about art being inextricably interwoven with history. In her famous essay published in 1929, Virginia Woolf described fiction in terms of a spider's web which is "attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners."¹⁹ Graff seems to subscribe to this

¹⁶ Graff, *Literature Against Itself*, p. 9.

¹⁷ See *ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, "A Room of One's Own," in: *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 5th Edition, Vol. 2

position when he insists that "only a historical view provides a perspective from which to assess the richness and poverty of the contemporary."²⁰ Commenting on a passage from D. S. Carne-Ross's essay "Scenario for a New Year," he arrives at the conclusion that "history is a criticism of the present."²¹ Consequently, what he proposes is a "rehabilitation of history"²² in literary studies, a program which views history in the totality of its development. In some respects, Graff's ideas anticipate the emergence of New Historicism in the 1980's, although his argument is not so firmly based in a clearly defined ideological agenda. Characteristically, his conclusions are practice-oriented; in this particular context, he elaborates on the benefits which applying a historical perspective in literary studies might bring to education.

Graff's writings usually steer clear of politics but there is an essay of his which openly addresses the issue of politically committed pedagogy. In it, he expresses his skepticism about the assumptions of radical pedagogy, identifying an insoluble dilemma which most teachers face. Either they have to suppress their own political agendas in order to make classrooms more democratic and less hierarchical or they explicitly engage with pressing political issues which carry an educational potential at the risk of imposing their views on their students and, consequently, of being accused of pedagogical authoritarianism and indoctrination. Graff's response to this dilemma is quite ingenious: he opts for removing the opposition between the two strategies by refusing to adopt an *a priori* political stance. In a truly pragmatic manner, he maintains that "like most questions about teaching, the question of how to bring political issues into classrooms is contingent on specific local contexts."²³ Further, Graff acknowledges that his preferred policy is to follow "a devil's advocacy politics in

(New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), p. 1999.

²⁰ Graff, *Literature Against Itself*, p. 124.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Gerald Graff, "Teaching Politically without Political Correctness," *Radical Teacher*, no. 58 (2000), p. 26.

class, opposing whatever is the dominant mindset of the students."²⁴ In other words, his professed views are not his own; Graff is prepared to advocate any contestable position, depending on "the ideological tilt of the students."²⁵ His choice of a relevant strategy is adjusted to the pedagogical requirements of a particular situation. Political issues are thus given an appropriate airing while the teacher abstains from imposing her/his own agenda on the students.

Graff's claim about his own commitment to educational outcomes rather than political views is not to be construed as his renunciation of the latter. In the most recent of his writings he declares his interest in what he describes as "democratizing academic culture."²⁶ The best way to achieve this goal is, according to Graff, by helping "students become active participants in the important conversations of the academic world and the wider academic sphere."²⁷ This lies at the foundations of his project, which consists in demystifying academic culture and empowering students by developing their argumentative talents (more on this in Section II). The project, developed in *Clueless in Academe* and *They Say/I Say*, involves a crucial ethical dimension which epitomizes Graff's views and provides a significant continuity between *Literature Against Itself* and his latest books. The dimension is aptly expressed in Graff's own description of his approach to writing which "asks writers not simply to keep proving and reasserting what they already believe but to stretch what they believe by putting it up against beliefs that differ, sometimes radically, from their own."²⁸ Writing is thus to be dialogic in the sense that it should be open to contestation and counterarguments; writers are obliged to take into account the perspectives of all those who think

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, 2nd Edition (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), p. xvii.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

otherwise.²⁹ On the face of it, his project may not look like much of a contribution to the promotion of democratic ideals, but Graff is well aware of the formative function of a liberal education and realizes that some basic skills connected with writing and thinking will have far-reaching consequences as soon as his students become active participants in public life.

Graff is convinced that the skills inculcated in his students will turn them into intellectuals, that is, individuals who feel at home in the culture of ideas and arguments. He carefully distinguishes, however, between being educated and being an intellectual: "Not all 'academics' are 'intellectuals,' and intellectuals come in many different types, including academic scholars, journalistic public intellectuals, policy wonks, information managers, media pundits, and legal and government professionals. What these different types have in common ... is a commitment to articulating ideas in public."³⁰ That is why he insists that, rather than acquiring a solid knowledge of a particular field, students should be primarily exposed to the techniques of arguing and making claims, defending their positions and identifying those of others. Those competences are likely to prove useful in their lives outside the university, no matter what positions they are going to hold. In this respect, their education is supposed to be thoroughly practical, and Graff puts emphasis on its *terminus ad quem*, that is, the ends it is meant to serve.

A practical thrust is also clearly visible in Graff's approach to criticism and theory. Unlike most who oppose introducing students to a discourse which is secondary to literature itself, he believes that, in the academy, criticism is the very air we breathe: "[I]ike

Molière's gentleman who suddenly realized he had been speaking prose all his life, we need to recognize that criticism is what we inevitably do when we talk about a work of art."³¹ What students are exposed to in the classroom is not an unmediated contact with 'English literature' because our perception of the literary text is predetermined by critical discourse which supplies us with the only available models of discussing literature. Graff claims that even the crudest and most spontaneous reactions to literature (his examples include "Oh, wow" and "It sucks"³²) constitute samples of 'secondary' critical discourse. Therefore there is no point in denying students access to critical texts on the grounds that they are too difficult and students are not prepared to understand them until they have studied the literary text in detail, as those texts are vital models of how to read and discuss literature in a rigorous way (more on this in Section III). After all, the primary task of the English department is to educate competent critics, rather than artists who will emulate the language of fiction or poetry.

Graff's notion of theory is also couched in simple, pragmatic terms. In *Beyond the Culture Wars* he follows Terry Eagleton's reflections on the subject and comes to the conclusion that theory is tantamount to thinking.³³ Graff notes that we are usually forced to rethink some crucial assumptions about what we do when someone or something poses a challenge to what we have taken for granted. Then theory 'breaks out,'³⁴ as he has it; it is "the kind of self-consciousness that results when a community ceases to agree on these heretofore seemingly obvious, 'normal' assumptions...."³⁵ Consequently, Graff distinguishes between the kind of theory which the New Pragmatists (in this case Walter Benn Michael and Steven Knapp) attack in their essay "Against Theory" and a more broadly understood "discourse concerned with the legitimate principles,

²⁹ Wayne C. Booth seems to endorse Graff's position when he puts forward his notion of 'listening-rhetoric' which consists in "the whole range of communicative arts for reducing misunderstanding by paying full attention to opposing views." Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication* (Malden, Oxford, and Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 10.

³⁰ Graff, *Clueless in Academe*, p. 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, p. 54.

³⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 52.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

assumptions and premises of literature and literary criticism."³⁶ The most elaborate definition of theory he offers is to be found in the final pages of *Professing Literature*:

Thus, another way of describing literary theory is as a discourse that treats literature as in some respect a problem and seeks to formulate that problem in general terms. Theory is what is generated when some aspect of literature, its nature, its history, its place in society, its conditions of production and reception, its meaning in general, or the meanings of particular works, ceases to be given and becomes a question to be argued in a generalized way. Theory is what inevitably arises when literary conventions and critical definitions once taken for granted have become objects of generalized discussion and dispute.³⁷

In other words, Graff identifies theory with our critical response to the increasingly unstable and contestable quality of the received notions of culture, literature and communication. Theory emerges from specific historical circumstances which have given rise to our incertitude and apprehensions concerning those notions. In effect, theorizing is, paradoxically, a practical, therapeutic mode of reflection³⁸ which embarks on the task of dispersing doubts and arriving at clear and convincing answers to the nagging questions about the status of intellectual, artistic and social conventions and definitions.

II

One of the most pragmatic aspects of Graff's professional activity is connected with his critique of academia's excesses and deficiencies, particularly in the context of humanities education. Most of his writings are intended as interventions or correctives which deal with specific problems and offer practical solutions. In this section I take a closer look at Graff's views on

³⁶ Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 252.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ This is how Richard Rorty describes pragmatism in his interview with E. P. Ragg: "I think of pragmatism as primarily therapeutic philosophy – therapy conducted on certain mind-sets created by previous philosophers." Rorty, "Worlds or Words Apart?", p. 373.

research and education to see how his books address the institutional impasses that are all too evident in the contemporary university. His primary focus is on literary studies (or what Jacques Derrida described as "this strange institution called literature"³⁹) and the English department as its basic locus, but many of the points he makes apply in equal measure to academia at large.

It is already in *Literature Against Itself* that Graff expresses his criticism of the contemporary measures of professional achievement. His principal worry is that quantitative 'production' of scholarship and criticism may, in the long run, result in increasing neglect of the "canons of proof, evidence, logical consistency, and clarity of expression."⁴⁰ In *Professing Literature*, his historical overview of the profession of literary studies, he observes that a paradigm shift occurred after World War II. Earlier, scholars had been encouraged to publish but their primary duty was to acquire knowledge ("Study much, publish little" was the academic motto since the establishment of Johns Hopkins, the first research university in the United States⁴¹). In the second half of the 20th century "publish or perish" became a professional imperative for all those who wanted to further their academic careers. According to Graff, one of the crucial problems with the recent deluge of scholarly publications is that they have served no purpose whatsoever, save that of safeguarding the academic positions of their authors.

One of the deplorable consequences of prioritizing published research is the denigration of teaching. Graff seems to realize that the process is inevitable⁴² and yet he is determined to reach a compromise between the two by claiming that research may and should be geared to teaching, at least up to a point. For that to happen, we must first recognize that "[a]cademia itself has become part of the mass culture industry, which

³⁹ See Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 36.

⁴⁰ Graff, *Literature Against Itself*, p. 97.

⁴¹ Graff, *Professing Literature*, p. 59.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

disseminates and popularizes academic trends and theories."⁴³ The problem with translating this insight into practical solutions is that academia does not know how to advertize its own benefits: what it has to offer is often obscured from public view by unintelligible jargon, its own prejudices against being communicative (even at the cost of being reductive), and the assumption of incompatibility between the cloistered universe of the university (what Graff also describes in terms of "the ivory-tower mandarinism of the professors"⁴⁴) and the world outside. Students themselves are often discouraged from developing an interest in the research done by their professors due to what Graff identifies as the mystification of research as such and an entrenched conviction that it is too sophisticated for undergraduates. The research would certainly be fit for them, Graff concludes, "if it were better written and more interestingly conceived."⁴⁵

Graff's critical remarks about research constitute a significant contribution to the ongoing debate over the future of literary studies. Equally insightful are his reflections on literary education, especially those concerned with the curriculum. In *Beyond the Culture Wars* he devotes much of his attention to the issues which are directly relevant to the organization of literary courses as well as their contents. First, against the charges of conservative critics, he argues that the alleged 'canonicide'⁴⁶ has not really occurred; in his opinion the claims that contemporary fiction of mediocre artistic quality has replaced the classics on most reading lists are overblown. Graff argues that the canon evolves in a much less revolutionary manner, by "accretion at the margins, not by dumping the classics."⁴⁷ And yet our attitude to the classics requires a reconsideration because what really endangers them is the reverential awe with which we approach those writings. By protecting them from disrespect, we betray

anxiety about their actual value: "Though this protective attitude postures as a form of reverence of Western culture, it really betrays a lack of confidence in that culture, whose monuments we evidently fear cannot stand up to criticism."⁴⁸ Graff abstains from advocating radical alterations of the canon but he is decidedly critical of the conservative positions represented by such prominent defenders of the classics as Harold Bloom.⁴⁹

According to Graff, many conservative postulates about education are unacceptable for the simple reason that they are ineffective. For example, William J. Bennett's naïve assumption of a common culture should be transformed into "a *common discussion* about culture, which implies agreement only to debate our different beliefs, tastes, and values, with the help of whatever common language, assumptions, and conclusions we are able to discover through the process of discussion itself."⁵⁰ Likewise, on a more practical level, Graff is skeptical of those commonsensical approaches to literature which stipulate that the students 'just read the books.' He believes that teaching literature always involves its interpretation, and pretending otherwise will be pedagogically disastrous in the long run.⁵¹ What he stresses is that reading books is a social activity which is meant to provide intellectual stimulation. To vindicate the potential value of heretofore marginalized works of literature, he indicates that texts are never difficult or easy in themselves; what matters is the kind of questions asked about them. As Graff puts it, "There is no functional connection between the status level of a text (however this may be measured) and the degree of complexity or difficulty attained by the interpretation of it for some hypothetical average reader."⁵² A corollary of this is that, for didactic purposes, interpretation is more

⁴³ Graff, *Clueless in Academe*, p. 18.

⁴⁴ Graff, *Literature Against Itself*, p. 109-110.

⁴⁵ Graff, *Clueless in Academe*, 35.

⁴⁶ See Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, p. 19.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴⁹ Bloom's most spectacular diatribe against what he calls "the School of Resentment" (which allegedly proposes to remove numerous classics from reading lists) is to be found in his *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (London: Papermac, 1995).

⁵⁰ Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, 45.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 100.

important than its own object. Again, Graff is pragmatic to the point of treating even the greatest works of literature instrumentally.

Open to new developments in education as he is, Graff is not prepared to accept those innovations that duck rather than confront existing pedagogical problems. When it comes to the curriculum he realizes that it cannot possibly reflect a common culture but neither is he happy with what he calls "a mere cafeteria counter of professorial research interests."⁵³ This model, based on the field coverage principle, assumes that individual courses have nothing to do with each other; they are not integrated in any way so as not to impose any totalizing framework on the curriculum. Each course constitutes an independent unit, which, according to Graff, leads to "the course fetish": detached from the institutional setting and isolated from the outside world, it is based on "the cult of the great teacher."⁵⁴ The course fetish is closely connected with an idealized image of academic education:

... the most familiar representation of the sentimental image of the course as a scene of conflict-free community is the one presented on untold numbers of college catalog covers: A small, intimate class is sprawled informally on the gently sloping campus greensward, shady trees overhead and ivy-covered buildings in the background. Ringed in casual semicircle, the students gaze with rapt attention at a teacher who is reading aloud from a small book – a volume of poetry, we inevitably assume, probably Keats or Dickinson or Whitman. The classroom, in these images, is a garden occupying a redemptive space inside the bureaucratic and professional machine. It is a realm of unity and presence in a world otherwise given over to endless difference, conflict, competition, and factionalism.⁵⁵

Graff's ironic image demonstrates how not only students but also teachers delude themselves into believing that education may be stripped of its institutional and ideological dimension when the professors refuse to acknowledge larger responsibilities beyond their own

courses. The university will never serve its basic function – that of preparing students for handling real-life problems in a world rife with social differences and conflicts – unless individual courses are purposefully coordinated to reflect the diversity of perspectives and ways of arguing about vital issues.⁵⁶ Hence Graff's insistence that the curriculum be "a microcosm ... of a clash of cultures and values in America as a whole."⁵⁷ This assumption underlies his conception of 'teaching the conflicts,' which I will enlarge on in Section III of this essay.

One of the most penetrating insights that Graff offers about liberal education is connected with what he calls the argument game, which should give coherence to the entire curriculum. In *Clueless in Academe*, he argues that students are baffled not so much by the content of the various courses they attend⁵⁸ as by the opacity which accompanies academic communication. In effect, what should be prioritized is obscured and made inaccessible: the best and most useful aspects of academic discourse lose out in confrontation with academia's peculiar predilection for unintelligibility and obfuscation. Graff has no doubt that what is central to humanities education is skill of argumentation, which is closely related to persuasive public discourse. Taking his cue from Hillel Crandus, he highlights the importance of Arguespeak, the kind of persuasive discourse that is common to many verbal modes of public activity. Besides strictly academic contexts, it is present in journalistic communication, political debates and even in the talk of students themselves.⁵⁹ Graff claims that learning Arguespeak has far-reaching educational and

⁵⁶ In *Professing Literature*, Graff puts it in the following way: "The question is how the many different kinds of things professors of literature do may be so organized as to begin providing a context for one another and take on a measure of corporate existence in the eyes of the world" (p. 251).

⁵⁷ Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, p. 8.

⁵⁸ Graff's name for the cognitive dissonance (caused by divergent syllabi and incompatible perspectives) which students have to cope with is the Volleyball Effect – see Graff, *Clueless in Academe*, p. 65.

⁵⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 116-117.

personal consequences; it entails "becoming socialized into a way of life that changes who you are."⁶⁰ By acquiring argumentative skills, students develop their own sense of self in relation to others and learn to define and defend their perspectives in confrontation with alien points of view.⁶¹ Clearly, Graff's vision of their academic socialization into the argument culture is premised on a holistic notion of education.

III

The centrality of persuasive argument in the university and culture in general seems to be Graff's formula for remedying the crucial problems which have recently bedeviled academia. The critics of his project may object that his own argument is restricted to the humanities at best, and to literary studies at worst. It is a fact that Graff is principally concerned with liberal education but at numerous points he claims that clear and reasoned persuasion underlies many other discourses, including the sciences. Certainly, his position transcends the purview of literary education and seems to assume a transdisciplinary perspective which may become a more productive approach in the future.

In an interesting essay concerned with disciplinarity, Sheldon Pollock makes a forceful claim about philology being a particularly fitting candidate for the status of a core knowledge form. He identifies three minimal requirements that such knowledge forms will have to meet in the twenty-first-century university. Those involve an awareness of the discipline's own historicity, a global and comparable perspective and an understanding of the changing criteria for truth-claims made both in the past and at the present time (what he

calls 'epistemic politics').⁶² To be sure, Graff does not formulate his own project in terms of a new philology; what emerges from his writings, however, may be construed as a blueprint for refashioning not just the English department but also humanities education as a whole. At the same time it is evident that his contributions rely on the rhetorical and philological tradition which has emphasized the significance of writing and speaking as crucial modes of participation in public discourse.⁶³ Therefore, in this section, I discuss Graff's practical suggestions which are intended to improve both the quality of communication within the academy and its public image.

Chronologically, Graff's first major contribution is presented at length in *Beyond the Culture Wars*, although it is anticipated already in the final pages of *Professing Literature*.⁶⁴ His solution to the problem of the mixed-message curriculum, which I discussed in Section II, is the project of teaching the conflicts. Graff's working assumption is that contemporary conflicts in the academy are "a measure of its vitality, not its decline."⁶⁵ Hence his plea that we recognize the legitimacy of conflicts in the university. Otherwise, we will only delude ourselves that we constitute an intellectual community: "While it [i.e., the university] welcomes diversity and innovation, it neutralizes the conflicts which result from them. This it does by keeping warring parties in noncommunicating courses and departments and by basing the curriculum on a principle of live and let live: I won't try to prevent you from teaching and studying what you want if you don't try to prevent me from

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 24; see, also, p. 57.

⁶¹ In this particular context, one crucial statement from Dewey's *Democracy and Education* seems to be especially relevant as an underlying principle of Graff's perspective: "A being connected with other beings cannot perform his own activities without taking the activities of others into account." Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 16.

⁶² Sheldon Pollock, "Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 4 (2009), p. 948.

⁶³ See, e.g., Graff and Birkenstein, *They Say*, p. xxii. Also, there are important interconnections between Graff's model of teaching the conflicts and contemporary approaches to rhetoric. For example, Steven Mailloux makes note of the usefulness of Graff's views for his own notion of cultural rhetoric – see Steven Mailloux, *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 183.

⁶⁴ See Graff, *Professing Literature*, pp. 250-252.

⁶⁵ Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, p. 4.

teaching and studying what I want."⁶⁶ And yet, by bringing various conflicting views out of the closet and making them explicit to the students we are more likely to give them an opportunity to "make sense of their education and their lives."⁶⁷ Consequently, for Graff, 'teaching the conflicts' is shorthand for a pragmatic program which stands a chance of bestowing coherence and purpose upon the curriculum.

Graff illustrates the idea of incorporating conflicts into the curriculum by discussing his own teaching practice. He describes the case of *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, a book which he used to teach as a universal parable of reason and unreason. However, once he realized that its reception may vary depending, e.g., on the reader's ethnic background he started looking at the work from other angles, too. What inspired this shift of perception was an essay by Chinua Achebe, who claims that Conrad's presentation of black Africa is shot through with racism. Graff decided to contrast those two perspectives (i.e., his own interpretation of Conrad's work and Achebe's) with each other and present the critical conflict to his students. More than that, he encouraged them to read short essays representing positions which are hostile to his own, thereby giving the students a chance to develop a critical perspective on their instructor's views. Also, he invited other critics and teachers into his class to debate the controversial issues and expose the latent disagreements about Conrad's book, which academics usually brush under the carpet as soon as they enter the classroom. The experience of teaching *Heart of Darkness* has led Graff to conclude that "[i]nstead of endlessly lamenting the intrusion of politics into the curriculum, we would do better to bring into the curriculum itself whatever may be instructive in the clashes of political and philosophical principles that have shaped it."⁶⁸ If liberal education is to be more sensitive to the plurality of perspectives which characterizes democratic societies, teaching the conflicts

is certainly a good strategy for exposing students to the disputes and disagreements which they will face in non-academic contexts.

In a more general sense, Graff's notion of teaching the conflicts reflects his view of academic discourse as a conversation, rather than a monologue. The idiom of entering the conversation, borrowed from Kenneth Burke,⁶⁹ is central to Graff's approach to academic writing. In his incisive critique of academic habits of communication, he describes what many academics write as being "turgid, pretentious, jargon-ridden, and humorless."⁷⁰ In consequence, their ideas are not clearly expressed, and certainly are not accessible to anyone outside the immediate circle of the few specialists who are concerned with the same field. Graff realizes that it is impossible to renounce the jargon completely: he does not encourage scholars to translate their insights into slang or nursery rhymes. Still, he believes that academic writing would benefit enormously from relying on what he describes as a bridge discourse, which would make communication between the academics and the students more effective.⁷¹ His notion of the bridge discourse assumes that academic writing should incorporate elements of both the vernacular and the academic. Often, that will involve restating the same points in two different ways: "effective academic writing tends to be bilingual (or 'diglossial'), making its point in Academese and making it again in the vernacular, a repetition that, interestingly, alters the meaning."⁷² Again, what underlies Graff's position is a conviction that the gap between academic and non-academic cultures is not so wide, and there is no reason why it should be exaggerated by the opacity of language in which academics couch their most important conclusions.

One of the most effective solutions to the opacity of academic discourse is the judicious use of metacommentary. In *They Say/I Say*, Graff and Cathy

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁶⁹ See Graff, *Clueless in Academe*, p. 158.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁷¹ See *ibid.*, p. 133.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 141.

Birkenstein begin their discussion of the issue with a simple explanation of what they mean by metacommentary. They state that it is “a way of commenting on your claims and telling others how – and how *not* – to think about them.”⁷³ Metacommentary occurs in everyday conversations, not just in academic writing; in fact, our daily reliance on such formulas as ‘What I mean to say is that...’ or ‘I don’t want you to think that...’ or ‘I’m not saying that...’ suggests that all modes of communication benefit from such clarifications. Still, in the context of academic writing metacommentary is particularly important. Here is how Graff and Birkenstein explain the reasons for using it:

Even the best writers can provoke reactions in readers that they didn’t intend, and even good readers can get lost in a complicated argument or fail to see how one point connects with another. Readers may also fail to see what follows from your argument, or they may follow your reasoning and examples yet fail to see the larger conclusion you draw from them. They may fail to see your argument’s overall significance, or mistake what you are saying for a related argument that they have heard before but that you want to distance yourself from. As a result, no matter how straightforward a writer you are, readers still need you to help them grasp what you really mean.⁷⁴

The point that Graff and Birkenstein make about the usefulness of metacommentary is plain and does not seem to need restating. The value of their most recent book, however, lies in more than just the simple conclusion that academic writing should involve a clarifying dimension. Above all, *They Say/I Say* is a practical compendium of writing techniques, including examples of usage and ready-made templates which students, but also more experienced writers, may incorporate into their arguments to make them cogent and persuasive. Graff’s educational pragmatism is here at its best; instead of theorizing *écriture* (or any other philosophical abstractions), he focuses on practical skills which translate directly into more effective ways of communicating with others.

Another useful strategy for making academic writing relevant to as many readers as possible consists in what Graff describes as ‘planting a naysayer in your text.’⁷⁵ Even the most carefully thought-out texts may fail to generate a lively response on the part of their target audience if their writers fail to inscribe them in a certain oppositional framework. In other words, to engage the reader’s attention, our writing must make a point in relation to other positions on an issue, preferably by way of contrast. It is not enough to state our own claim; we must also indicate why this claim needs to be made. The best way to do so is by pitching our views against commonly held beliefs, or those of recognized authorities in a given field. Thereby, we provide a rationale for our writing and answer two all-important questions which Graff encourages all writers to ask themselves before they make their own claim: ‘So what?’ and ‘Who cares?’⁷⁶ Otherwise, the claims are not ‘arguable,’ that is, without the necessity of defending them by providing convincing arguments writers will never persuade anybody of their significance. In this sense, the best and most interesting academic texts advance claims which at first appear controversial and counterintuitive.

Given Graff’s interest in writing and his conviction that “the public argument culture is the name of the academic game,”⁷⁷ it comes as no surprise that he highlights the centrality of composition courses to humanities education in general. This is not to say that, in the context of pedagogical practices, he has no other suggestions to offer. In *Beyond the Culture Wars*, he observes that academic writing could gain a new impetus from a dialogue with journalism, which may provide models of how to convey complex issues in a concise and appealing manner. Also, he has a number of interesting ideas about how to effect curricular integration. One of them involves “an adaptation of the academic conference or symposium to the needs of the

⁷³ Graff and Birkenstein, *They Say*, p. 129.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁷⁵ See Graff, *Clueless in Academe*, p. 158.

⁷⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 119 and 136.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

undergraduate curriculum."⁷⁸ Another envisages collaboration between teachers from different departments who would assign the same text in a particular semester and then hold a transcourse conference "in order to compare different approaches, clarify disputed issues, and give students a more dramatic sense of the wider debate than a single course can provide."⁷⁹ All these ideas assume the usefulness of coordinated teaching, one of Graff's major postulates connected with refashioning the present-day academy. Implicitly, they also entail a redefinition of the role of the teacher and her/his authority in the classroom. No longer a solo performer – satirically portrayed as the vanguard professor-intellectual already in *Literature Against Itself*⁸⁰ – she/he must be poised to have her/his views challenged and, possibly, also defeated by those who bring different perspectives into the conversation. This may be one of the main reasons why Graff's program has not been enthusiastically received in many quarters. After all, few professors will be happy to relinquish part of their authority and prerogatives unless they realize that, in the long run, it is in their own interest.

Apropos literature courses, Graff emphasizes the value of exposing students to secondary sources which contextualize and interrogate the literary text itself. His insistence that critical essays are particularly useful didactic materials may seem questionable, yet his argument is cogent and firmly rooted in his notion of humanities education. To begin with, he claims that many teachers tend to overrate the primary experience of literature, which they oppose to secondary analyses. This approach rests on the conviction that an inchoate response is more authentic, while critical discussions of literature may involve an imposition of the teacher's perspective on the students' spontaneous reactions. However, this is to ignore the fact that our reactions are always mediated by a cultural context which provides us

with a critical vocabulary to articulate our response to the text. In the classroom, when we ask students to speak about how they 'feel' about a book, or a poem, we assume that they already know how to express their primary experience in relatively communicative discourse. Graff maintains, in turn, that this response requires models of assessing and analyzing texts, which only critical essays may offer.⁸¹ Literary education is, accordingly, a matter of developing students' critical skills, rather than giving them an opportunity to enjoy what they might fail to appreciate on their own. This is not to say that a critical assessment of a work of literature should not tap into the students' primary aesthetic experience, but exposing them to carefully chosen critical writings may be the best way to engage their attention and elicit articulate responses: once they see that a literary text is a subject of critical controversy and there are issues which the critics disagree about, they are likely to be drawn into an exchange of opinions.⁸² Finally, students are encouraged to express their responses in a language which matches the rigor and coherence of academic writing.

It is emblematic of Graff's views that all his assumptions are tested in classroom conditions. That is why he is aware of the potential problems that might result from exposing students to excessively sophisticated critical discourse: "When teachers recoil at the idea of assigning criticism, they are often thinking of opaque or unreadable criticism whose effect in their classes has been or would be deadly. Yet even when criticism is lucid and well written it may be poorly suited to students' needs, and end up only confirming suspicions that such material has nothing to say to anyone who is not an academic specialist."⁸³ Therefore what is required of the teacher is considerable discrimination in the choice and preparation of the critical writings. Graff describes how over many years he has accumulated a number of published essays which, by trial and error, proved to be

⁷⁸ Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, p. 188.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁸⁰ See Graff, *Literature Against Itself*, 116.

⁸¹ See *ibid.*, p. 176.

⁸² See Graff, *Clueless in Academe*, 163-168.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 182-183.

useful in his own teaching.⁸⁴ Also, he has co-edited with James Phelan two textbooks organized around the critical controversies surrounding Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The books contain primary texts along with selected critical essays which reflect the debates and disagreements between the critics. Students are thereby provided with a larger context which gives them a chance to relate their responses to those already made by others. Again, underlining this particular didactic strategy is Graff's belief that the opposition between teaching and research is unnecessary⁸⁵ and that humanities education should put a premium on students' argumentative skills, which they are likely to find useful in public contexts.

My discussion of Graff's views and writings has been largely expository but now it is time to return to the claim which I made at the outset of this essay. It is true that he has never explicitly identified his position as pragmatist and yet, from what I have discussed above, it clearly transpires that Graff's notions of literature and pedagogy are akin to those of John Dewey and other champions of progressive education. Moreover, the thrust of Graff's arguments is almost invariably practice-oriented, while his academic career has been testimony to his commitment to bettering not only the academic community but also democratic society at large. This ameliorative dimension of his intellectual activity puts him in the ranks of the most prominent contemporary scholars and teachers whose interpretation of pragmatism puts the lie to Marshall Sahlin's sarcastic definition of the university as an institution which is concerned with "the pursuit of disinterested knowledge by self-interested people."⁸⁶ It is fair to conclude that Graff's writings, as well as other forms of his academic activity, emerge as genuine harbingers of a better future for the humanities.

⁸⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 183.

⁸⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸⁶ Marshall Sahlin, "The Conflicts of the Faculty," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 4 (2009), p. 999.