My topic in this essay is the rhetoric of subversion—or rupture, or disruption—that is so frequently encountered in critical discourse these days; my purpose is to raise some questions about the implications this rhetoric carries for a politically oppositional practice in the academy. I shall address some important features of poststructuralism and deconstruction, as well as certain components of feminist theory, but I shall try to minimize my focus on theory as such and instead stress a related concern that has increasing influence on our everyday critical practice and pedagogy—namely, the matter of challenging (whether opening up, jettisoning, or, as my former colleague Michael Warner calls it, busting) the literary canon. When I use the term “new scholarship” in this essay, I refer primarily to this canon-busting activity, in conjunction with its roots in poststructuralist, deconstructive, and feminist theory.

Before tackling these critical and literary-historical questions, however, I shall briefly summarize the historical context within which our current discourse about theory and pedagogy is taking place, since any recommendations about political oppositionality necessarily address themselves to a specific situation. This context is profoundly anomalous and contradictory. On the one hand, we seem to be inhabiting a wasteland that makes T. S. Eliot’s spiritual desert a comparative oasis. The supersession of Cold War rivalries by a race for newly opened markets that will align emergent and declining superpowers in highly competitive—and increasingly warlike—alliances; the desperation of a declining American empire that is doggedly supporting fascist regimes around the world while creating a massive new poverty class within its own proletariat; the reestablishment of gross inequalities of race and
gender, even after decades of popular resistance; the reconversion of the campuses into centers for CIA recruitment and war research: these and other phenomena signal the deepening of a capitalist crisis that can only result in increasing repression and impoverishment for a vast number of the globe’s inhabitants.

On the other hand, while CIA recruitment is on the increase, in the academy we seem to be experiencing exciting and progressive developments that signal a very different sort of trend: the number of canon-busting scholars and poststructuralist theorists is also on the increase. A generation of 40ish scholars, whose social and political consciousness was shaped in the crucible of the 1960s and has now reached full maturity, is writing many of the books and articles we now read, and is attaining (or seeking to attain) tenured positions in English and literature departments. Academic Marxism is experiencing a popularity and prestige unprecedented since the 1930s. While fifteen years ago it was heresy to treat literary works as anything other than apolitical, ahistorical, transcendental, and privileged, now, in the wake of poststructuralism, deconstruction, and feminism, it is almost a new orthodoxy to proclaim that everything is ideological, everything is textual and political. And in the wake of the canon-busting movement, the literary tradition emerges as variegated and full of pockets of resistance, rather than monolithic and hegemonic. Ethnic-minority, female, and working-class writers now draw the attention of many of the best younger scholars, and even the stodgy oldsters of the canon are discovered to have been secretly in rebellion against the dominant ideologies of their time.

As a result, the humanist’s role as the gatekeeper of tradition seems to have undergone a profound alteration. Where once we were charged with pointing up the uniqueness of works of undisputed genius and the darkness and ambiguity of the human condition, we are now empowered—indeed, encouraged—to relativize, historicize, contextualize. Subversion is the new order of the day, and we appear to inhabit a decidedly oppositional stance in relation to dominant ideology. Allan Bloom and William Bennett may be building up a dangerous case for cultural traditionalism among the populace at large, but we in the academy know that pluralism and decentering constitute a truer and better (kinder and gentler?) approach to cultural matters.

Does this anomalous disjunction between the situation in literature departments and that in the body politic at large indicate that the academy is exempt from the rightward drift I described before? Do we in fact look to semiotics and poststructuralism for political guidance in the moral limbo exemplified by Tammy Faye Bakker and Geraldo Rivera, Donald Trump and George Bush? Is the Chapel Perilous located in departments of comparative literature? Is the canon-busting scholar the Fisher King? Or does the apparent progressiveness of contemporary literary scholarship make for only thunder over distant mountains, but no rain?

No doubt my own skepticism is signaled by my irony. Before explaining the reasons for this irony, however, I should acknowledge the most significant achievements of the canon-busting movement. First, and most obviously, the movement has profoundly democratized literary study, for students are now asked not only to
read but also to understand and respect significant numbers of previously marginalized writers and traditions. No major shake-up occurs, of course, when a few women writers or writers of color are given grudging admission to course syllabi, or when old analytical paradigms remain intact. (I think here of a professor who incorporated Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” into his survey of American literature but taught it as an instance of Nabokovian unreliable narration!) But when the critic pays careful attention to those very features of neglected literary texts that have provided the basis for their exclusion from the canon in the first place, then there can occur a profound rupture in literary study—not only with inherited models of literary history but also with the elitist politics undergirding traditional notions of aesthetic value. For example, Cleanth Brooks’s valorization of literary texts as setting forth not ideas, but what it would feel like to hold certain ideas (731), can take shape not merely as an expression of an aesthete’s disdain for political commitments in general, but as a conservative’s reaction against the leftist politics that many texts of the 1930s had worn on their sleeves.¹

Second, the canon-busting movement invites us to rehistoricize canonical writers as well, and thus rescues them from the toils of the New Critical and archetypal interpretations in which they have been enmeshed for so many years. It becomes difficult indeed to stress Herman Melville’s metaphysics to the exclusion of his materialism when “Benito Cereno” is taught not with “The Turn of the Screw” but with Frederick Douglass’s Narrative of the Life of an American Slave (1845) or Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig (1859). The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884), when viewed in conjunction with Charles Chesnutt’s The Marrow of Tradition (1901) or W. E. B. Du Bois’s The Souls of Black Folk (1903), requires the critic to address questions quite different from those invited through a comparison of Mark Twain’s novel with Walden (1854). As Carolyn Porter has pointed out, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s early essays gain a crucial social dimension when seen in the context of the author’s anguished reactions to the commodification and alienation of labor in New England mill towns of the 1830s (Seeing). After decades of a critical hegemony exercised by the intentional and affective fallacies, by paradox and ambiguity, by epistemological skepticism, and by archetypal patterns of Adamic innocence in a fallen world, history reenters the domain of literary study—not simply as background or source, but as a constitutive component of discourse and textuality. (See also the recent excellent revisionary readings in Karcher, Sundquist, Arac, and Wilding, as well as Russell Reising’s theoretical study of the politics of traditional American literary scholarship).

Despite the significant achievements of the canon-busting movement, however, I believe that in many ways it falls short of its emancipatory rhetoric and frequently ends up reconfirming those very structures of authority to which it purports to be opposed. There are a number of axes along which this process of cooptation and reincorporation occurs. It is to a scrutiny of these that I now turn, first focusing on more exclusively critical issues and then exploring their implication for our political practice in the academy.
First, the maneuver of opening up the literary tradition—and the curriculum—to previously silenced or marginalized voices is often conflated with the notion that these voices, because excluded, must somehow constitute a significant threat to the hegemony of dominant social groups. Now, I do not want to be misunderstood as saying that works such as Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1929) or Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) fail to query important facets of class, race, and gender inequality in American culture and in the discourses by which that culture represents and validates itself. But I am bothered by the argument that these writers, simply by virtue of their race and/or gender positioning, necessarily articulate a counter-discourse that is intrinsically subversive of dominant power relations.

For an instance of this phenomenon—of which there appear more and more examples every day—I refer to Sandra Gilbert’s introduction to the recently issued Penguin edition of *The Awakening* (1899). This essay is in some ways politically astute, but also, in my view, injuriously one-sided. Gilbert argues—with considerable force—against the antifeminist reading that would invoke standards of “realistic” plausibility and would accordingly treat the novel’s conclusion as “a defeat and a regression, rooted in a self-annihilating instinct, in a romantic incapacity to accommodate . . . the limitations of reality.” Accordingly, Gilbert claims that Edna’s final act of suicide represents instead “a resurrection, a pagan female Good Friday that promises a Venusian Easter.” The protagonist’s final gesture thus “expresses not a refusal to accommodate to reality but a subversive questioning of both reality and ‘realism’” (31).

I am in considerable sympathy with Gilbert’s desire to point out the oppositional, even triumphant, aspects of Edna’s rejection of a patriarchal society that would restrict her possibilities for growth. I also agree with Gilbert’s corollary assumption that feminist criticism should address itself not simply to textual patterns of victimization but also to representations of defiance. I would moreover second the view that the presumably “realistic” invocation of probability and common sense as criteria for evaluating Edna’s character carries with it a freight of conservative patriarchal judgments. But I also think that, in treating Edna Pontellier as a kind of transcendent pagan goddess, Gilbert profoundly distorts the contradictory nature of Kate Chopin’s portrayal of her protagonist—a woman marked by considerable weakness of intellect as much as by greatness of spirit, by a narrow selfishness as much as by a generous identification with cosmic regenerative forces.

In arguing that Edna engages in a “subversive questioning of both reality and ‘realism,’” in short, Gilbert mistakes the part for the whole, substituting a univocal—and somewhat anachronistic—celebration of female sexual identity for what is, in my view, in fact a highly tension-filled and ambivalent representation of the cost of woman’s emancipation. In particular, I would point out, it is precisely at the text’s moment of closure that this conflict emerges most sharply. For in its
attempt to synthesize the divergent claims of individual and social identity, Chopin's valorization of her protagonist's courage is substantially qualified by profoundly ambiguous patterns of symbolism and imagery that suggest infantile regression at least as much as Venustian transcendence.  

The problem I have pointed out in Gilbert's introduction to *The Awakening* is repeated, I believe, in a substantial number of works of the new scholarship. Recent critics are often eager to demonstrate that a noncanonical—or, in this case, recently canonized—writer occupied (and occupies) an oppositional stance in relation to dominant institutions of power. But in arguing their case, these critics too frequently select various subversive moments in the text while overlooking the ways in which these moments are frequently subordinated to larger narrative patterns, most particularly patterns of closure, that negate or at least blunt the text's sporadic querying of hegemonic conceptions of character and social relations. The critic's own brand of oppositional politics, in other words, becomes conflated with authorial intention.

Second, practitioners of the new scholarship too often conclude not only that noncanonical writers possessed subversive politics but also that long-canonized writers experienced significant sympathy with oppressed social groups—or at least ironized or otherwise problematized the more reactionary ideas that their texts would appear to assert. As I mentioned before, Porter's discovery of Emerson's awareness of the alienation of labor in 1830s New England mill towns, and her postulation that this awareness is centrally involved in his formulation of a transcendentalist epistemology, puts Emerson's philosophical enterprise in a badly needed historical context. But this discovery does not in itself demonstrate that Emerson has any particularly strong sympathy for the oppressed masses, who figure in his essays as a somewhat rowdy and undesirable presence—"the unintelligent brute force that lies at the bottom of society [and] is made to growl and mow" (Emerson 960). In Emerson's complex political epistemology, the great unwashed contribute to the anguish suffered by the all-seeing "eye" at least as much as they themselves suffer from a comparable alienation. Nor does demonstrating Emerson's awareness of alienation in itself prove that, in his own philosophical practice, Emerson managed to contest or overcome the commodification that he perceived and decried.

Moreover, Porter extends her analysis of Emerson as a radical—which, given his association with Margaret Fuller and other progressive transcendentalists, is at least plausible—to Henry James, Henry Adams, and William Faulkner as well:

Each of them [the four cited above] responds critically to his society, and the related terms in which these several radical critiques take shape reveal at once the deepening structure of reification in American society as it moves from the nineteenth century into the twentieth, and the exemplary efforts of four of America's most formidable critical minds to overcome and resist that reification. ("Reification" 188–217)
Emerson, James, Adams, and Faulkner do indeed offer compelling analyses of the costs of living in modern industrial society, but their criticisms are largely articulated from a conservative viewpoint. It does little to clarify these writers’ political stands to treat them as sympathetic participants in an essentially Marxist critique of capitalist commodification. (For an interesting discussion of the distinctly nonradical aspects of Emerson’s thought, see Grusin).

I invoke the example of Porter’s Seeing and Being not to negate the value of her discoveries about the centrality of the problem of alienation in the works of Emerson and other American writers, but simply to point out a certain lack of dialectical thinking that is prevalent in a number of even the most valuable works of the new scholarship. In the attempt to pull canonical writers down from the clouds of idealist critical discourse and to reground them in history, writers who have for decades been seen as bearing the standard of traditional moral values are suddenly seen as querying these values. By a curious turn of the wheel, then, the effort to historicize produces a new kind of dehistoricization, albeit on a different plane. To be sure, writers are no longer seen as espousing human truths divorced from time and space. But in their insertion into time and space they frequently take on an aura of anachronistic political correctness. Their firm commitment to elitist, sexist, or racist social values is waved aside so long as their works contain the germ of a concern with decentered subjectivity or the problematics of reference.4

Indeed, such a privileging of postmodernist concerns can result in a very troubling bypassing—verging on whitewashing—of reactionary politics in canonical texts. Andrew Parker, for example, argues that Ezra Pound’s virulent hatred of Jews stemmed from his perception that “Judaism, writing, money and rhetoric . . . all belong to the same tropological series, each term functioning analogously as a figure of ‘excess,’ as an inscription that deflects any immediate connection between the sign and its intended referent.” Although Parker claims that his argument “will enable us to reject the widely-held critical position that considers Pound’s anti-Semitism as a merely ‘contingent’ phenomenon, ancillary to his poetic achievement,” I remain skeptical of a rehistoricizing that virtually collapses politics into poetics (81, 71). Parker is certainly not arguing that there is anything progressive about Pound’s anti-Semitism. But his contention that Pound worked out his poetic anxieties through his social attitudes has the effect of dignifying those attitudes. Pound’s obsessive concern with the relation of signifier to signified makes him “one of us”; even his repellent politics takes shape as a protest, however distorted, against the epistemological dilemma of modern humanity.

I can anticipate various objections to these arguments. It might be stated, for example, that in invoking critical categories such as “larger narrative patterns,” “closure,” and “intention,” it is I who am reproducing dominant ideology, especially when I apply these notions to noncanonical texts. Concepts of totality, coherence, and authorial subjectivity can be seen as Aristotelian or Jamesian mediations of phallogocentric hegemony. Counterinvoking Jacques Derrida or Paul de Man, the canon-busting critic might argue that oppositional ideology necessarily asserts itself in gaps, fissures, and discontinuities in the text—that opposition itself
is by definition a marginalized phenomenon. It is enough for the text to have flaunted the logocentric conventions that support patriarchy and racial domination; subversion consists not in the negation of this hegemony, but simply in its interrogation.\(^5\)

I am bothered by this argument, even though we hear it often enough these days, uttered in a tone of radical panache. For what it amounts to is an admission that subversion and oppositionality are essentially formalistic operations—maneuvers of which the target and goal remain unspecified. The act of rupture is valorized. But what this act is subversive of, and oppositional to, is too often left unclear—as is the extent of the text’s commitment to its disruptive stance. The enemy would seem to be an epistemological nexus defined by stability, fixity, realism—but beyond this we know little else. The result of this insistently structural definition of the antagonist is that we are left with only a hazy notion of the actual political praxis involved in textual subversion. Power, in this critical paradigm, lurks everywhere; but it is not always clear where power comes from or whose interests it serves. There is no cause for despair, however, since polysemous subversion waits everywhere in ambush, forcing dominant ideology continually to cover its flanks against guerrilla harassment from what Derrida calls the “marginalized other” of the West (134–35). There are romantic echoes here of the discourse and practice of Regis Debray, so popular among certain elements of the New Left in the 1960s. We may wonder, however, whether such a formulation of subversion and oppositionality is as sure a safeguard against reincorporation as it would claim to be.\(^6\)

It is not necessary, I believe, to throw out the subversive baby with the traditional bath: to recognize that texts do not always succeed in negating dominant ideology is not to deny that they may try to do so. For such notions as intention, totality, and closure do not rule out the importance of considering contradiction in literary texts. Indeed, they enable us to view the text as an ideological battleground where contradictions in representation fight out the broader struggles of the society at large. But within the dialectic of the text’s unity, there are nonetheless primary and secondary aspects of contradiction. If the “pockets of resistance” in a text constitute a secondary aspect—as is, in my view, most often the case with works written in the bourgeois tradition, even with noncanonical texts—so be it. Let us appreciate these pockets for all they are worth, and point out their significance to our students. But this does not mean that other aspects of authorial consciousness may not—however unfortunately—end up winning the battle. Indeed, to posit that an insurgent, secondary aspect of a contradiction is, simply by virtue of its existence, a primary, essence-determining phenomenon is to trivialize the very urgency of the political issues that the canon-busting movement invites us to consider. For such a contention makes it appear that battles that have been bitterly waged in the historical world—and often continue to be waged—have achieved a comparatively easy victory in the realm of literary discourse.

It might also be objected, as a kind of fallback position, that even if I am right about the limited subversiveness of the majority of texts produced in the
bourgeois tradition—or even at its margins—I am misconstruing literature’s relation to ideology when I hold writers accountable for the formulable social views that their texts project. Some, invoking a more traditional distinction between the languages of science and poetry, might maintain that literary discourse is pseudo-statement. Others, calling upon the post-Althusserian description of literary discourse as positioned midway between ideology and ordinary propositional discourse, might declare that literary texts are distanced from the politics they appear to articulate. To hold Emerson as a “subject” accountable for the views he expresses is to miss the point, since what the new scholarship is doing is precisely to demonstrate how subjectivity is constructed by discourse. Rather than affix praise or blame to the formulable politics explicit or implicit in a text, the critic’s task is to reveal how the multiplicity of language continually disrupts ideology as such; indeed, the real subversiveness of literature (and of the criticism that treats it) resides in precisely this antipathy to the confinements of univocal meaning and reference.7

In response to this argument, I would note that it is quite illogical to assert on the one hand that “literary” texts must be understood within the fuller context of contemporaneous discourse, and on the other that there is something distinctive about “literary” language that over turns the text’s apparent commitment to the ideological content it appears to set forth. Indeed, what this argument does is again not to foreground but to bracket—or at least to marginalize once again—the issues of politics and history. For if poets and novelists necessarily become rebellious when they start tangling with literary language, then there must be something intrinsically subversive about literary discourse as such. Politics thus becomes an abiding feature of discourse rather than a historically specific matter of social analysis and intervention. Writers might in their personal lives (which are after all historical lives) adhere to politically retrograde beliefs—for example, Faulkner on the subject of black equality. Nonetheless, when such writers take pen in hand, they become deft interrogators of dominant ideology. Ideological contradiction is thus displaced from within authorial ideology—where I for one think it belongs—and inserted into the epistemological space between literature and ideology (see Eagleton, Macherey, Bennett). Despite its insistence that everything is political, everything textual, then, much of the new scholarship—even in some of its neo-Marxist variants—ends up hypostasizing the realm of the aesthetic as a terrain somehow exempt from the political constraints that ordinarily shape the operations of consciousness. Perhaps Brooks has not, after all, been completely left behind.

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We may now address the implications that this critique of the politics of the new scholarship has for our practice as citizens of the world—and, in particular, as teachers in the universities and colleges of the empire whose troubled situation I touched upon in the opening part of this essay.
There is, I believe, a distinct oppositional potential in the critical movements I have been describing here. In challenging both the makeup of the canon and the values that sustain the canon, we are in a position to subvert key tenets of dominant ideology. We therefore do potentially occupy an adversarial position in relation to the centers of power in American society—centers that are represented, among other places, on the boards of trustees of the colleges and universities that pay our salaries. And while it is our colleagues in the sciences and social sciences who are called upon to do weapons and counterinsurgency research for military escapades in Central America, we should not minimize our importance to ruling-class hegemony. After all, it is our job to furnish—and make compelling, beautiful, and inevitable—views of the human condition that, if they do not glorify, generally justify and permit social inequality and the separation of personal morality from public policy. The humanities, Herbert Marcuse once observed, serve to inure people to their own and others’ want of bread by demonstrating that man does not live by bread alone (109). If we successfully undermine such assumptions, pointing up their specious universalism and ahistoricity, and bringing to our students’ attention entire submerged subcultures that have queried such values, then we pose a threat to ruling-class hegemony.

But if this is the case, why do our boards of trustees generally tolerate—indeed, actively cultivate—our presence? Why, indeed, has the move for integrating race, gender, and class into the curriculum been promoted—over the objection of harshly hostile elements—at major universities such as Duke and Stanford, where the sons and daughters of the wealthy receive their training? This happens, I believe, not because financiers and industrialists shed their crude commercialism when they enter the groves of academe, but because we oppositional scholars by and large make ourselves safe—and because, to some extent at least, the captains of industry actually need us to do much of what we do. I shall now translate my earlier criticisms of the canon-busting movement and the new scholarship into a critique of the political practices, both liberal and neo-Marxist, that they imply.

To begin with, the movement to open up the canon to new voices and traditions is readily enough assimilable to the myth of American democratic pluralism: the melting pot has simply finally made it to the academy. What a celebration it is of “representative” American institutions if female and minority writers now receive “representation” in anthologies and course syllabi! Even if the largest poverty class in the U.S. consists of families headed by single women, and even if millions of unemployed and working-class people of color confront continually worsening prospects for housing and jobs—what a testament the new cultural pluralism is to the “sensitivity” of the leading institutions in our society! My sardonic tone here should not be taken to signify, of course, that I think it negative that such an opening up has occurred. (On the contrary: we should always recall that the decisions about inclusion and exclusion that take place nowadays in the quiet halls of W. W. Norton are the fruits of the very unquiet decisions—and demonstrations—about inclusion and exclusion that took place in other halls some twenty years ago).
My point is simply that, if we really want to "politicize" the study of literature, we should juxtapose Richard Wright's Uncle Tom's Children (1938) with William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! (1936) in a way that fully recognizes the fundamental antipathy between the two. For unless we incorporate a re-creation of social struggle into our presentation of these writers to our students, we are simply perpetuating—and doing nothing at all to subvert—quintessentially logocentric conceptions of the American body politic. Wright and Faulkner are not simply two sides to the democratic coin. The social views articulated in their texts are as irreconcilable now as they were in the 1930s. Any pedagogical strategy that simply juxtaposes them in a pluralistic exploration of literary representations of race and racism violates the motives that prompted both writers to take pen in hand.

By no means, however, are all scholars involved in opening up the canon so conventionally liberal as I have just suggested. Rather than validating the myth of the melting pot, some of the new scholars would claim, they are blasting it open and demonstrating that social life—and discourse—are constituted not by unity and consensus, but by difference, alterity, heterogeneity. Indeed, they would argue, the politics implied by their critical practice is emancipatory, even revolutionary. For they are seeking out pockets of resistance and envisioning social change coming from autonomous groupings of dispersed elements—women, blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, gays—who fashion what Stanley Aronowitz calls a "micropolitics of oppositional movements," or what Felix Guattari calls the "proliferation of marginal groups" that will bring about "molecular revolution" (Aronowitz 123–26; Guattari 268–72).8

Traditional Marxism, according to this analysis, is logocentric and authoritarian, since it posits the primacy of production in determining social relations, situates change in the class struggle rather than in the activities of "interest groups" such as those cited above, and makes the fatal mistake of supposing that a "third term"—revolution—will synthesize and resolve the destructive binary oppositions upon which bourgeois society founds itself, and by means of which it justifies itself. True resistance, in short, can come only from "pockets" that take the "refusal of mastery" as a guiding political principle. If these pockets should turn into phalanxes, much less armies, then the margins would become the center, and logocentric structures of authority would reassert themselves, albeit in a different guise. According to this argument, which is endorsed by a number of feminists and neo-Marxists involved in the new scholarship, to overturn the canon is neither to reaffirm liberal democracy nor to contribute to a class-based movement for social revolution, but rather to carry on rear-guard guerrilla actions that will interrogate hegemonic discourses without superseding or replacing them.9

Such a politics, in my view, amounts to little more than a rewarming of the liberal pluralism I mentioned before, although I know its adherents would strenuously disagree with me. To be sure, many feminists and neo-Marxists are quite correct to point out the "old left"'s fatal failure to understand the centrality of questions of race and gender within the overall class contradiction. And a class-based Marxism need not—indeed should not—seek the eradication of plurality,
which is not the same thing at all as pluralism. But to concede that race and gender cannot simply be collapsed into class does not mean that the class struggle is no longer the main contradiction shaping historical processes. Nor does it mean that provisional coalitions of dispersed and molecular interest groups can successfully confront the powers that be, which have proven themselves remarkably efficient in accommodating—at least rhetorically—demands for cultural self-determination. Indeed, our political experience of the last decade or so reveals that this presumably radical politics of heterogeneity and difference is readily enough absorbed into the conservative pluralism of "E pluribus unum," which celebrates the openness and flexibility of American capitalist democracy while guaranteeing the continuing segregation and subjugation of the great number of its citizens. Interrogation from the margins is kept safely at the margins.

Indeed, in its extreme form this politics of decentering and marginality becomes a politics that actually enshrines impotence as a positive good. For the "refusal of mastery," apparently an act of heroic disengagement from the epistemology that fosters oppression, can lead to a kind of defiant passivity. This passivity may console the conscience of the individual, but it forecloses in advance the possibility of engagement in a praxis that will encounter hegemony on its own turf. The adherents of this refusal of mastery become avatars of Eliot's Fisher King—incapable of determinate action, but by their very presence continually emanating the promise of a redemptive rain that will magically fall from the sky. One might note, indeed, that some practitioners of the new canon-busting scholarship seem actually to relish the continuing existence of ruling-class hegemony, insofar as they take their own marginality as a condition of their scholarly being and conceive of themselves as a kind of loyal opposition. Fearing that should the margins become the center, they would be transformed into sites of a new Power that would be, quâ power, as oppressive as the old, these scholars prefer to engage in skirmishes that never take as their goal the actual reconstruction of textual value and literary tradition—let alone the seizure of power in the society at large—according to a new plan. Better, they counsel, to drop in our lines from the dock behind the gashouse, turn our backs on the devastation of the global wasteland, and restrict ourselves to setting our own lands—demarcated by the new pluralistic geography—in order. What starts out as a radical refusal to engage in the coopting discourse of power can easily enough end up as a resort to the solaces of the word-processor and the conventional prestige rewards of the profession.

I'd like to point out, however, that such questions of how most effectively to oppose the machinations of power are frequently rendered moot—for liberals and neo-Marxists alike—by what I have argued to be the greatest drawback of much of the new scholarship: namely, the tendency to find subversion under every textual bush. For if it is true not only that marginalized texts subvert the established canon, but also that canonical texts subvert the traditional and conservative ideologies that they seem to endorse, then bourgeois ideology—at least when embodied in literary texts—really poses no sort of threat at all. It self-destructs when touched—or, at least, when touched by the poststructuralist critic or pedagogue.
However inadvertently, the scholar who holds such a view of literature actually ends up bolstering bourgeois hegemony. For if literature quâ literature offers, when deconstructed, such a trenchant critique of dominant values, and if it takes the oppositional scholar to point out the full extent of this critique, then what are universities and colleges if not privileged zones where the mysteries of textual subversion can be plumbed? The logic of the new scholarship ought to extend to a critique of those institutions that help to maintain hegemony. But it can actually end up legitimating the hegemonic view that campuses are apolitical centers where disinterested research and pedagogy take place, and, moreover, where the future leaders of society can receive the humanistic enlightenment that will equip them to respond effectively to the discursive plurality—if not the material needs—of the citizenry.

Poststructuralist scholarship thrives on the perception of ironic incongruities. I can think of no more ironic incongruity, however, than the situation of poststructuralist scholars who affirm the latently self-critical capacities of bourgeois culture while their campus administrations are recruiting students for the CIA or training officers to lead working-class G.I.'s into battle in Central America—or, on the more mundane level, preparing the new generation of business leaders to meet the challenge posed by an increasingly multicultural work force. For the view that both literature and criticism subvert and disrupt dominant ideology implies that the discourse carried on in departments that teach these subjects is somehow not complicit with the discourses and operations in which the university as a whole is engaged. Despite its up-to-date post-Saussurean dress, then, and its insistence that literature purveys not sweetness and light but counterhegemonic subversion, much of the new scholarship ends up valorizing literary study on grounds that are hardly unfamiliar. As I noted before, the numbers of both canon-busting scholars and CIA recruiters are increasing on our campuses these days; let us not be content with a conception of either literature or literary study that facilitates a peaceful coexistence between the two.

NOTES

1For a discussion of the problems minority and female writers have encountered with the ideological premises encoded in inherited genres, see, respectively, Reilly and Abel. The definitive treatment of the relation of questions of aesthetic value to the activity of canon revision remains the final chapter of Jane Tompkins's Sensational Designs.

2Similar dynamics and difficulties underlie Deborah McDowell's recent introduction to the reissued edition of Plum Bun:

Plum Bun has the hull but not the core of literary conservatism and convention. . . . It passes for conservative, employing "outworn" and "safe" literary materials while, simultaneously, remaining suspicious of them. . . . Plum Bun dares to explore questions about unconventional female roles and possibilities for development using the very structures
that have traditionally offered fundamentally conservative answers to those questions. Fauet’s answers were risky, in the literary marketplace, but powerful, liberating alternatives nevertheless, both for herself as a writer and for the image of blacks and women in literature. (xxii)

(For this example I am indebted to conversations with Carla Kaplan during our joint explorations of Harlem Renaissance literature in a graduate independent-study course at Northwestern University.) There are abundant examples of these sorts of radical claims in recent feminist scholarship. See also, for example, Lee Edwards, who encounters a dilemma frequently found in works of scholarship that aspire to demonstrate the oppositionality of a submerged tradition in women’s writing. On the one hand, Edwards asserts that her study, unlike Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), finds not “covert reappraisals” of patriarchal domination but “overt and radical attacks” (15). On the other hand, she is forced to conclude that in work after work of nineteenth-century fiction, the female hero ends up a “heroine,” safely reincorporated into the dominant system of patriarchal marriage. I agree that many nineteenth-century novels featuring woman heroes do exhibit this contradiction—and therefore wonder at Edwards’s claim to be discussing works that unequivocally contain “overt and radical attacks.” For a considerably more dialectical assessment of the strengths and limitations of the “cult of domesticity” in nineteenth-century women’s fiction, see Baym, especially 22–50.

3See the final chapter of Foley (Truth), 233–64. For a discussion of ideological reincorporation in Afro-American literature, see Hogue. For a description of the ways in which an excluded cultural tradition develops its own oppositional poetics and countertraditions, see Gates. In stressing the issue of ideological reincorporation, I am not denying that it has been a salutary development in feminist criticism to move from analyses of women’s distorted lives, anxious authorship, and conservative social roles (for instance, Heilbrun) to explorations of their strategies of cultural survival and resistance. I am simply arguing that it is crucial that we not heroize the achievements of victims of oppression in such a way as to end up minimizing the nature and extent of that oppression. What seems to me a very sensible analysis of the relationship between oppositionality and reincorporation is presented in Radway.

4For arguments along similar lines regarding the presumably self-reflexive (and hence antilogocentric and antiauthoritarian) quality of the American literary tradition in its entirety, see Dauber and Riddel. Porter avoids the solipsism of Dauber and Riddel but mistakes the foregrounding of the problem of reification in classic American literature with a radical opposition to that reification.

5For altering views on the extent to which the novel form itself is irrevocably patriarchal, see, on the one hand, Jehlen and Fetterley, and, on the other hand, Tompkins.

6For a valuable critique of the pseudo-oppositionality of the leftist panache accompanying much poststructuralist criticism, see Graff, Meyerson, and Larson. It is important to note, however, that poststructuralism can produce the diametrically opposed claim that literature—or at least narrative—is intrinsically so cooptative as to preclude opposition of any kind, deriving from either authors’ explicit politics or their implicit subject positions. See Davis.

7For an intelligent discussion of literary conventions as carriers of ideology—a discussion that both acknowledges the force of dominant ideology and at the same time allows space for oppositional activity—see Rabinowitz.

8Interestingly, Guattari notes that “it is impossible to make a clear cut distinction
between the fringe ideas that can be recuperated and those that lead down the slippery slope to authentic 'molecular revolutions.' The borderline remains fluid, and fluctuates both in time and place" (269). This argument is similar to Michel Foucault's contention that Power and opposition are often indistinguishable from one another (141).

9See Foley ("Politics") and, for the poststructuralist/ Marxist critique of dialectics, Ryan. Among poststructuralists/Marxists who attempt to retain dialectics as an analytical category, a common operation is to assert the importance of identity rather than struggle within contradiction, and thus to evade the necessity of determining which aspect of the tendencies locked in combat is essence-determining. See, for example, Jameson (281–99), who argues that in both literary texts and social experience, Utopian gratification and ideological manipulation often become virtually indistinguishable from one another. It seems to me crucial for the Marxist critic—for any critic—to make distinctions in this arena.

10For an instance of a critical stance that takes the refusal of mastery as both premise and goal, see Craig Owens's description of Martha Rosler's photographs of the Bowery, in which she purposefully undermines her own authority as photographer in order to impress upon her audience "the indignity of speaking for others" (her words, Owens 69). There is an urgent need for further inquiry into the extent to which such statements articulate not simply an antipathy to hegemonic discourses but also an acknowledged anticommunism, one that conceives of Marxism as a reductionist discourse threatening to engulf all difference not immediately subsumable to class. Until such inquiry is undertaken, there is the continual possibility that current research into the intersections—textual and historical—of race, gender, and class will be inhibited by the assumption that these intersections are merely conjunctural, with the consequence that the last of these categories will, by a curious turn of the wheel, almost automatically be subsumed to either of the former two.

11The extent to which careers are now built around this politics of marginality is exemplified in a 1987 PMLA advertisement that heralded the new collectively written Columbia History of the United States, which presumably embodies much of the new concern with canon-busting. We are told that the new survey is "thoroughly up-to-date in understanding and attitude . . . refreshingly contentious and crammed with bright and bold [scholarship] . . . intellectually challenging and socially and politically provocative." Interestingly, the ad was headed by the following in boldface: "Meet the New Authority."

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