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Essay Review

WHAT'S AT STAKE IN THE CULTURE WARS

BARBARA FOLEY


The term "culture wars" has been much bandied about in recent years, often with an ironic appreciation of its somewhat oxymoronic quality. In comparison with the fighting wars that have been tragically waged in Angola and Bosnia and the trade wars that have fundamentally reconfigured domestic and global economies from China to Mexico, disputes about what literary texts we read, and how we read them, may seem trivial. The three books under review remind us, however, that culture wars are not as far removed from wars of blood and money as we might think.

Recovering American Literature, by Peter Shaw, who is described in the publisher's release as "a founder and current chairman of the National Association of Scholars" (NAS), claims to plumb the depths of American literature and salvage its complexity from the shallow dogmatism of its leftist critics. Shaw's readings of various American classics, while purporting to transcend politics, reveal that for him nothing less than respect for the law, the family, and the nation is at stake in how we read our national literature. Gerald Graff's Beyond the Culture Wars proposes that disputes over canonicity and the politics of interpretation, rather than vitiating literary study, can revitalize United States higher education. Implicit in Graff's optimism is a belief that the academic negotiating table can be the site of a productive debate currently precluded by the doctrinal and tactical sectarianism
of both right and left, who prefer to grind axes rather than talk out their differences. John Guillory's *Cultural Capital* contextualizes the culture wars by examining the dilemma the humanities face in an economy where literary texts—of whatever kind, read in whatever way—no longer constitute a necessary form of "cultural capital" for the bourgeoisie. For Guillory, the culture wars constitute a liberal ideological diversion—a "displacement of the political" (p. 11)—which inhibits recognition that the terrain of culture has shifted along with that of capital. Despite their divergent assumptions—and still more divergent prescriptions for change—these texts thus, to one degree or another, all envision the culture wars as either symptomatic reflections or performative articulations of larger crises facing the body politic.

Before I comment on *Recovering American Literature*, a few remarks on its author and his allegiances are in order. Shaw, who retired early from his professorship at SUNY-Stony Brook and is now listed with the Modern Language Association (MLA) as an independent scholar, has authored *The Character of John Adams* (1976), *American Patriots and the Rituals of Revolution* (1981), and, most recently, *The War against the Intellect: Episodes in the Decline of Discourse* (1989)—a collection of polemical critiques of contemporary literary criticism previously published in various neoconservative journals. One of Lynne Cheney's appointees to the National Council of the Humanities, the advisory board to the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), Shaw has declared that "'second-rate traditionalist scholarship is ultimately more valuable to the country than first-rate feminist works.'" As a conservative on the board, he has "been forced to vote for excellent proposals in fields of scholarship that he feels are destructive to the country"; offering a sweeping solution to this personal dilemma, he has "raised eyebrows recently with suggestions that the government should not support the humanities endowment."1 A harsh critic of student anti-war activists at Stony Brook, Shaw has long been a participant in neoconservative activities. He was a featured speaker at a 1992 Heritage Foundation Leadership

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Conference and recently became editor of *Academic Questions*, the official journal of the NAS.

Ellen Messer-Davidow has traced the NAS’s genealogy and sources of support:

The NAS, which took its current title in 1987, evolved from a predecessor organization called the Coalition for Campus Democracy, which was founded in 1982 under the auspices of the right-wing Committee for the Free World and the IEA [Institute for Educational Affairs], whose associates were neo-conservatives Irving Kristol, Midge Decter, Elliott Abrams, and William Simon, current president of the Olin Foundation. The NAS is, as the Coalition was, led by Stephen Balch and Herbert London and funded by right-wing foundations. . . . For FY 1991–92, it estimated revenues of $682,830 from [Harry] Bradley, [Adolph] Coors, [John M.] Olin, [Sara] Scaife, Smith Richardson, Joyce, Madison Center, and anonymous donors.

While Messer-Davidow points out that some NAS chapters were “founded by nonacademic political conservatives,” it bears noting that NAS boasts of a steadily increasing membership—it passed the 3,000 mark in September 1993—and has a growing base among mainstream academics. For example, Lawrence Lipking, a literary scholar not routinely associated with the academic right, addressed the 1994 NAS Convention. No longer devoting its meetings primarily to “rehashing war stories about political correctness,” the “new” NAS was recently covered favorably in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which highlighted the attraction the NAS holds for “increasingly diverse voices” in the academy.2

The NAS declares itself an advocate of “reasoned scholarship in a free society.” “Only through an informed understanding of the Western intellectual heritage and the realities of the contemporary world,” the organization declares, “can citizen and scholar be equipped to sustain our civilization’s achievements.” Since it is “deeply concerned about the widening currency within the academy of perspectives which reflexively denigrate the values and institutions of our society,” the NAS urges “a renewed assertiveness among academics” who recognize that such perspectives “are often dogmatic in character and indifferent to both logic and evidence.” The NAS’s positions on a number of issues indicate, however, that its presumably disinterested fight

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against dogmatism targets distinct social groups. For example, while acknowledging that charges of sexual harassment are occasionally justified, NAS President Stephen Balch, in the association's newsletter, worries that "investigations of alleged sexual harassment can provide a pretext for engaging in the ideological persecution of persons whose views are out of favor." Ridiculing the harassment complaints of women students who charge professors with creating a sexist classroom atmosphere, Balch concludes, "What we are witnessing . . . is the transformation of a clear behavioral offense into a ubiquitous 'thought crime' and the substitution of psychological manipulation for rational discussion." Similarly, attacking the notion that "diversity proclaims proportional outcomes to be of inherent educational value, and not merely a measure temporarily required to undo past wrongs," Balch asserts that "the university is inescapably hierarchical" according to a "stratification . . . unlikely to display ethnic or gender proportionality." Those faculty members among "diversity's beneficiaries" who "arrive on campus as both the representative and champions of 'oppressed' groups" have not, according to Balch, "[won] their positions competitively"; hence "they are far more likely to be of an activist disposition, aspiring to make the university into an exemplary egalitarian community." "Logic and evidence," it would appear, are systematically abused only by certain sectors of the population.3

The NAS does more than proclaim positions, however; it uses its membership muscle and financial backing to influence national policy on a variety of issues. In November 1993 the NAS sent a delegation to meet with then newly elected NEH president Sheldon Hackney to "stress the importance of maintaining the agency's commitment to rigorous scholarship in both its public pronouncements and grant-making processes, and the need to ensure that under the guise of promoting 'cutting edge' research proposals were not vetted according to political tests." In September 1994, moreover, the NAS helped inaugurate the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics (ALSC), a conservative competitor to the MLA that numbered 300 at its founding and aimed to grow to 2,000 within its first year. Among its early joiners were E. D. Hirsch, Denis Donoghue, John Hollander, Richard Poirier, and Ralph Rader. Above all, it is members of the California branch of the NAS—Cal State–Hayward professor Glynn Custred and California Association of Scholars head Thomas

Wood—who are spearheading a national move to abolish affirmative action and, in Custred's words, "restore true color-blind fairness in the United States." Small but by no means marginal, the NAS is organizing a significant movement among bona fide academics which is shaping U.S. institutions in far-reaching ways. And that movement is by no means benign. It is clear from its rhetoric that the NAS sees itself engaged in a war. Balch's editorial in a recent newsletter speaks of the necessity of adopting a "strategy of indirection" against the "strongholds" and "citadels" of the "postmodernist" foe: "If one cannot easily overthrow, one can still encircle, isolate, demoralize, and wear away. Avoiding the chief sectarian bastions, one can nonetheless progressively diminish their influence over the surrounding countryside."

No doubt many will think it peculiar, even inappropriate, to preface a book review with the sorts of observations I have been making here. In calling attention to the political affiliations of its author, I am not claiming that the arguments of _Recovering American Literature_ are reducible to these affiliations; like any text, Shaw's deserves to be read on its own terms. But I write at a time—a few months after the 1994 midterm elections and the Republicans' first-phase implementation of their "Contract with America"—when neoconservative forces are dictating national policy on a wide range of issues—immigration, welfare "reform," education, criminal justice, affirmative action. In advocating and furthering the cause of this triumphant right, the National Association for Scholars has played—and will doubtless continue to play—a significant role.

Surely it is no coincidence that the Madison Center, which contributes funds to the NAS, has supported on sixty-seven campuses seventy conservative student newspapers—the most notorious being the _Dartmouth Review_—and financed hundreds of student internships with conservative magazines and journals. Nor is it pure coincidence that Bradley, Olin, Scaife, and Smith Richardson, which substantially support the NAS, also support the Center for Individual Rights (CIR), a legal foundation that has, among its projects, carried forward the litigation of NAS board of directors member and CUNY professor Michael Levin, who has written that "blacks, on the aver-
age, are less intelligent than whites,’ ” stood up for “the right of storekeepers to refuse service to blacks,” and proclaimed that “blacks and whites should have separate cars in the New York City subway system.”

Nor, again, can it be sheer coincidence that the empire of beer magnate Adolph Coors, another NAS supporter, has contributed substantially to the eugenicist Pioneer Fund, which generously financed much of the “research” cited in Charles Murray’s and Richard Herrnstein’s pseudoscientific tract The Bell Curve, as well as to FAIR, one of the moving forces behind the “Save Our State” movement that succeeded in getting Proposition 187 passed in the 1994 California election. To ignore the connections among Peter Shaw the literary critic, the NAS, the NAS’s backers, and the recent drive to the right is willfully to close our eyes to what is going on around us. In this context, Recovering American Literature is not just a text, but itself an event.5

Shaw criticizes much post-1960s scholarly commentary on American literature for attempting to impose left-wing political doctrine on classic texts. Contemporary leftist critics, Shaw claims, substitute “political certainty” for the “metaphysical doubt” analyzed and valorized by such 1950s and 1960s critics as Richard Chase, Harold Kaplan, and Marius Bewley. By contrast with their forebears who engaged in “objective teaching,” “proselytizing” contemporary critics have discovered in American literature “an outright assault on specific failings of American society: racism, sexism, homophobia, economic exploitation, class oppression, and imperialism. The literature’s preoccupations, this is to say, exactly matched those of academic radicalism from the 1960s to the present” (pp. 13, 58). Yet these same radical critics also apparently “express resentment and dismay when authors fail to see things their way in the first place.” The post-1960s critics thus “present the spectacle of a national literature that stands condemned on aesthetic and moral grounds by the very people who have chosen to devote their professional lives to it” (p. 15). By failing openly to acknowledge his own political agenda, however, Shaw refuses to engage his opponents’ left-of-center politics directly but in-

stead complains that these politics necessarily distort their object of study. This sleight of hand leads him into a logical contradiction: recent criticism both forces American literature into the procrustean bed of an anachronistic political correctness and repudiates that same literature for not conforming to left-wing values.

Shaw is, in a limited sense, right: some recent criticism of classic American literature does discover subversion in improbable places; still other efforts impose anachronistic standards of ethical evaluation. But his claims are confusing because his larger position does not allow him to acknowledge that a wide spectrum of opinion characterizes current readings of American literature: to Shaw, any controversy among contemporary literary scholars is pseudo-controversy. Granting that feminist critics of The Scarlet Letter have disagreed vehemently about whether the text is "protofeminist" or "phallocentric," Shaw concludes that "these disagreements never really produced a debate" since "[t]he question of where Hawthorne stood was overshadowed by that of where his readers should stand," a point on which "feminists entertained no doubts" (p. 37). Similarly, Shaw contends that contemporary critics "offer conflicting interpretations" of the doublon in Moby-Dick but "refrain from arguing about these inasmuch as they agree fundamentally that, one way or another, some kind of aspersion on America, and particularly on capitalism, is involved" (p. 67). (Analogous points about the nondebate presumably surrounding Billy Budd, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and The Bostonians are also set forth [pp. 93, 119, 136–37].) When various scholars associated with new critical methods make points with which Shaw happens to agree (such as New Historicist Larry J. Reynolds's contention that Melville reacted conservatively to the revolutions of 1848 [p. 70], or my own Marxist-based objection that contemporary critics find radical oppositionality under too many bourgeois textual bushes [p. 14]), they are treated as anomalies rather than as intellectuals engaged in dialogue with their peers over what it means to do "political" criticism.

By Shaw's own account, it is apparent that the range of contemporary interpretations of classic American texts is at least as wide as that offered by critics in his Cold War–era golden age. What Shaw cannot stomach are the various politically left-of-center values some critics now espouse: he resists being positioned as the implied reader of recent feminist, neo-Marxist, and New Historicist critical discourse. Again, fair enough, some might say. Rather than acknowledging his own politics as a component of his response, however, Shaw invokes
idealistic and abstract notions of aesthetic value, contending that the explicit endorsement of egalitarian political values in recent criticism in and of itself violates the "integrity of the literary object" (p. 20). Needless to say, he fails to acknowledge that the 1950s and 1960s valorization of metaphysical doubt is in its way as political (and, moreover, was in its time as "politically correct") as the current enshrinement of emancipatory discourses along the lines of gender, race, and class.

Shaw is not, however, simply fighting a rearguard action from a stance of honest aestheticism. The critical terminology and alternative textual interpretations offered in Recovering American Literature reveal that Shaw's reading lenses are as colored as anyone else's. First, we should be aware that Shaw routinely deploys a rhetoric inherited from the discourse of anti-communism. Recent "politicizing critics" are said to "stifle deviationism" (p. 17); "free discussion" is "stifled by a new, radical orthodoxy" (p. 19); critics of The Scarlet Letter, "unable to think in any but the unliterary language of either/or," can only "ideologically interrogate" the text (p. 41). When Henry Nash Smith in 1956 changed his position on various issues articulated in his earlier Virgin Land (1950), he "[e]xpress[ed] himself in the party-line language of someone who has just emerged from a reeducation camp" (p. 18). James critic Charles Anderson revised his estimate of The Bostonians's Basil Ransom "as though under the eye of a censor" (p. 134); critic Alfred Habegger, "when the cultural winds shifted," was "obliged to purge himself far more radically than Anderson" (p. 135). Today's radical critics are also accused of puritanism (p. 38) and humorlessness (p. 126)—reliable old arrows in the quiver of anti-communism. Apparently Shaw hopes to vanquish his foes with the bugbear of a shadowy, unnamed Stalinism. As in much neoconservative rhetoric addressing the multiculturalist Enemy Within (which seems to have arisen as the Evil Empire fell) anti-communist trope substitutes for—indeed, to use Shaw's favored term, "stifles"—argument.

In his discussion of the critical treatment of race in Huck Finn, Shaw resurrects another standard red-baiting ploy. It is only white critics of Twain's novel who are upset with the characterization of Jim and who have "expressed a need to declare America a failure," announces Shaw. "For black critics [here black critic Charles Nichols presumably stands in for his entire cohort] Huckleberry Finn remained a work that 'reaffirms the values of our democratic faith'" (p. 122). Not only does Shaw substantially distort the range of opin-
ions—some vehemently condemnatory of Twain’s racism—that have characterized the black response to *Huck Finn* over time;\(^6\) he also invokes a stale old rhetoric aimed at white radicals that—whether applied to abolitionists, carpetbaggers, or communists—has historically blamed racial disturbances on outside agitators: we all got along fine on the plantation until y’all came along.

While much of Shaw’s anti-communism emerges rhetorically rather than substantively, in places he brings in the red bogeyman directly. In support of his argument that the “central concern” of *The Scarlet Letter* is “precisely with the warping effects of ideology,” Shaw offers as a “rough analogue” to Hawthorne’s text a description of a putative novel by a “Russian Hawthorne” about a businessman arrested for the “crime of speculation.” Shaw’s synopsis of this bizarre tale is worth quoting at length:

The victim might well feel innocent yet at the same time suffer from guilt at violating the socialist norm which all around him is supported with a piety as intense as Puritan righteousness. . . . The Russian Hawthorne telling this tale would want to concentrate not on his Hester’s innocence but on the train of unhappy results following from committing the crime of speculation. At some point this Hawthorne might have his character somehow manage to come to America and there find sympathy for his pain and suffering. After a time, though, his denunciations of the Soviet Union, with which all agree, might well come to seem obtrusive. This victim would prove to be one of those whose personality has been “withered” by his martyrdom. In the end he could, like Hester after her sojourn in England, return to his country, now grown sympathetic to his point of view. Yet once there he would sense that the effects on him of his fate have rendered him ineligible to be the one who will lead his fellows to a better dispensation, and he puts his faith in a more generalized, spiritual renewal of society. [Pp. 45–46]

The point of this post-Soviet parable would not be “criticism of the defunct communist system,” Shaw states, but more generally “the warping effects of ideology” (p. 46). His very decision to reconstruct Hester Prynne as an avatar of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, however—as well as his throwaway comment that presumably “all agree” with this character’s “denunciations” of the Soviet Union—clearly signal Shaw’s larger political agenda. More than serving as an analogy, Shaw’s “text” tells its own tale. Even though he purportedly introduces the fictional example to demonstrate the transhistorical nature of Hawthorne’s ethical parable, he reinforces, indeed presupposes, a

historically specific—and unambiguously anti-communist—interpretation of the Soviet experience.

Shaw again raises the issue of communism directly in his discussion of *Billy Budd*. His principal argument is that the ironic or “resistance” reading of the novella, which posits Vere as villain and Billy as victim, belies the overwhelming textual and extratextual evidence for the “plain sense” reading that Melville, however reluctantly, endorsed the actions of the authoritarian Vere. In the midst of this argument, however, Shaw inserts a lengthy, anomalous discussion of a debate over *Billy Budd* found in Lionel Trilling’s anti-Stalinist novel *The Middle of the Journey*. Shaw particularly focuses on a “liberal-progressive, fellow-travelling” character who uses Vere’s example to defend the exercise of state power in the Soviet purge trials: “When it comes to apologizing for executions by the state, Trilling is pointing out, the same liberal mind that professes an absolute dedication to Spirit has provided the world with examples of willing acquiescence and even unsolicited apologetics for the murder of innocent spirits committed for reasons of state” (p. 92). It seems not to matter that Trilling’s “fellow-traveller,” by appropriating Vere’s authoritarianism, dissociates herself from the tradition of “resistance” readings that Shaw sees reaching its apotheosis in recent leftist criticism of Melville’s tale. Nor does it seem to matter that the stance of Trilling’s “fellow-traveller” is, by a peculiar turn of the ideological wheel, in fact logically compatible with Shaw’s own pro-law-and-order reading of the text. Nor indeed does it seem to matter that, in espousing the “plain sense” reading and repudiating the “resistance” reading—which is built on an appreciation of Melville’s irony—Shaw abandons the aesthetic valuation of ambiguity and depth that guided his Cold War–era mentors. Shaw is apparently willing, in other words, to sacrifice the consistency of his own argument when the opportunity arises to tar contemporary criticism with the brush of Stalinism. Although at various points in *Recovering American Literature* Shaw joyfully proclaims the demise of communism, he apparently feels it can do no harm to give the dead horse a few more whacks.

In *Recovering American Literature*, Shaw espouses one set of literary standards but in effect practices another. He claims to stand for disinterested appreciation rather than ax-grinding critique, depth rather than surface, aesthetics rather than politics. But Shaw’s opportunistic embrace of New Critical values does not inhibit his discovery of some fairly explicitly formulable—and, not coincidentally, conservative—doctrines at the core of the texts he discusses. In *The Scarlet
Letter, Shaw opines, “Hawthorne’s Puritans are fundamentally right when they intolerantly and perversely associate Hester’s sin of adultery with all other sin,” since “all violations of norms are linked” (p. 44). Billy Budd, he argues, is replete with “negative implications for democracy” insofar as Melville “suggest[s] that a kind of iron necessity in human affairs renders permanent the law’s built-in insensitivity to the essence of the individual” (pp. 96–98). The “resistance critics” who “unnecessarily deny the plain sense of Billy Budd . . . succeed in illuminating only their own willingness to distort literature in the interests of repudiating authority” (p. 99). In The Bostonians, the heterosexual love story between Ransom and Verena, which displaces Verena’s implied lesbian relation with Olive, shows that “nature has its way.” By denying that Ransom’s “aggressive male role” enacts a “courtship ritual virtually universal in the animal kingdom,” the novel’s feminist characters “do not find an acceptable outcome insofar as they or their sponsors happen to be at odds with biology” (pp. 142, 143, 148). Both feminist characters and feminist critics, it would seem, are defeated by sociobiology. The humorless politicizing critics of Huck Finn refuse to see that Tom Sawyer (who keeps the freed Jim imprisoned for fun) is “foolishly romantic,” that Silas Phelps (who leads the party that hunts Jim down) is “kindly” and “selfless,” and that the novel is “really” about not slavery but “a larger conception of freedom” (p. 112). (No doubt the NAS’s pursuit of “color-blind fairness” through the destruction of affirmative action is also part of this pursuit of a “larger conception of freedom.”) Whether conceded as tragic necessity or embraced as natural fact, the subtext of classic American literature is, for Shaw, family values, the rule of law, male dominance, and white beneficence.

Shaw directs his polemic against the motley grouping of Marxists, feminists, deconstructionists, and New Historicists he loosely terms “contemporary critics,” but he does not speak to them. These critics, he asserts—in quite an extraordinary equation of aesthetics and politics—“explicitly repudiate” the “rules of literary discourse” “just as they do nature” (p. 149). The feminist commentators on The Bostonians, for example, reveal the vastness of “the divide separating [the novel’s] old and new critics.” “It is difficult to imagine,” Shaw concludes, “how critics might once again find common ground on which to disagree” (p. 150). Shaw’s implied audience in Recovering American Literature consists not of the “rule-breakers” but of those faint-hearted apostates from the conservative cause who have caved in to the pressure of the left orthodoxy, those “older, traditional critics,”
that is, who have "remained silent or acquiescent" and have "blandly treat[ed] the "radical revisionists" as "serving a literary movement fundamentally no different from any other" (p. 16). Hence Shaw's ire at Michael Colacurcio, who in the 1980s repudiated his earlier reading of The Scarlet Letter as supporting "the world's law" (p. 35), and at James M. Cox, who, in his 1985 re-reading of Huck Finn, "plac[ed] the word freedom in quotation marks" and "went as far in his denunciation of America as any of the younger critics who had come to dominate criticism in the eighties" (p. 120). Just as the target of Prof-scam and Tenured Radicals—diatribes by Shaw's fellow neoconservatives Roger Sykes and Roger Kimball, respectively—is not so much the radicals themselves as the cowards who have granted them tenure, the audience to whom Recovering American Literature is pitched consists of conservatism's traitors: those who know better but have abandoned the field.7

By retreating in the face of the leftist onslaught, indeed, the older generation of traditional critics have betrayed not just literature but—here's the rub—the nation itself. For it is only by "retaining literary status" that American classics have "usefulness as a national literature" (p. 20). Shaw's putative formalism here comes full circle with his patriotism. To defend classic works of American literature from "politicized" readings that interrogate these texts' implication in sexism, racism, and capitalism is to defend the United States from its naysayers and detractors. The "rules of literary discourse" are on the side of the nation favored by nature's God.

Gerald Graff, in Beyond the Culture Wars, proffers an invitation to all participants in the culture wars to drop their weapons and come to the negotiating table; his is a classic swords-into-ploughshares argument. This is not to say that Graff pretends to be an entirely neutral observer upon the academic combat; indeed, he is a founding member of Teachers for a Democratic Culture (TDC), an organization established in the late 1980s largely to counter the blistering attacks launched by the right—in particular, the NAS—against the Modern Language Association. Graff has written that Shaw is an "ignoramus" whose polemics reveal that "he doesn't have any understanding of

7Lazere ("Political Correctness," p. 335), reports that Olin and the IEA funded Kimball's Tenured Radicals.
[the new fields]." Nonetheless, Graff has put his money where his mouth is, spreading his gospel about "teaching the conflicts" not only to liberal intellectuals at MLA seminars but also to participants in NAS conferences. He is genuinely committed to getting all parties, even Shaw, to the table.

Graff registers more irritation with the right than the left for distorting the relation of literature to politics and foreclosing debate. He recapitulates in some detail the "great Color Purple hoax," in which one academic's speculative—and, Graff documents, highly inaccurate—statement that Walker's novel was taught more frequently than Shakespeare's plays was seized upon by Dinesh D'Souza and other right-wing culture warriors, who turned speculation into anecdote, anecdote into a statistic, and a statistic into a universal claim that "universities [are] expelling Homer, Aristotle, Shakespeare, and other 'white males' from their required reading list" (p. 17). Moreover, Graff comments upon the inconsistency in the right's definition of what is "political": "Change is political, but keeping things as they are is not" (p. 164). Former Secretary of Education William Bennett and his allies, in Graff's view, "have no strategy for dealing with cultural and educational conflict except to deny its legitimacy" (p. 43). Furthermore, while denying their historical indebtedness to the nationalism that, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, enabled English departments to introduce "modern" U.S. literature into the university curriculum, the contemporary cultural right cloaks itself in an "Americanism" based on exclusion and elitism. When women authors and those from racial minorities are proposed for admission to the canon, their advocates "are reproved for replacing literary value with politics and demographic clout." Graff trenchantly concludes, "It is a classic case of pulling the ladder up behind us once we have made it ourselves" (pp. 155–56).

Graff's attitude toward the cultural left is, however, ambivalent. On the one hand, he defends contemporary theory against the right-wing charge that it "reduce[s] literary works to transparent expressions of ideology" by noting—correctly, I think—that the most powerful and influential of recent theories argue that literature is a scene of contra-

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9According to Henson and Philpott ("Right Declares War," p. 14), Olin funded D'Souza's Illiberal Education "to the tune of $150,000—spending $100,000 on D'Souza's research fellowship at the American Enterprise Institute, another $30,000 funneled through the IEA in 1988, and $20,000 to the MCEA [Madison Center] to promote the book" (p. 14).
dictions that cannot be subsumed under any ‘totalizing’ ideology” (p. 31). Moreover, in an imagined faculty lounge encounter in which a young feminist professor (YFP) and her older, male colleague (OMP) debate how to read and evaluate “Dover Beach,” Graff allows the former to score more—and more interesting—points. On the other hand, however, Graff is impatient with practitioners of a “pedagogy of the oppressed” who, he says, “never sto[p] to ask what is to be done with those teachers and students who do not wish to be radical-ized.” He is skeptical of cultural studies, which he characterizes as a covert “leftist studies,” and complains that “it can[not] live up to its democratic pretensions . . . if it excludes everyone from its orbit who does not already agree with leftist postulates about the political nature of culture” (p. 169). This formulation makes it clear that “democ- racy” is, for Graff, situated in a middle ground that both right and left periodically invade. “Democracy” is thus defined not as a function of determinate politics and social practices but as a zone in which all varieties of politics and practices can be debated without regard for their origins or consequences.

The crisis facing the humanities today, in Graff’s view, consists not in the mutual antagonism of right and left but in the boredom and mystification of the student body. Most undergraduates in U.S. universities are, he claims, likely to be alienated as much by the left’s subversive as by the right’s complacent discourse as long as both remain irrelevant to students’ immediate concerns and are couched in incomprehensible jargon. Relating his own undergraduate experience in studying *Huck Finn*, Graff remarks that he became interested in the book only when he learned that critics deeply disagreed about the meaning and value of the novel’s ending: investigating that debate encouraged him for the first time to grapple critically with literary interpretation and evaluation. Rather than hobbling critical inquiry, the current culture wars, if they can only be moved off the battlefield and into the academic arena, represent, for Graff, not a disability but the best available means of reviving humanistic study. ¹⁰

There is much that is appealing in Graff’s proposed scenario. His description of a class in which *Heart of Darkness* is taught neither as an expression of man’s timeless confrontation with evil (which just

happens to be represented by black people), nor as a univocal reflection of colonialist racism, but as the object of a debate between these viewpoints is exciting and instructive. Any of us who has gone through the exercise of teaching multiple approaches to literary texts knows how energized students can be by the challenge of adjudicating the power of different arguments that draw upon the same text for evidence. Thus Graff’s proposal that faculty members intellectually and politically committed to divergent critical perspectives publicly debate their differences is one that all of us should take seriously. We would be removed from the self-created ghettos of our own classrooms and forced to confront opposing views and interpretations; our students, watching us defend our views and contest those of our colleagues, would learn how to explore their own lines of inquiry and argument. As pedagogy, Graff’s recommendation is eminently sensible, if, we might admit, a trifle intimidating.

Graff writes with wit and elegance, and Beyond the Culture Wars, like all Graff’s other books, has much to teach us. One thing that bothers me about Graff’s proposed truce in the culture wars, however, is that, despite its many references to a left and a right, it does not adequately acknowledge the links between progressive and reactionary social movements and the academic discourses that articulate them. When YFP notes that “Dover Beach” reinforces traditional sexism, she is not just taking a position in a scholarly discussion but insisting that how one reads Arnold’s poem affects how one behaves in the world. Itself a product of a mass movement against women’s subordination, YFP’s stance entails advocacy of one type of praxis and repudiation of another. Similarly, Graff underestimates the importance of the cultural right’s well-heeled conservative supporters. He makes passing reference to the NAS’s funding from the Olin Foundation, but more to cite the inconsistency of the right’s claim to political neutrality than to examine what it means to have national cultural policies shaped by an organization that expends some $55 million a year on grants described as “‘intended to strengthen the economic, political, and cultural institutions . . . upon which private enterprise is based.’” Graff may have some success—I sincerely hope that he does—in bringing his message about “teaching the conflicts” to that same group the NAS is trying to reach—namely, those traditional scholars who have retreated to the sidelines rather than defend their turf against perceived threats from the “politicized” younger generation. Graff will not reach a hard-core neoconservative ideologue like Shaw, however, who as early as 1979 had concluded that the possibility of a “reformation in literary thinking” was “all but hopeless.” The NAS
leadership have no interest in coming to the negotiating table; for them—I hope I do not sound too apocalyptic—the war is a crusade against the infidel, and no quarter will be given.11

I am also disturbed somewhat by Graff’s tendency to idealize the university as the site for negotiations. He calls for “teaching the conflicts” because he sees “controversy [as] the life and soul of a democratic intellectual institution” (p. 136). This formulation seems to me vastly to underestimate the extent to which academics working in capitalist universities are less disinterested seekers of truth than petty bourgeois entrepreneurs who gain status, honoraria, book contracts, and salary increments by investing their modest assets in a portfolio—sometimes diverse, sometimes concentrated—of critical enterprises. While their ideas take on exchange value in the intellectual marketplace, this marketplace fosters not so much debate as territoriality and profiteering.12 Moreover, the role of the university in society at large is, arguably, to perpetuate, not dispel, inequality insofar as institutions of higher education engage in a complex credentialing process that separates skilled from unskilled, thus reinforcing social hierarchy. Graff’s proposal that universities function as centers for preserving and promoting democracy is thus somewhat utopian, for it takes at face value the university’s idealized representation of itself rather than critiquing it as a site of privilege. While Graff clearly disagrees with Shaw’s analysis of what has “gone wrong” with the contemporary academy, in many ways he shares Shaw’s view of it as a place where “objective learning” rather than “proselytizing” should take place. That Shaw’s own rhetoric is undermined by his neoconservative political subtext would, for Graff, probably suggest not the futility of their shared idea of the university but simply Shaw’s own failure to live up to this idea.

One of the great virtues of John Guillory’s Cultural Capital is that it purveys few illusions about the contemporary bourgeois university. For Guillory, literary study is threatened with marginalization, indeed has already been largely marginalized, not because it has sent litera-


ture through the wringer of politics, or because it has been torn apart
by dissension between left and right, but because it has experienced
what he calls "capital flight in the domain of culture" (p. 46). Building
upon Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital as the fund of
knowledge necessary to guarantee the elite their continued domi-
nance, Guillory argues that, in the latter part of the twentieth cen-
tury, the only meaningful cultural capital is professional/technological
knowledge. Whereas in the past the legitimacy of aristocratic and
bourgeois ruling classes was shored up by their possession of the skills
needed to appropriate their cultures' sets of holy texts, at present the
skills required for maintaining social status have shifted to the realm
of technology. Alvin Gouldner's "new technobureaucratic class" alone
possesses the intellectual means of production requisite for securing
bourgeois hegemony. Divisive debates over what literary texts we
read are essentially irrelevant to the larger forces shaping the context
in which reading takes place.

Guillory supports his position with a trenchant analysis of the forms
taken by cultural capital in past and present Western societies. From
the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the emergence of compet-
ing canonical forms—poetry, literature as vernacular "polite letters,"
and literature as "imaginative" writing—mediated the shifting inter-
relations between aristocracies and emergent bourgeoisies. In the
mid twentieth century, the New Critical definition of literary lan-
guage as difficult language served not only to exclude the more pop-
ulist strains of modernism but also to secure the interests of the uni-
versity, which used the comprehension of a "literary" dialect beyond
the ken of the untutored masses as a crucial means of credentialing
the elite it produced. At present, however, neither acquaintance with
holy texts nor the ability to decode literary language contributes to
power and status: the humanities are in crisis because their former
rationale has all but eroded. The supersession of literary interpreta-
tion by "theory"—at least at the graduate level of study—thus repre-
sents, for Guillory, an effort by literary scholars to replicate the pre-
sumed rigor and scientism of technobureaucratic discourse.
Deconstruction's opposition to the logocentric humanism of the uni-
versity—where it was in fact nurtured—is thus a pretense: sympto-
matic rather than substantive, contemporary literary theorists' attacks
on traditional exegetical literary study simply reflect their own impli-
cation in the larger social forces and historical developments that
have exported cultural capital to another zone.

The debate over canonicity that occupies so many contemporary
literary scholars is therefore, in Guillory’s view, a red herring. “Non-canonical” texts are not necessarily subversive, Guillory argues, nor, more crucially, do they necessarily constitute a body any more coherent than do the “canonical” texts to which they are opposed: the “equation of all minority writers as ‘noncanonical’ brings their social identities into ontological correspondence, and equates their works as the expression of analogous experiences of marginalization” (p. 11). If canon-busting critics overestimate the subversiveness of so-called noncanonical writers, then, they erroneously dismiss Western culture as “unified and monolithic” (p. 47), whereas it is in fact fissured, contradictory, and at times highly critical of the society that it represents. In contemporary left discourse, Guillory complains, the value of “canonical” texts—that is, their value as bearers of cultural capital—has been simplistically conflated with the values encoded in them. “[I]t has become surprisingly difficult,” he concludes, “to define a progressive political rationale for the teaching of canonical texts” (p. 21). What we read has supplanted the politically more important issue of how we read.

Guillory’s study very usefully places the culture wars in the larger context of capitalist institutional development. The notion that debates over canonicity may be rendered moot by the migration of cultural capital away from all literary texts, canonical and noncanonical alike, is sobering indeed. Moreover, Guillory’s central proposition—that both theory’s pretension to deconstruct the bourgeois subject and multiculturalism’s aspiration to celebrate alternative subjects bear a conciliatory rather than an oppositional relation to contemporary capitalism—is a crucial materialist intervention in contemporary debates. Guillory astutely queries the “leftness” of a critical program that devotes itself almost exclusively to the democratization of the object of consumption while largely ignoring the more compelling question of the conditions—demographic, historical, political—under which texts, and readings of texts, are produced.

In his zeal to take the wind out of the sails of the liberal multiculturalists, however, Guillory oversimplifies—indeed, cavalierly dismisses—some of the issues at stake in the culture wars. For one thing, as Recovering American Literature copiously attests, it is simply not the case that literary progressives have characterized “Western culture” as monolithic and reactionary. Guillory would seem to be basing his version of the anti-canonical position upon the now notorious Stanford University student chant of some years ago, “Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Civ has got to go.” But it is precisely the fact that The
Scarlet Letter, Huck Finn, and Billy Budd are frequently read as radical criticisms of American capitalist society that gets Shaw's back up. Guillory, who as a professor at Yale should know better, seems himself to have bought into the "great Color Purple hoax."

While overlooking the substantial contributions of critics who have attempted to explore exactly those cracks and fissures in canonical texts that he says we should examine, Guillory also dismisses—unfairly, in my view—the critics who do subject canonical texts to rigorous "politicized" scrutiny. Complaining that a "politically progressive reading" is now assumed to "consist of exposing the hegemonic values of canonical works," Guillory charges that "liberal pluralist critique . . . has found its way back to what was once considered to be a 'vulgar' Marxism." According to Guillory, the error in this "rediscovery of 'reflection theory' is determined by the internal logic of pluralism itself, by its theory of representation as reflection, as image" (p. 21). In other words, Guillory equates the liberal identity politics that would evaluate a text according to the positiveness or negativity of its representation of a given social group with the Marxist advocacy of a "reflectionist" mimesis. But the category of reflection in Marxist aesthetics is—as its impassioned advocate Georg Lukács repeatedly pointed out—much more complicated, stipulating not positive "role models" but the dialectical grasp of totality as the goal of representation. Guillory's unexplained use of the tag "vulgar Marxism" warns off would-be reflectionists from engaging in political commentary.

For the consequence of Guillory's dismissal of reflection theory is the occlusion of ideology critique: canonical texts are presumably too complex to be evaluated for the adequacy—or inadequacy—of their correspondence to something we might call "reality." Apparently aesthetic doctrines—whether the conception of literature as "polite letters," the New Critical valorization of opacity, or contemporary deconstructive theory—can be read symptomatically, as in some sense epiphenomenal expressions of underlying historico-political developments. (Indeed, Guillory's model of historical causality could itself be faulted for a certain technological determinism, since, for Guillory, it is the information revolution in contemporary capitalist forces of production that, as a not particularly "final" instance, leads to the emergence of the new technobureaucratic class, which in turn is the basic motor force—I use the famous mechanistic metaphor advisedly—driving the present-day flight of cultural capital from the humanities.) But this same "Real" that undergirds institutional development ap-
parently cannot, for Guillory, also form the basis of a reflectionist mimesis that permits ideology critique. By a curious turn of the critical wheel, then, Guillory ends up not as far from Shaw as one might suppose, insofar as both defend the literary canon from a leftist assault that, in querying texts as ideological constructs, is presumably reductionist and simplistic.

Guillory also, I believe, sells short the political importance of the current critique of canonicity and the advocacy of “noncanonical” works. He is surely correct to point up the silliness of critical acts that reduce individual authors to their raced/gendered/classed identities, as well as the speciousness of the hushed aura that surrounds many multiculturalist discussions of “oppositionality.” But he is, I believe, wrong to treat so lightly the movement to draw into the curriculum significant numbers of texts written by minority, women, and working-class writers. While some multiculturalists may advocate teaching such texts on the naive ground that they represent an “experience” that is transparent and, qua transparent, subversive, surely there are better arguments for inclusion: these texts’ construction of distinct modes of reaching their audiences and, hence, their expansion of our knowledge about the relation of representation to rhetoric; their challenge to received ideas about society and to inherited modes of reading; their pressure on us to read “canonical” texts against an alternative grain. Shaw’s objections to “politicized” readings of Huck Finn—as well as his notion that the novel is about freedom in a “larger sense”—lose force when Twain’s representation of race and slavery is read alongside, say, that offered in Frederick Douglass’s Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself. Effective political challenges to the canon, in other words, cannot be created entirely from within the canon. To reduce the call for opening up—or exploding—the canon to the arguments of its weakest advocates, as Guillory does, is to render the debate over the canon a nondebate. Moreover, it supplies academics confronted by the prospect of retooling themselves and their curricula with an apparently “left” rationale for not doing so. Given the wholesale attack on the gains of the civil rights and women’s movements currently being waged by the right, progressive critics like Guillory should not, it seems to me, be giving aid and sustenance to any aspect of cultural conservatism.
I do not want to look gift horses in the mouth: both Graff and Guillory provide very useful antidotes to Shaw's rabid left-baiting. Graff asks that cultural conservatives like Shaw cease stereotyping their opponents and instead enter into principled debate. Guillory exposes Shaw and other neoconservative "humanists" as rear-guardists upholding a doctrine that is not so much under attack as simply irrelevant to the cultural program of modern-day elites. Because neither Graff nor Guillory takes seriously enough the egalitarian impulse that—if in occasionally moralistic or simplistic ways—has shaped a good deal of recent "left" criticism, however, both misestimate the importance of what does and can take place in the humanities classroom. By positing the classroom as the site of democracy and the university as the locus of neutrality, Graff cuts ideas off from their tangled roots in history: he overestimates the value of "teaching the conflicts" precisely to the degree that he envisions these conflicts as the "teachable" material of academic discourse. Guillory, by contrast, underestimates the importance of what happens in the classroom. That the war for hegemony takes place largely—and, I would grant, in some fundamental sense primarily—in sites beyond the academy does not mean that generations of young adults, of all social backgrounds, are not profoundly affected by the views of human potentiality and conceptions of justice embedded in the texts that they are assigned to read. To contest Shaw successfully, it seems to me, critics need not only to refute the speciousness of the neoconservative claim to a transcendent humanism but also to keep continually in view the links between what we read and the social and political circumstances that condition our reading—not least among which is the steadily sharpening opposition between the have and the have-nots in the world beyond the academy.

Given the growing attraction of the NAS and its offshoot organizations among academics, as well as the entry of neoconservative scholars into the lists of policy battles like the attack on affirmative action, the culture wars promise only to intensify in the coming period. We may be in for another Seven Years War (or, who knows, a Thirty or even a Hundred Years War). While organized neoconservative forces at present constitute a small minority in the academy, they may not remain on the defensive for too much longer; clearly they are very much on the offensive in U.S. society at large. The National Association for Scholars is no doubt busy improving the range and sophistication of its weaponry. Those of us who are reluctant to envision the
academic triumph of the right should take it seriously as an opponent and get our own artillery in the best possible condition.

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