

REVIEW ESSAY

Clues that Gerald Graff Overlooked

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Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind, by Gerald Graff. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003, 320 pp., \$29.95 hardbound.

One of the sadder spectacles of academe today is that of the eminent, near-retirement humanities professor reflecting on a long career and struggling to absorb the precipitous decline of his field. There is, to be sure, enough woe throughout the faculty ranks, but the borderline emeriti bear a special burden. The adjuncts and assistant profs are poorly-trained and narrowly-learned, and too occupied with job hunting and manuscript submission to bring a fresh perspective to the trade. And mid-range people, having matured in a tough job market and undergone a post-Culture Wars retrenchment, well, most are content with tenure, one or two good students, and the seasonal conference paper. But the topmost faculty are now concluding their professional lives. The standard arc of an educational career asks that they muse upon the humanities scene with experience, wisdom, and realism. They were there at the beginning, when theory and politics started to displace scholarship, and it is time for them to survey the fruits of their decades in power.

And so we watch them at the lectern and in print stepping forth to speak of and for the Age. Long ago they might have executed an intricate reading of a line of verse or issued an impassioned call for social justice. Now they collect their thoughts, pore over time and circumstance, and reckon the humanities a finished thing. Some opt for personal reminiscence—the *angst* of grad school, fights with colleagues (especially the “Old Boy” network), classroom miracles. Others affirm and reaffirm the opening of the canon, diversity, cultural studies, and the like long after their triumph in the university is complete. Still others offer lessons in handling students and administrators, and even the media. The press catalogues market these efforts as a record of change in the humanities, an insightful recapitulation leavened with a veteran’s ken, and the authors’ marquis footing seems to bear them out.

Read them, however, and you find something else. Arguments that waver between anecdote and position paper, defenses of race, class, and gender studies that barely grant the opposition a grain of intelligence, puffery of colleagues,

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anger at off-campus parodies—this is the stuff of our mentor’s capstone statement. It poses as a summary, but rambles blithely from one mode to another, here a polemic against conservatives, there a story about tenure, here a theory of postmodernity, there a citation of Barthes. The anticipated magisterial tone dissipates in a shuffle of remembrances, opinions, allusions, and jeers. The most exciting part of the story, the swift and absolute takeover of theory and politics, is cast as an easy and ordained outcome, and traditionalists are dispatched in effortless sallies. The conceptions that the authors abjured (high art, objective interpretation) have no philosophical or moral depth, but only an institutional sanction soon overcome by the brainpower and social conscience of the rising generation. The tensions that make the past worth telling, and that dignify the teller, lack drama and sweep. In sum, while the end-of-career genre demands a summary, stirring panorama of where we’ve been and where we are, the current leaders can’t carry it off.

But how could they? First of all, for a grand assessment of a discipline to be coherent and pointed, it must take the discipline’s confrontations seriously and apply to them hard and fast educational principles. We understand the past and present by applying a yardstick that transcends them both, which is to say that we need standards of truth and value and validity. But this generation (1960s Ph.D., 1970s tenure, 1980s stardom) was raised on other, adversarial grounds. Its style of forensics was more political than intellectual, and it had but one positive offering: an against-epistemology-and-institutions pose. Every major critical movement it fomented was destructive: feminism dismantling patriarchy, deconstruction dismantling Western thought, cultural studies dismantling high culture, postcolonialism dismantling imperialism. Success was built upon the latter’s fall. But now that success is clear and longstanding, and retirement is nigh, the anti routine doesn’t play so well. When the adversary is defeated, is beyond all hope, adversarial postures are empty. When, as happened last Fall, an elderly endowed professor castigates literary historians from the 1930s and 1940s, people whom nobody has even read for at least thirty years, one realizes just how pointless and ritualized the posture has become. Age and stature require a different delivery, but how can leading academics play the role of venerable guide when they made their living denying the traits of venerability: tradition, learning, objectivity?

Another reason humanities sages falter at historical summation is that the history of their field discloses a disturbing, elephantine fact: a descent into *un*-respectability. During the 1980s and 1990s, as they were celebrating the end of Eurocentrism and the rule of identity, hiring their own and expelling the Old Guard, the humanities field went in the opposite direction, plunging into discreditation. However they vindicate their actions, the reality is that the cultural capital of the humanities sank under their stewardship. We can skip the blows academics have suffered, the embarrassing course descriptions, lecture titles, speech-codes, MLA resolutions, and so on, and only note their social

consequence. Scientists and historians laugh at humanities research, journalists disdain the cloistered righteousness, the best students avoid literature seminars, and politicians deplore the anti-Americanism. Twenty years ago leftist antics produced alarm. Now, they evoke a sigh of disgust and a shrug of the shoulders. Politics in the classroom, quotas in the committee room, ideology everywhere and aesthetics nowhere—the profs revel in it and the public scorns.

How can the professors square their high sense of accomplishment with the low standing of the profession? Ordinarily, by doing what the rest of us do, letting the world around curb our egos and correct our fancies. But the elder elite forms a special group, with a unique historical timing. We must remember what it was like to enter the profession back in the 1960s. Things have been so bad for so long that one assumes the humanities have always suffered budget cuts and campus slights and hiring freezes. But there was a Golden Age, roughly, from 1960 to 1975. During that time, the size of the professoriate in the United States doubled. Baby boomers swelled the freshman classes, women and minorities gained overdue access, and schools needed new teachers fast. Universities split into mega-schools and satellite campuses sprang up. Ambitious deans at the UC and SUNY systems not only took in record numbers of applicants, but sought to rival the Ivies in intellectual firepower and research productivity. Sputnik sent billions of federal dollars into the sciences, and the humanities snatched at the not-so-meager crumbs, at the same time imbibing the spirit of innovation and progress (appropriate for scientific inquiry, but not humanities learning). Special centers were created, such as the School of Criticism and Theory at UC-Irvine, and conferences such as the 1966 meeting at Johns Hopkins on “The Structuralist Controversy” became international events. Daring journals opened shop—*Diacritics*, *New Literary History*, *Critical Inquiry*, and *boundary 2* began around 1970—and graduate programs expanded with all the momentum of a field on the verge of greatness.

For the fresh Ph.D., the explosion in higher education in the 1960s was a fantastical occasion. One of my teachers in graduate school (a medievalist) told me that in his first year on the job market in 1969 he had thirty interviews at the MLA convention. People say that you had to be incapacitated not to find a position, that filing your dissertation got you tenure, that a book contract got you on the recruitment list. Fellowships were plentiful, visiting professorships routine. Someone had to teach all those kids, fill the panels, edit the quarterlies, and run the programs. Of course, there was an intellectual cost: no professional guild could double in size so quickly without lowering the bar and admitting thousands of mediocrities to the membership. But that only meant that those with a measure of talent were even more valuable than before. By the time enrollments flattened and the job market tightened in the late 1970s, the best and brightest were securely placed as department chairs, series editors, MLA officers, and celebrity theorists. They’d spent a dozen years as young Turks and gatecrashing feminists, their notoriety only enhancing

their prestige. They like to remember those years as an uphill struggle against old-fashioned formalists, biographers, bibliographers, and arts appreciation-types, but I have yet to hear of a hotshot iconoclast skilled in structuralism who suffered for his beliefs. The fact is, campus conditions favored them. As administrators caved in to various protesters, they found a rationalization in the theory/politics tailwind and jumped to invest in the bold new critical world. Competition between Yale, Princeton, Chicago, Stanford, Berkeley, Cornell, Hopkins, and the rest took on a life of its own, and as monies began to dry up in the 1980s it became ever sharper. A good professor with a timely thesis might earn tenure in one year, take a Fulbright the next, a year later join a rival school as a visitor, then win a fellowship at the National Humanities Center before returning home to a consecrating raise and promotion to Full after passing along an offer from the number-two-ranked department in the country.

Life was good, and one can hardly blame the beneficiaries if they attributed the largesse to their own abilities instead of to post-War demographics and social movements. Why should a cutting-edge specialist in French thought ask about the social value of literary theory when so many were demanding his attention? A Marxist professor invited to lecture from Sydney to Zurich wouldn't think that his anti-capitalist rant in class might rile a local editor or state legislator or tuition-paying parent. No matter how radical or avant-garde or grave they pretended to be, in truth they were a pampered labor group. When conservatives did strike back and the press played along, the humanities professors entered the public debate with all the callow surety of people who've never faced a real political challenge in their lives. The joys were many, but saved from the ordinary struggles of adulthood and lacking respected antagonists—we shall not consider the contest of literary theories a serious challenge—they never learned the value of self-scrutiny and the pain of giving up a cherished notion. They were anxious, yes, but for their repute, not their ideas. In the intellectual realm, their self-certitude ballooned, and their imaginations withered.

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tion of Jacques Derrida's game-playing essay "Limited, Inc." and interviewing the deconstructor at length for the volume. When the Culture Wars hit academe in the late 1980s, Graff chimed in with what many took to be a salutary pedagogical way out, a middle-ground solution called "Teaching the Conflicts" that became a catchy token which half-informed commentators cited as a next-step idea in the campus flurry. Currently he focuses on the fundamentals of higher education and is cited as an authority on general humanities practice. This new book, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*, was solicited by the editorial director of Yale University Press, and two grants helped him through its composition.

Graff's career qualifies him as an elder statesman, and the chapter titles in *Clueless in Academe* ring of deep educational issues (curriculum, intellectualism, "Why Johnny Can't Argue"). Indeed, Graff presents the book as a return to basics—"this book suggests ways in which teachers and programs cut through the curricular clutter to show students how the argument world works" (11)—as if he were taking all the concoctions and revisions of the past decades and reducing them to their pragmatic import. He recognizes the failings of lower and higher education, and pledges to confront the cultural and rhetorical illiteracy of students. Only a seasoned pro is up to such a task, and Graff ably ranges from the author in graduate school to MTV-addled freshman, from academic writing to journalistic style, from dissertation research to progressivist pedagogies. He can call upon a personal experience, a remarkable sophomore, a brilliant colleague, his own prior books, or a Culture Wars debate, and he quotes the *New York Times* op-ed page as smoothly as he does Wayne Booth and Eve Sedgwick. But if the syndrome described above holds, the long-term privileges he has enjoyed and the cultural reach he claims may, paradoxically, limit his understanding. His name echoes of past controversies and his book sports an intriguing title, but whether a noted professor in his twilight can muster the courage and clear-sightedness to carry out a thorough professional soul-searching is doubtful.

Graff answers the question in his very first sentence:

This book is an attempt by an academic to look at academia from the perspective of those who don't get it.

It sounds good until you reach the last three words. To see academe from outside the campus walls and faculty cliques is a sanative aim. If humanities professors made the least effort to understand why Eugene Goodheart, Frederick Crews, and others criticize the field, instead of dismissing them as reactionaries and dumbbells, they might strengthen their own positions or even find points of agreement. But the "don't get it" phrase shortchanges the outsiders. Even though it suggests some sympathy for them, they are still the benighted, the confused, people who feel "shame and resentment" when facing the "impenetrability of the academic world" (1). They suffer "cluelessness,"

a mental condition that forbids them any critical engagement with the disciplines. And who are they? Not humanities professors who've never set foot outside the academic setting, or journalists who've never set foot inside it. Nor are they active scholars and public intellectuals who get it all too well and still abhor current practices. Rather, Graff has only one group in mind: the students.

Now, if Graff aims to show how the humanities squelch the intellect, the experience of students isn't a bad place to begin. Ninety-nine percent of the professoriate is best measured by teaching accomplishments, and if the students tune out and turn off then the discipline must be awry. And so Graff forthrightly acknowledges the drawbacks of undergraduate study: the joylessness of the classroom hour, the hodgepodge curriculum, the jargon, the abstraction, the stiltedness. He explores deadening conventions such as the application process, will not pardon "bad academic habits of communication" (154), accuses scholars of "big, ambitious, interdisciplinary claims" (117) that leave students ignorant of the facts, and deplores the absence of genuine exchange in campus discussion. These teaching habits have an anti-educational outcome: "schooling takes students who are perfectly street-smart and exposes them to the life of the mind in ways that make them feel dumb" (2).

This is the real topic of *Clueless in Academe*: the broken interface of student minds and academic culture. Kids enter classrooms and open quarterlies to encounter language games that befuddle and alienate them. If teachers could convert the "conflict between IntellectualSpeak and StudentSpeak" (13) into a fruitful pedagogy, then education might proceed. Unfortunately, Graff acknowledges, professors feel too many pressures in the other direction, that is, toward greater obfuscation and specialization. Instead of leading students into IntellectualSpeak, they remain mere practitioners of it. Students are no less intelligent than formerly, but because of "the failure of higher education to clarify its culture of ideas and arguments" (3), they falter in their assignments. Worse than that, they have no understanding of the *why* of the assignments, no sense of the purpose of humanistic study. Professors go their professional way, and students exit their courses bored and estranged.

Few teachers today would disagree with Graff's description of the symptoms of humanities instruction. His resolute awareness of the undergraduate experience nicely contrasts the blithe incognizance of colleagues who proceed with their careers as if all were well. Indeed, such concessions give him the reputation of a scholar valiantly concerned for the kids and willing to address the profession's problems. But look closely at Graff's diagnosis of the problems and you find an evasion and a rationalization wholly consistent with the dithering appraisals of his generation. The runaround is simple: Graff attributes the breakdown of humanities education solely to a rhetorical failure. Scholars and teachers think sharply and reason skillfully, he insists, but they don't express their ideas in limpid speech. Advances in curriculum proceed, breakthroughs of theory have transpired, but the academic idiom hasn't articulated

them well. Students shy away only because they don't speak the professors' language. In class, "Once students have to translate their personal interests and experience into the formalized conventions of written Arguespeak, their interests and experience no longer seem their own" (156). Nothing in the values, principles, and knowledge of the professors is askew. It is, rather, only the communication of them that needs fixing. The humanities are dying, but Graff goes no further than urging, "We have to improve our message."

Hence with every verbal fault, Graff pairs an intellectual virtue:

As I see it, my academic intellectual culture is not at all irrelevant to my students' needs and interests, but we do a very good job of making it appear as if it is (1).

Far from being narrow, soulless, and impoverished, then, the content of academic intellectual culture at its best is now rich and potentially compelling. But academia represents and explains this content so badly that one thinks it is hiding it (20).

Though academia has lately produced an amazingly sophisticated body of thought about the dynamics of representation, it remains at a remarkably rudimentary and incurious stage in thinking about how it represents itself (39).

Behind the self-criticism lies a self-congratulation. Even though students are uninterested, academe is "sophisticated," "rich," and "relevant." Professors are stuck in obfuscation, but still, they're "supposed to be smart, sophisticated, and on the cutting edge" (5). Yes, students ignore them, but they wouldn't if professors imparted the thrill of their ideas. They have shirked their duties only by communicating in a recondite argot that doesn't do justice to their intelligence.

Limiting his accusers to students, Graff only has to address the uninformed and inexperienced. The many criticisms leveled by knowledgeable observers may go unanswered, and the deeper beliefs of professors untouched. True, Graff realizes, "most students experience the curriculum . . . as a disconnected series of courses that convey wildly mixed messages," but "The increased diversity and complexity of today's curriculum [is] an unqualified advance in itself" (27; *unqualified?*). And, while "it is better to write a modest but solidly researched book on Southey's juvenilia than to churn out heavy-breathing nonsense on gender and romanticism," "most students would rather take a course from a scholar whose intellectual reach may exceed his grasp on an ambitious topic" (119). This "Yes, things are bad, but things are good, too," mode of observation disarms the deeper criticisms, openly censures ProfSpeak but implicitly ratifies ProfThink. The first principles of current humanities practice—identity politics, self-inflation—remain intact. All we need to do is find ways "to make Arguespeak less foreign—and less boring" (156).

The latter half of Graff's book counsels professors in a more vernacular idiom and cites classroom strategies that involve students in adversarial arguments and interpretations. In themselves, such advice makes sense, but Graff's

treatment of them obscures the more pressing problems in humanities education. To consider an infacility with Arguespeak the prime shortcoming of students is to overlook other, gaping deficiencies of skill and knowledge. Graff appears unconcerned with the fact that high school graduates can't write a periodic sentence, barely understand a passage of prose, disregard the classics, and can't pinpoint the half-century in which the Civil War took place. Feeble historical learning, declining reading scores, pitiful writing skills—all give place to a particular forensic, Arguespeak. Humanities education is training in academic discourse, not the study of history and literature. Rather than forming students into learned, eloquent minds, Graff's pedagogy shapes them into canny rhetors, that is, into junior imitations of their professors.

Ignoring the vast evidence of failure in our schools and colleges, Graff never need ponder the role humanities change has played. Has a multiculturalist curriculum actually improved students' knowledge of other cultures, other times? Has theory or, in K–12 discourse, "critical thinking pedagogy," enhanced their analytical skills? Hardly, but such questions aren't addressed empirically in Graff's and others' retrospections. Humanities professors have championed the concepts underlying current practices, but when the evidence arrives to challenge the claims, it is never the concepts that undergo scrutiny. In *Clueless in Academe*, Graff inserts only one instance in which he considers an alternative vision of education. Under the heading "The Overrating of Fact," he mentions E. D. Hirsch's 1987 book, *Cultural Literacy*, as a misguided program in fact-based learning. Hirsch maintains that students need "a foundation of factual information" before they can "progress to higher-order forms of thinking" (30). But, Graff counters, "knowledge of facts is useless unless students can use such knowledge in relevant conversations." Without meaningful contexts, facts are forgotten.

A fair objection, but Graff offers no further evidence to support it. Other than citing an article by Barbara Herrnstein Smith from 1992, plus the obligatory reference to Dickens's Mr. Gradgrind, his assertion stands alone. This is irresponsible scholarship, high-handed in its certitude (conclusion: "Displaying pointless information for its own sake . . . is the mark of a bore, not an educated person" [31]). That a Dean of Curriculum and Instruction should execute it says a lot about research standards in the humanities. If Graff bothered to do a little extra reading, he would see that since 1987 Hirsch has written many books and articles, testified before Congress, and started an influential K–8 program, Core Knowledge. If he wishes to refute a fact-rich curriculum such as Hirsch's, very well, but scholarly protocols demand that the opponent be given a fair hearing, that Graff examine later writings and the performance of Core Knowledge schools.

This isn't a one-time scholarly oversight, however. Graff's failure to address ideas and values thoroughly is but one consequence of his "teach the conflicts" method. He believes that the way to engage students with academic

discourse is to introduce controversies to the classroom and let students work them out. He remembers one episode in which he presented texts by two polar opposites, “traditionalist Allan Bloom and radical black feminist bell hooks” (6), and awaited the sparks. In this case, though, the pedagogy broke down. “I realized that some students saw little difference between Bloom and hooks,” he says. Whereas many teachers would try to clarify the positions of Bloom and hooks on education and identity, Graff “concluded that it wouldn’t matter much whether Bloom’s or hooks’s side won the debate if these students remained excluded from the discourse in which it was carried on” (6). We might, to some extent, agree that to “articulate a political stand you already have to belong to the culture of ideas and arguments” (6), but this flattening of Bloom and hooks is an abdication of instruction. There are serious stakes involved in favoring one position or the other, and not to see them through with students (despite their verbal ineptitude) is a dodge. Graff is so caught up in the ProfSpeak side of things that he downplays the values clashing in the texts in front of him. That, indeed, may be why his students didn’t engage with the material. They want more than stogy conflicts and discourse-tutelage.

Comfortably settled in the humanities mindset, Graff feels no reason to provide it. He advocates teaching the conflicts, but when put to the test in his own arguments, Graff does otherwise. True to his generation, he cannot look in the mirror and stretch his criticism to root premises. Signs of decline pile up daily (for example, scholarly presses cutting their humanities line), but the name professors still prosper, so why agonize? Let’s maintain that the old canon was a stifling bias, that identity politics have energized higher learning, that campus diversity leads the charge for social justice. If that produces a lot of institutional puffery, bad faith, self-regard, and spurious arguments, it also keeps the vision of the humanities alive. People who believe in objectivity, traditions, and erudition simply don’t register in this world, and need not be taken seriously. By every standard of educational outcome, the humanities have compiled a dismal record, but the luckiest generation opts not to deal with it. To do so would be to question a lifetime of vanguard cultural theories and politics, to admit that all the advents in scholarship and curriculum amounted to a massive educational slide. Under the guise of a pedagogical criticism of humanities instruction, *Clueless in Academe* amounts to yet another blundering validation of the Revolution. The Revolution gave us theory and politics as a disciplinary practice that brought ridicule upon the professoriate, and it produced a legacy of half-learned followers, but bliss was it in that dawn to be a Ph.D. Why worry now?