

# ADE Bulletin

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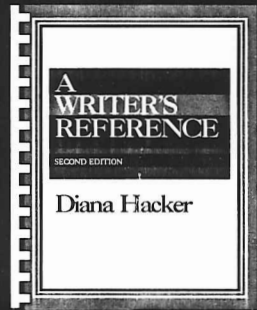
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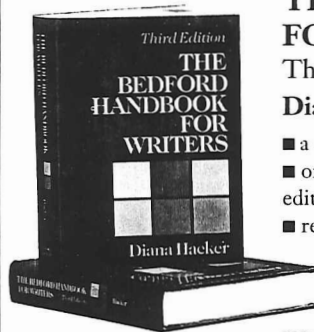
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# Rhetorical Power: What Really Happens in Politicized Classrooms

SUSAN C. JARRATT

THE furor over educational change propelled by the new social movements arises from anxieties about power.<sup>1</sup> Over the last two or three years, the popular press has been full of charges that teachers who call into question traditional knowledge and pedagogical methods are indoctrinating their students—using their authority as teachers irresponsibly. This same charge has been leveled against “rhetoric” in general over the centuries and against sophistic rhetoric in particular. One name for the accusation is *demagoguery*: the unethical manipulation of public opinion by a powerful speaker.

Along with the charge of demagoguery is a complaint that the so-called enforcers of political correctness limit free speech of others. Arguments over free speech always begin with rules passed by schools like Michigan, Wisconsin, and Brown restricting hate speech. But for the critics of curricular change, just about any successful challenge to the educational status quo counts as a threat to free speech. Articles in *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *New Republic*, and elsewhere describe the failures of attempts to reverse educational decisions expanding the canon and building programs in minority studies as evidence of “intolerance,” “intellectual intimidation,” and “taboos” rather than as what they really are—outcomes of struggles for control over curriculum, programs, and hiring that go on all the time in the academy. The language used is an artful rhetorical maneuver of reversal: accusing your adversary of your own wrong. What’s missing or seriously muted in this discussion of free speech is an acknowledgment that at the very heart of the new educational transformations is the *freeing* of speech—bringing to voice knowledges, experiences, and histories for whole bodies of people previously unheard. But, as Foucault teaches, the powerful mechanisms of disciplinary knowledge operate by hiding themselves within institutions. And so disruptions of stable, traditional disciplines and their objects of study are read as “a decline in tolerance,” when the critics know well that such “disruptions” are linked to the larger project of making social and economic conditions more “tolerable” for many citizens. But these material considerations are artfully ignored by the neoconservative critics of educational change.

It’s difficult to get even well-intentioned but hard-line civil libertarians to acknowledge the link between social injustice and the limits, exclusions, and silences pervading discourses of all types—unwritten rules that let some voices in and keep others out. William A. Henry III, author of a 1991 *Time* article, has it right when he finds things being turned upside down. We hear Henry reporting with something between outrage and astonishment that educational changes “amount to mirror-image reversal of basic assumptions held by the nation’s majority” (66). Precisely the point. The “outlandish” courses Henry names represent the perspectives of outlanders—those whose standpoint offers versions of rationality, aesthetics, and even science outside the parameters of the Euramerican heritage. Decisions at many levels making possible the restructuring of higher education to allow for those viewpoints have emerged out of struggle; the traditionalists focus attention on the struggle itself as indecorous, avoiding the real issues.

Even George Bush, in his commencement address at the University of Michigan in May 1991, has entered the fray, expressing dismay that “neighbors who disagree no longer settle matters over a cup of coffee.” In evoking this homey scene, Bush insulted those participants in the civil rights movement who, often denied the chance to live in neighborly proximity to their white oppressors, struggled courageously and at such great cost for the opportunity to sit down for a long-denied cup of coffee. But then Alexander Cockburn reminds us that “the will to retain a useful historical amnesia lies at the heart of the fury about PC” (69). In another moment of amnesia, Bush forgot his own campaign strategy of racial hatred and admonished that those “creating” divisiveness in our harmonious social system by insisting on change haven’t successfully conquered the temptation to assign bad motives to people

*The author is Associate Professor of English at Miami University. This paper was presented at the 1991 ADE Midwestern Summer Seminar at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.*

who disagree with them. It’s worth noting on this point that the same edition of the *New York Times* that reported these remarks included an article about black high school students who organized a separate prom because of the climate of racial tension in their southwest Chicago school. Bush must be perceptive indeed to have guessed the motives of those who participated in racial incidents on 115 campuses in 1989. He must know more than meets the eyes and ears about the three thousand white students at the University of Massachusetts who chased and beat blacks in a mob attack in 1986, about the football players at the University of Connecticut in 1987 who spat on Asian American women, shouting “Oriental faggots” (Cockburn 690). Perhaps I should ask him about the motives of my students (more than one) who believe that homosexuals deserve to die of AIDS, who have proposed transporting “them” all to an island to die together, and who are not in the least interested in discussing this “disagreement” over a cup of coffee, or even over a beer.

## Rhetoric in the Classroom: Indoctrination or Rhetorical Authority?

While I have been engaging here in an eristic rhetoric, sparring rhetorically with George Bush and others who have passionately resisted attempts to open the gates of the academy a bit wider, I believe that the classroom often requires a different rhetoric. The instructor who offers counterhegemonic explanations of reading and writing practices—like the feminist who teaches students to recognize the way language constructs knowledge on the lines of a gender system or the Marxist who examines the historical connections between social class and reading habits—forces an epistemic break from the comfortable paradigms of liberal humanism, positivist science, and capitalist progress. But these fundamental differences in pedagogical and epistemological theory are often misread—either willfully or out of ignorance. Those who hold to a view of teaching as the value-neutral transmittal of a body of objective knowledge accuse teachers who raise questions about how their subject matter has evolved within historical circumstances determined in part by the dominance of specific social groups of having dropped any disinterested attempt to present “content” and giving over the class to an unethical effort to force students to accept a set of opinions about race and gender difference. The popular press contributes to the process of blurring any distinction between taking up the politics of the classroom and offering up politics—that is, partisan issues—in the classroom. The media create the general impression that so-called politicized teachers use classrooms as platforms. Of course, any full discussion of “politicized classrooms” would take in every class, for the teacher who offers a

great-books survey course is no less entailed in issues of institutional power and social difference than a teacher offering the courses with “obfuscatory titles and eccentric reading lists” (Henry 66) named triumphantly as evidence of the corruptions of “politically correct” thinking. But here I wish to focus on instructors who introduce questions of power and difference in discourse—to counter the charge that teachers who acknowledge the political nature of their profession necessarily exercise demagoguery.

When David Laurence organized the ADE session from which this paper comes, he suggested, as a historical point of orientation for this question, an essay by Max Weber called “Science as a Vocation.” In this 1918 analysis of the institutionalization of science, Weber outlines a distinction like the one I make above: between an approach to the subject of study through methods of cultural critique and the teacher’s use of the lecture halls to act as prophet or demagogue. Weber acknowledges that students want more from their educators than mere analyses and statements of fact; they crave leaders and not teachers, he says. His formulation of the goal of critical teaching as responsible self-clarification approximates closely the critical pedagogy of today, but Weber’s sensitivity to the pedagogical setting leads him to warn professors against the temptation to use the classroom to air their opinions about specific political or social issues. In the lecture hall, he explains, students are a captive audience; there is no possibility for critique or even response.

Even though most of us in English departments teach at least some of our classes to small groups of students, in which discussion is an essential element of the pedagogy, we are mindful of the complaint that the power wielded by the teacher—specifically, the power of the grade, but also the power of age, knowledge, the institution, the emotional power of giving or withholding approval and professional guidance—may mute dissent or critique from students even when the classroom structure in principle provides opportunity for it. For some critics of political correctness there is little question about the domination of teachers’ voices when they present their subject through the lens of sociological critique, only a question of how that power is wielded. On this model, two things can happen, both bad. In the first case, the teacher is overt about the political agenda of the course. Dialogue is impossible, critics say, because students are so intimidated by the teacher and so determined to get good grades that they won’t risk expressing an opinion contrary to the teacher’s. In the case of teachers who are more covert, the argument is that simply raising social issues in the current climate tips off students that you’re “one of them.” They will then respond by parroting a generally left position out of fear and without thinking through the issues on their own.

Certainly those things can and do happen. All kinds of things happen with our students: alienation and tune-out, but also resistance and opposition; dutiful reproduction, interested experimentation, even conversion. I heard recently of a kind of student manipulation that was new to me. Instructions are given by one male student to another about how to succeed in a feminist classroom: pretend to be male chauvinist, then have a conversion. You're bound to get an A. This strategy raises an issue that the critics of political correctness never consider because it doesn't fit within their monolithic phantasm of the teacher: the ways teachers are positioned differently along multiple power axes within classrooms. For example, I sometimes have an easier time convincing my students in a composition class to try out unfamiliar pedagogical methods than my graduate-student teachers do, because of their youth and lower status in the institution, but perhaps I have more trouble than my male colleagues. Class and race offer more complications. The point is that there are more kinds of power than simply the institutional status of the teacher at work in a classroom at every moment. Indeed, everyone in the room—even at a mostly white, middle-class school like Miami—brings a rich history of diverse social relations. In my view, the aim of “politicized” teaching is to mobilize those histories into a complex interplay of authority and counterauthority in the classroom (see Graff). The pedagogy I advocate does not demand that students adopt a “politically correct” position; in fact, it argues against any fixed agenda in favor of a process of learning how technologies of discourse make possible the exploration of personally grounded and historically located knowledge. I'd like to offer two theoretical orientations for the exercise of rhetorical power in the classroom and then propose some suggestions for generating and sustaining dialogic classroom discourse.

### Politics of Location and Dialogic Classrooms

In offering these ideas, I can't speak for everyone who claims to teach from liberatory or transformative pedagogical principles. The practices I describe have evolved out of my own experiences as a white, middle-class woman teaching first-year composition and graduate courses in rhetoric and social theory, from several years' work as a mentor and teacher of a pedagogy workshop for new graduate assistants, out of the feminist sophistics summer institute and seminar I codirected in the summer of 1990 with Dale M. Bauer, and from ongoing collective work in feminist pedagogy at Miami. The pedagogy developed within these contexts advocates teachers' exercise of rhetorical authority toward ends of social transformation. In this pedagogy, English studies is defined along lines

explored by Henry Giroux, Linda Brodkey, James Berlin, Patricia Bizzell, John Trimbur, Ira Shor, and many others as the development of critical literacies—one element in an education toward critical citizenship. While this goal may differ from the scientist's model of value-free knowledge transmission, or from the aesthete's aim of cultivating literary taste and sensibilities, I would argue that it shares with the humanism of William Bennett, Allan Bloom, and Lynne Cheney the goal of making students into certain kinds of human beings. I reject the charge that liberatory pedagogy is somehow more intrusive or manipulative than what it seeks to replace. When teachers make their own political and ethical commitments to social change part of the course, students who have internalized a model of education as the transferral of “objective” knowledge may feel an uncomfortable dissonance. Speaking openly about ethics can create for students a painful awareness of the absence of a strong community consensus about right and wrong in our huge, diverse social system. But it can also provide a source of relief, pleasure, and challenge in confronting these anxieties.

Motivating students to locate themselves socially and historically in relation to the subject of the class can mediate institutional (teacher) authority and create the possibility for counterauthority to emerge within students' own discourses. This process takes place when students are led to describe their lives, especially their educational experiences, as socially and historically embedded—to articulate the self in history. It's a way to approach the understanding of differences without by exploring differences within. What's encouraged here is not political correctness but what I call a historical attitude. To have an attitude, one must have a position, a stance, instead of remaining undifferentiated. One must be situated not only in space but in time and social order, the last of these elements invoking “attitude” in its colloquial sense of “having an attitude” as an aggressive challenge to social hierarchies. I'm not suggesting we turn our students into little James Deans but rather that we teach them to see the act of speaking and writing as always relational. For writing classes, this view is a break out of the tyranny of the present; for literature classes, a break into tyrannically discrete historical pasts.

Having a personal investment or location in relation to class material protects students against indoctrination or coercion; further, it's the basis of any meaningful educational experience, as theorists from many camps would agree. But the process I'm describing needs to be attached to specific theoretical spheres: namely, cultural studies and feminist politics of location. It shouldn't be confused with self-satisfied psychologizing, with a purely confessional mode of consciousness-raising, or with a kind of composition teaching that uses narratives of student experience as a means of discovering the true self or unique voice. Nor

does this approach represent a pluralistic embrace of all points of view as equally valuable and defensible. It's more aptly described in Nietzschean terms as a continual process of negating, consuming, and contradicting—enacted through the connection of singular with collective histories. Through this pedagogy students orient themselves as readers and writers within the asymmetrical power relations currently crisscrossing our society but also within their own specific histories as students, family members, and citizens. Further, this teaching method asks students to resee those experiences in terms of social difference and power imbalance and within historically located disciplinary practices. It's not a demand that students express white or male guilt, nor does it participate in the race essentialism the critics of political correctness assume to be the theoretical basis of multicultural education. Rather, students identify their stances as provisional and dialogic and try on the role of transformative intellectual in their own historical moments and culture spheres.

The difference between classroom demagoguery and an alternative politics of the classroom depends on the theories of discourse underlying these competing accounts of language in the classroom. On a simple communication theory of language, one individual speaks to another, so that the speaker is an agent and the listener is characterized as a passive recipient of a reified message. This theory grounds narratives of indoctrination, coercion, or other manipulative rhetorical effects. But according to Marxist linguistic theorists like L. S. Vygotsky and M. M. Bakhtin, any discursive act involves a complex interplay of “voices,” internal as well as external, present and past. When students use class materials to confront or re-create their own histories and present locations as social beings, they bring to voice internalized conflicts among authoritative voices as part of the dialogic classroom experience. Active engagement with language in the classroom shapes the consciousness of all the participants, teacher included. This shared linguistic experience is best described not in terms of communication—the delivery of the message from one, or even two, subjects to others—but rather in terms of a collective activity through which we are all constantly engaged in processes of semiotic transformation. Instead of conversion, the “politicized” teachers I know look for dialogic reflection in our students' writing and oral responses.

The practices of location and dialogism open a space for the teacher not as demagogue or prophet but as what Weber calls “leader” and Henry Giroux calls “public intellectual.” The complex flow of language and interplay of power in the classroom calls for many different responses from the liberatory teacher: silent listener, supportive encourager, equal participant in debate, or, sometimes, advocate of a position that remains unrepresented or challenger of oppressive discourses generated by stu-

dents. I think it's a mistake to advise teachers that they should never express opinions on vital public issues or to neutralize the composition teacher into the role of “facilitator.” We should be able to demonstrate, when it is rhetorically appropriate, what our opinions are and, more important, how we derived them—how they may be connected to personal histories and social positions and how each of us will necessarily be limited in assessing those histories and views. These are delicate decisions, hard to generalize about. But that difficulty should not prevent us from taking seriously our role as public intellectuals to make the formation of political consciousness the subject of literacy education. Doing so within the theoretical parameters I've described is fundamentally different from using the lectern as a platform for partisan views on specific issues.

### Classroom Practice

Moving from a descriptive to a prescriptive mode, I wish to suggest ways to foster a dialogic climate—to encourage the development of counterauthority—in English classrooms of all kinds: composition, literature, and theory. These are not all original ideas but draw on work—some of it unpublished, some in the form of lectures, discussions, and private conversations—by many colleagues, most significantly Patricia Bizzell, Bell Hooks, Steven Mailloux, and John Trimbur.

*Mediating the conventional classroom dynamic.* The most material way to effect counterauthority is to create an actual, physical intervention of another voice into the teacher-class dialogue (see Graff). Inviting former students or guest authorities to address the class members and team teaching in various forms (including simply trading off or combining classes for a day) are possible ways to accomplish this goal. The English department at Miami University allows advanced undergraduate majors to act as teaching fellows for faculty members, building in a triangulation of authority through the semester.

*Foregrounding pedagogical decisions.* Pointing out ways our teaching differs from traditional classes—making the educational institution itself the subject of the class—taps student resistance to authority but converts it into a collective critical inquiry. What does it mean to study writing, or literature, or rhetorical theory now, at this institution? What did it mean twenty years ago or two thousand? Such questions bring into focus issues of professionalization, disciplinary language, and paradigm change.

*Making classroom discussion—how people talk—the subject of the course.* Stepping out of the discussion from time to time to assess how language is working allows for reflection on power and difference in discourse. Rather than the “micro-management of everyday conversation”



George Bush warns about, this practice encourages a microlevel attention to the way ideas are shaped. Readings on language and social difference—for example, Dale Spender on gender and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., on Black English—build concrete knowledge about formerly unconscious practices. Audiotapes can help in this process in at least three contexts. In addition to bringing tapes into the classroom, teachers can use them to engage in self-critique or to work with other teachers interested in analyzing the complex play of power and difference in classroom discussion from day to day.

*Using keywords.* Each semester my students and I select and work closely with certain “keywords” (a concept created by Raymond Williams) that seem to emerge with some significance in public discourse from any of a number of spheres: within the class, on campus, in national or global news. We do a series of inquiries into each word, investigating its histories for us and the groups using it. For example, in work with sexist language in a composition class one semester, first-year students seemed really angry and resistant to a feminist critique of *lady*. While my analysis had emphasized economic dependence and class hierarchy, the students revealed, through discussions of how and where the word had entered into their experiences, the heavy weight of sexual socialization it had carried in high school and its use as a reward for “maturity.” The point of these inquiries is not to resolve differences in liberal compromise but to gain a fuller understanding of the particular histories, differences, and powers language carries.

*Taking advantage of the multiple sites for dialogue between teacher and student.* While we may think of class discussion most immediately as the site of “politicized” teaching, a dialogic pedagogy exploits differences in rhetorical context provided by various opportunities for exchange between teacher and student and among students. Different kinds of exchange can occur in class (the most public context), in conference, on ungraded assignments, on graded papers. We should be aware of using different rhetorical strategies for different occasions.

*Reducing grade pressure where possible.* Though students and teachers almost always work under the shadow of grades, doing a number of ungraded writing and speaking assignments allows students to perform the work of social and historical location in an exploratory mode without being measured and judged in the reductive terms of grades.

These suggestions concern the classroom instructor; on the departmental level, chairs can create a supportive climate for counterhegemonic teaching by looking carefully at student evaluations in dialogue with teachers’ own accounts of their classes. This is not to imply that critical pedagogy always produces low student ratings, or that low

student ratings can be explained simply by labeling the pedagogy “politicized.” It is to point out that counterhegemonic teaching produces challenges to traditional ways of thinking and learning not often resolved within a quarter or even a semester. If the teacher’s goal is to raise questions, to initiate new forms of reading and writing rather than to perfect old ones, and the effort is successful, the students’ responses may be more tentative than effusive. In such cases, the best measure of success may not be high numerical ratings from students.

Another way to create a supportive climate is by organizing regular opportunities for faculty members to discuss the politics of the classroom. These discussions should not occur only when decisions have to be made about curriculum, program, or policies—situations in which various factions of the faculty have turf to guard or reputations to protect and when time constraints may create pressure to truncate discussion of complex questions. When teaching becomes an ongoing collective project, departmental practices reinforce the commitments of a critical pedagogy outlined above in terms of the single classroom.

### Correctness Revisited

I’d like to end with a few more words about the phrase *political correctness*. My source here is Geoffrey Nunberg, a linguist from Stanford, who in an editorial on National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered* offered a historical perspective on the phrase. Nunberg sees the language of “correctness” today as a trivialization of political debate but reminds us of an earlier era when there was a more substantial connection between civility and civil liberties. As English teachers, we might be especially susceptible to the accusation of fussing over correctness and want to distance ourselves from that association. But it’s the accusers themselves who frame the debate as one concerned with taste, manners, and propriety in the most reductive sense when it suits their purposes, though they sometimes turn the tables. For George Bush, manners become serious business when he depicts political debate in terms of lapses from neighborliness. Those of us invested in transformative pedagogy need to provide a vigorous counter-discourse to the characterization of our teaching as a faddish fixation on political correctness. The same rhetorical tradition that gives us the concept of demagoguery (as well as its critique) offers a long and venerable tradition of rhetorical instruction as a practice of civic responsibility. When we ask students and the public as well to engage in collective inquiry into language in society, we improve the prospects for progressive social change within and outside the classroom.

### Note

<sup>1</sup>In preparing this article, I used some ideas from my chapter “Feminist Sophistics: Teaching with an Attitude,” cowritten with Dale M. Bauer. I’m also indebted to Patricia Bizzell’s essay “Power, Authority, and Critical Pedagogy.” Works by Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Bell Hooks, and Ira Shor are sources for my discussions of critical literacy, critical pedagogy, critical citizenship, and public intellectuals.

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# Politicized Polemics: Who Names the Controversies?

JANET McNEW

WHEN I was an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina in the early 1970s, my seventeenth-century-literature professor told an amusing anecdote to begin our study of Marvell. Only a couple of years before, a young professorial advocate of the sexual revolution had asked the women in his class to consider the effectiveness of "To His Coy Mistress" as a poem of seduction. They were to write an essay in which they explained whether Marvell would or would not have succeeded in convincing them to have sex with him. As it happened, one of his students was the daughter of a state lawmaker who failed to see the educational value of this assignment and gave a speech in the legislature calling for the dismissal of the young man. All of us laughed at the legislator's prudery and applauded on learning that academic freedom had prevailed: the university supported the young professor and forced the legislator to back down. For years, this story represented to me the problem of letting politics intrude in the classroom—namely, that less-educated and less-sophisticated powers might impede the pursuit of knowledge, especially when that knowledge offended current social mores.

More recently, my analysis of the politics in the story has changed. Now I can, of course, see the sexist and heterosexist bias in that assignment, not to mention the potential for complaints of sexual harassment. This alteration of perspective has resulted not just from shifts in my understanding but also from changing meanings of the word *politics*. As Gerald Graff has convincingly argued, much of modern criticism was designed, at least in part, to protect literary study from political pressures by denying that literature ever does anything so crass as offer a message (229–31). Yet nearly every postmodern criticism includes a recognition of the various political contingencies that shape literature and our responses to it. We don't, however, mean *political* in the sense that dictionaries still mostly use—"having to do with state and its government." Instead, we now use the word to describe a skepticism about any alleged purity of intention. Consciously or unconsciously, teachers and writers speak on behalf of the systems that support them; hence there are multiple political dimensions even to such ostensible pleas for quiescence as Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode*.

What was once the political threat from without—the philistines who hold the purse strings on boards and in legislatures—has now become the threat from within. In stripping away claims for universality and objectivity in our aesthetic and pedagogical practices, postmodern theorists have shown us that just constructing a syllabus is, whether we like it or not, a political act. The effect of this recognition of the politics inherent in our work has been, I think, mostly salutary. Among people I know, it promotes a highly moral skepticism, a questioning and reexamination of old ways of reading and teaching that rested on now-discredited claims to authority. I assume by now that that once-young University of North Carolina professor has a deepened respect for the legitimacy of the discomfort his assignment might have given his women students.

I've spent some time making a distinction between old and new definitions of *political* because not everyone involved in the conversation about politics in the classroom either understands or accepts this redefinition. Here I invoke the two most recent best-sellers attacking the politicization of the academy—Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* and Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*. Both men posit a decline in the humanities associated with the coming into power of 1960s radicals who brought their political agendas with them. Now here's where the use of the word *political* begins to obfuscate things. Kimball and D'Souza have an easy time exposing certain feminists, African Americanists, and even white male poststructuralists like Stanley Fish as carrying out "ideologically motivated assaults on the intellectual and moral substance of our culture" (Kimball xviii). All Kimball and D'Souza need do is present series of reports from conferences and campus interviews and say, See, we told you that those radical professors are promoting silly politics that you don't agree with. Every major media story on the topic that I've read in the last year—in

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sources that include supposedly intellectual magazines like the *New York Review of Books*, the *Atlantic*, and the *New Republic*—joins these men in deploring the rise of politics in the curriculum. Contemporary theorists would say that they aren't inserting politics; they're only making conscious and examining academic political agendas. Tactically, however, the media—and some number of the theorists' academic colleagues—simply have not accepted the redefinition of the word *political*.

This explains, in good measure, why the pose of disinterested high-mindedness struck by many of the critics of academia has such public credibility, even while to the academics being criticized it is absurd to believe that William Bennett and Lynne Cheney—both Reagan political appointees and full-fledged members of the Republican neoconservative movement that put first Reagan and then Bush into power—are guarding American education against politics. Likewise, Kimball and D'Souza are card-carrying members of the New Right. Most of Kimball's book was published in the magazine he edits, the *New Criterion*, an organ of the neoconservative movement, and if you look at his acknowledgments, you'll see, among other familiar conservative organizations, the John M. Olin Foundation, which is chaired by William Simon, a secretary of the treasury under Reagan. In a *New Yorker* review of *Illiberal Education*, Louis Menand begins by taking issue with the disingenuousness of D'Souza's tone, which he characterizes as that "of a man who is curious about the reports he has been hearing of campus strife over issues involving race and sex, and who, as a friend to liberal learning, is sympathetic to all the parties involved (or nearly all, for he cannot find a good word to say about homosexuality)" (101). However, as an undergraduate, D'Souza was the activist editor of the notorious *Dartmouth Review*, funded by over \$100,000 in external money from conservative foundations, including Olin. He went on after graduation to become a policy analyst for Reagan, then apprenticed to William F. Buckley for the Heritage Foundation, and now works for the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute.

Suddenly, I'm back at the old University of North Carolina scenario: how do we protect innovative inquiry from the powerful, hostile politics outside academia who not only have access to pots of money but also run the government? I think we have to begin by realizing that they are winning the battle of rhetoric, partly by exploiting the confessionism in our theoretical recognition of the incapability of politics. Quoting Annette Kolodny's frank admission that she sees her "scholarship as an extension of [her] political activism," D'Souza displays a mock-horrified glee at the naive way she plays into his hands (18). To me, the analyses of higher education put forward by Bennett, Cheney, Kimball, and D'Souza suggest a shared political ideology. I have even wondered whether

the New Right intellectuals swept into power by the Reagan revolution have identified universities as the last institutional bastions of anticonservatism and targeted them for "reform" that would put them in step with the rest of the nation. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., a conservative disciple of Leo Strauss like Allan Bloom, reveals the mentality and motives of this group when he defensively says that the reason so many Straussians came to Washington to work for Reagan was that they couldn't find jobs in universities where their brand of ideology had become unfashionable (36). It sometimes seems that everywhere we look nowadays in the media, there is some manifestation of the conservative agenda that aims to snatch universities away from liberal loonies, and a mobilization of the same massive resources that packaged and sold Reagan and Bush may have the power to do it.

Let's you think that I exaggerate the media reach of the conservative agenda. I offer a nationally syndicated column by Cal Thomas, printed in the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* just before Christmas, entitled "Parents Should Avoid Colleges Gripped by Liberal Orthodoxy." Here's one of his paragraphs: "In many cases, orthodoxies long abandoned, or never accepted, by most Americans are defended as steadfastly as the Alamo in academic circles. Reality is what professors say it is, and the rest of us are, well, dumb and undeserving of a fair hearing." I also present in evidence a copy of a glossy magazine called *Campus: America's Student Newspaper*, which was dumped late in the spring of 1991, in the dead of night, into the student mail of my college. It is published by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, a familiar campus conservative group, and appears to have one major advertiser, the Adolph Coors Company, a faithful funder of right-wing causes. On the inside back cover is a full-page ad and order form for more free copies of *Campus*. The headline for the ad reads:

\$80,000

Isn't that too much to pay for four years of Liberalism, Radical Feminism, and Relativism?

40,000 students and faculty think it is.

The cover illustration shows three witches—Deconstruction, Multiculturalism, and Feminism—who are feeding a fire with books by Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, and Homer in order to cook two bewildered-looking young folks in their pot. Funny as this is, it's no joke.

I think these examples—and I'm sure you know of many more—add up to a Republican media campaign to manipulate genuine intellectual controversy in a way familiar to anyone who followed the 1988 presidential election. (As a member of the audience said when this paper was discussed at the ADE meeting, "We're being Willie Hortonized.") A major public relations problem

for those of us who are trying to assess the lessons of post-structuralist theory is that most Americans still believe that it is possible to avoid politics altogether, still possible just to adhere to tradition. They think about politics the way the pilot of my plane to Detroit did about the atmosphere when he said, "There's some weather to the south of us, but we'll do our best to fly around it."

Take, for example, Irving Howe, the eminent scholar and the author of a piece called "The Value of the Canon" in the *New Republic*. Howe is certainly not part of the neoconservative movement, and he quotes Trotsky on behalf of the "autonomous being and value" of literature as he debunks the "highly dubious" claims of "many academic insurgents" to be leftists (41). Later, he says that "education entails the 'imposing' of values" only in a "rudimentary but not very consequential sense" (44). He objects to political pressure that would encourage African Americans to study African culture. At the same time, he mandates that core courses must focus on traditional Western culture because European civilization, "like it or not, is where we come from and that is where we are" (46). Although his insistence on the great Western heritage sounds suspiciously like an unconscious politics of identity, his argument seems to assume that there is an objective, nonpolitical way to study the Arnoldian very best.

Likewise, John Searle's long article from the *New York Review of Books*, "The Storm over the University," demonstrates how the mere acknowledgment of the political dimensions on all sides of these conflicts counts as post-modern radicalism. While finding Kimball's book too extreme, Searle reserves most of his contempt for leftists who, he says, are out to attack Western culture as an instrument of oppression (35). He complains that "many members of the cultural left think that the primary function of teaching the humanities is political; they do not really believe that the humanities are valuable in their own right except as a means of 'social transformation'" (36). Searle disputes this view by insisting that all a college education ought to do is "give students access to works of high quality" (36), which means that political criteria are not important. To support his arguments, he digresses from his review and hastily devises a philosophical basis for a scholarly objectivity by which we can decide what books are the "best" (38-39).

Even though I've been looking hard for the last couple of years, I have not seen a sustained journalistic attempt to explain the poststructuralist critique of such "scholarly objectivity." I've seen lots of expositions of the critique in scholarly journals, but those pieces aren't often written in a language that appeals to the uninitiated. Hence most people are left thinking that a feminist classroom is a politicized one but that a "great books" classroom is not. Howe offers another telling illustration. A short while after the article on the curriculum, he wrote again for the

*New Republic*, this time about T. S. Eliot. How was it, he wonders, that Jews like himself were once charmed into overlooking Eliot's deep-seated anti-Semitism? He concludes the essay with a meditation on the "division between the aesthetic and the ethical" and passionately asserts that where the two clash, the ethical should win in order to sustain the "very idea of civilization" (32). My first response was to compare the arguments of the two essays and to want to confront Howe, to insist that he explain how the permission he gives to decanonize Eliot on the basis of anti-Semitism is any less political than the objections of feminists to sexism or of minorities to other racisms. Then his essay led me to consider how one person's politics is another's ethics. For, writes the secular Howe, keeping within himself "enough of a Jew" to denounce Eliot's anti-Semitism was an ethical imperative, but when those he calls "the insurgents" choose to discover "racial, class, and gender bias," he demurs: "to see politics or ideology in all texts is to scrutinize the riches of literature through a single lens" ("Value" 46). Of course, it's not just rhetoric that keeps Howe and poststructuralist critics of the traditional canon apart, but I begin to suspect that the two sides are talking past each other, at least partly because of shifting uses of words like *politics*.

Frankly, I was surprised that using a collection of texts on racism and sexism in writing courses at the University of Texas was denounced as an untoward introduction of politics into the classroom (Hairston). I had thought that by now there was enough consensus on the basic social evil of these tendencies that using them as subject matter was like teaching against slavery or the Nazis. Kimball and D'Souza denounce as "political correctness" efforts to promote liberal social ideals like feminism and multiculturalism as shared community values. Thus they turn academic recognition of the inescapability of political motives against us while concealing their own political interests and claiming only to be defending free speech. They are betting that they can link liberal ideals with enough strange-sounding academic jargon (remember the *Campus* cover joined feminism, multiculturalism, and deconstruction) to convince most people that such a community would be dangerously un-American. Kimball's chapter "The Case of Paul de Man" manages to insinuate that all poststructuralism is covert totalitarianism. D'Souza ends an essay in the *Atlantic* with a section entitled "Where the Logic Leads," and—you guessed it—he traces various radical skepticisms through Heidegger right to Hitler's doorstep ("Illiberal Education" 78).

As a sort of moderate, or cowardly, leftist, I am led to conclude that part of the blame for this misperception rests with us and arises out of the overuse, if not outright misuse, of the word *political*. Often I think we could usefully and not deceptively substitute other terms—*ethics* or *values*, perhaps—for *politics* in some of our discussion. I

know that there are good, iconoclastic reasons that many have skirted high-sounding words like *ethical* in favor of the more rough-and-tumble *political*. And, I repeat, when attention to politics encourages scrupulous, skeptical self-inquiry, the cold-water slap of the word is salutary. Nevertheless, a myopic focus on revealing every nuance of politics in our own practices can blind us to the larger problems of old-fashioned politics—those external forces I describe that aim to seize universities and reestablish a calm, pre-1960s order. I would hate to see promising radical theories go the way of Jimmy Carter and civil rights legislation and become further victims of neoconservative media campaigns. Have we, as they charge, grown contemptuous of making ourselves intelligible? Are we academics as afraid to use the word *ethical* as we once were to speak of politics? I hope we can find enough community among ourselves to make a more effective response to this assault.

Meanwhile we should also meditate about the charges made by our critics. Although I believe that most of the ferment about leftist politicization is high-conservative guff, I worry about losing the hearts and minds of our students. Sometimes (and one need only read the conservatives cited above for illustrations) obsessive focus on the political nature of everything can lead to cynicism of a sort quite dangerous to teaching—first, because it can breed disrespect for students. Supercilious jargon and tactless frontal assaults on their fondest beliefs will not, and should not, win students. Academic freedom should never become an aegis for bad or abusive teaching. Since at least Socrates, some teachers have been in the business of pressing students toward uncomfortable knowledge, and, like Socrates, some of us get in trouble with the public for it. Whenever teaching respects students as ethical subjects and shows a proper regard for the power imbalance in the student-teacher relationship, most other kinds of politics in the classroom do not bother me. Our students are, of course, our most important audience, and it

is finally because we wish to teach them well that we ought to question the effectiveness of the poststructuralist rhetoric of politics in the classroom. Conservative critics charge us with destructive cynicism, with an intent to destroy the pleasure and instruction in reading literature. Professors who use political analyses to deny these ancient attractions of literature are, indeed, a danger, not because they are un-American but because they are bad teachers. If it is to affect more than a coterie, poststructuralist rhetoric ought instead to empower students and to liberate them, as it has many of us, from false claims to aesthetic transcendence of ordinary human value. It ought, in other words, to make the study of literature a more deeply pleasing and deeply instructive pursuit, which means it ought not be simply anything, including simply political.

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