

## **How to Be A Public Person of Letters in the 21'st Century**

by Carol Houlihan Flynn, *Tufts University*

A funny thing happens when professors of English Literature try to instruct the public. Not that there is actually one "public." In our fragmented, multicultural, post-modern society, most of us move quite fluidly between many public spheres, and become in the process invested in various and complex political, intellectual, cultural and spiritual agendas. Without insisting upon the existence of one public, I would like to suggest that a large number of the most literate and most vocal consumers of culture have strong opinions about what English Professors should be doing, or perhaps more importantly, what they should not be doing. In fact, these disparate publics might be united in their shared suspicions about the power of cultural critics.

This public believes that it owns English in a way that it does not own mathematics or biology or philosophy. Born or thrust into the language, it speaks it, reads it, writes it with a relatively clear sense of what it should mean. While they are not united by their experiences, (bilingual speakers and writers of English may have very different ideas about what literacy means), members of this public expect a relatively high degree of consistency from professors of their language and culture. This public values coherence, ethical values, and historical continuity, and looks to the English profession to enforce these principles, to make them central to the mission of the English departments in universities across the land. At the same time, professors of English have become over the last 30 years increasingly alienated from projects designed to protect "core" values of our culture. Some of the brightest and the best have set out instead to change and expand the culture, to reform and revise ideas about national identity. In doing so, they will almost inevitably disappoint and even anger public expectations.

The culture of dissent reflected in the civil rights movement, the Viet Nam War, and the feminist movement, helped to form the values of a generation of literary scholars whose mission is one of interrogation and revision, central to the formation of a new understanding of national identity. The methodology is frequently interdisciplinary. Looking through historical, scientific, or anthropological lenses, the cultural critic digs into the contextual foundation of literary works. While their public might yearn to celebrate a culture which "flowered," producing literary texts which were inspiring, progressive, enabling, cultural critics look to literature as a place to redirect the energies of American society. Individual interests in feminist, Marxist, post-colonial, and queer theory have coalesced in a project to unsettle and at least question just about everything that the public wants to hold dear. Consequently, we can be seen as hostile, incomprehensible, and confusing.

In this essay, I want to examine the tension which has resulted from the differences between the public's expectations of a certain cultural coherence and the literary profession's transformation of those expectations. Most specifically, I will be asking this question: can there be a public person of letters who will speak about shared public values? Is such a position of authority even possible or desirable? To answer this question, I will briefly look at the careers of three academics recognized as people of letters listened to by a broad audience outside of the academy. I am interested in the ways that these figures fill a public need for meaning and coherence. I will then compare the celebrity of these three critics to the more common, less popular, more critical role that

most professors of literature play in the academy, and follow this comparison with a discussion of “stardom” in the academy. The second half of the essay will ask cruder economic questions about the role of the public intellectual in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. First, I will examine an early moment of post-war cultural tension, the Quiz Show scandals of the late fifties, dramatically exemplified by the collision between the academic and literary values of the Van Doren family and the public’s fascination with the younger Charles Van Doren’s success at winning money. The meaning of the quiz show possesses a particular urgency in the year 2000, a year dominated by reincarnations of the television program “Twenty-One.”

To a certain extent, money haunts this essay. In capitalistic America, in the academy as well as in the market place, money signifies success recognized by the most ardent Marxist critic. Even as we can point to “stars” in the profession known for their ability to receive bigger salaries and greater perks, their own financial success is relatively diminished when it is compared to their better paid colleagues in the sciences and social sciences. This leads to a rephrasing of my original question. Will the public listen to a “public person of letters” speaking from a position within the academy that is economically marginalized? There are many ways *not* to listen to cultural critics. The frequent attacks made against the difficulty and obscurity of academic language often come from a public desire not to hear what is being said. Rather than rejecting outright a critic’s attack on cultural values and practices, readers will decide instead that the message itself is unintelligible, and therefore cannot and need not be understood.

### **Brush up your Shakespeare**

From February, 1998 until December 1999, I asked roughly three hundred educated adults in and out of the academy in Boston, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Tampa, and Dover, New Hampshire to name those American literary critics with national reputations who are recognized outside of the academy. The results were startling in their consistency. Harold Bloom, Camille Paglia, and Henry Louis Gates invariably came to the assorted minds. Jacques Derrida was also mentioned, but as a figure in a special category of his own, as somebody known to be important without being properly understood, and besides, he is French.

The reasons for the celebrity of Bloom, Paglia, and Gates has everything to do with their own personal charisma, their prodigious productivity, their accessibility, and their talent for self-promotion. Most significantly, they share a mission to encourage the public to appreciate its literary and cultural productions. These missions vary considerably. Bloom, careful to place himself “outside” of academe, extols the many common virtues of Shakespeare and other members of “the Western Canon,” defending them from post-structural critical analysis. Paglia, exulting in her exclusion from the academic world, personifies herself as a postfeminist champion of eroticized and transgressive cultural productions that she is rescuing from dreary politically correct mistreatments by feminist cultural critics. Gates differs from Bloom and Paglia in his attempts to alter the academy by producing an impressive body of collaborative scholarly and critical work that places African American and African literature and culture at the center of the academy. His mission is to teach an American public to value African American culture as an essential part of an American national identity. In spite of their differences, all three critics work to develop within the culture a positive attitude towards

literary production. Their popularity signifies a gap, perhaps even a chasm, between the public and the literary academy, which is seen to be engaging in dangerous and unfriendly work that undermines a popular belief in the values of a national culture.

Ever since David Garrick held his Shakespearian Jubilee in Stratford-On-Avon in 1769, William Shakespeare has been a remarkably beloved writer, one purported to be speaking to all people in all ages. Shakespeare at the turn of the 21st century is no exception. Martin Arnold claims that at the present, Shakespeare's work "makes up the greatest backlist of any writer in history," and points to the Borders bookstore at 57th Street and Park Avenue for proof of his popularity. Eight shelves are filled with Shakespeare's work, while three are dedicated to of Shakespeare criticism. Lovers of Shakespeare are often careful to separate their acts of devotion from dryer academic treatments of their hero. Just recently, the Shakespeare Society of America was founded, not as an academic society, but as a meeting place for those who "love Shakespeare." The Society is committed "not to deconstruct Shakespeare but to study him as if he were a contemporary." Not surprisingly, Harold Bloom is honorary chairman.<sup>i</sup>

In his recent book, *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human*, Bloom claims kinship with Shakespeare, arguing that Shakespeare invented in his characters "our kind of inwardness, which really means our sense of personality."<sup>ii</sup> Since Shakespeare invented "our" personalities, he becomes necessarily a contemporary, albeit a rather deified one. Indeed, in a talk radio program, *The Connection*, Bloom drew rather explicit connections between Shakespeare, Falstaff, and himself, whom he referred to more than once as Sir John Bloomstaff. As a literary critic of considerable charm and girth, Bloom by identifying with Falstaff (who is also Shakespeare), suggests that his own critical book is actually written by Sir John Falstaff, Falstaff, and, coincidentally Shakespeare himself.<sup>iii</sup>

Bloom's critical ability and his prodigious taste for production have long been recognized by the academy. His many books<sup>iv</sup> have earned him two teaching positions, one at Yale, and another at New York University. Yet he takes pains to distance himself from the professoriate, sounding like a outlaw performing illegal critical operations, the better to vex *his* critics. Thus on *The Connection*, Bloom explained to Christopher Lydon and callers alike that since he had been scorned by the academic world, only renegades like himself would appreciate his work. He goes out of his way to explain that far from looking for academic approval, he loathes it. Producing a text without index or footnote, he wants it only to be useful to "common readers" and "common playgoers," individuals presumably who have no index needs whatsoever. He goes so far as to wish that his book be kept out of academic hands entirely. He doesn't want "a single person, with a few honorable exceptions, who ostensibly teach Shakespeare even to look at the book. They're hideous ideologues, pseudo Marxists, pseudo feminists, pseudo historicists, and disciples of Foucault."<sup>v</sup> Such attacks on false teachers endear him to his general public. Callers to *The Connection* reveled in his concern for their common readership, frequently confessing their own impatience with literary critics who ruin Shakespeare by over-analyzing him, when we know that Shakespeare speaks the truth to us all. Bloom's popularity with the general public seems to result from his mission over the last decade to be "the people's critic." He reassures his readers that the canon of masterpieces of Western Civilization is sufficient for all men (men means people; persons means odious feminism creeping into criticism), and that great writers can be understood by their

language and their characters by all of us, and are only mutilated by critical deformations committed by post-structuralist critics. Not only does Bloom promise the reader that he need not corrupt his sensibility by exposing it to the ideological excesses of other critics, but he insists that it is possible to exist without ideology, as a “pure aesthete.” His readers are given license to “love” Shakespeare without taking on the heavy baggage that critics like to carry, briefcases packed with vexing questions about nationalism, identity, sexuality, power, authority, economics, colonialism, racism, and anti-Semitism. This is not to say that Bloom cannot be a brilliant close reader and theorist. His classic work *Anxiety of Influence* shaped influence studies for over a generation. But the popular Bloom who provokes affectionate and idolatrous calls on talk-radio programs allows his “common readers” to “own” a version of Shakespeare which can reinforce their own sense of cultural worth. Bloom urges his readers to feel good about being “human,” or at least to feel “awed” to be present at the literary transfusions uniting Shakespeare’s “personality” to their own, mediated by Sir John Bloomstaff.

In spite of his own predilection for controversial public exchanges, Bloom is old fashioned in his publicity habits. We read about him in the *New York Times Book Review* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, and are most likely to hear him holding forth on canonical matters on talk shows broadcast on National Public Radio. He does not, however, seem to deploy web pages and fanzines to make his way into cyber-consciousness. A search for Harold Bloom resulted recently in 4,745 matches for the entire Web.<sup>vi</sup> The number befits his prodigious output over a scholarly and teaching career of 34 years. The entries that I scanned, however, seem modest enough: bibliographies of his works, reprints of lectures given at various universities, interviews about his favorite canonical works for young and old (he’s keen on *The Wind in the Willows* and Kipling’s *Kim*) and titles remarkable only for the presence of his name written in German, Norwegian, and Italian. I could find nothing obviously glitzy or self-promoting. The oddest entry was a reference to Harold Bloom, stock analyst for Sherwin Lee, author of *Stock Tips for the Next Century*, which I can only imagine signifies the existence of another non-Shakespearean Bloom. Either that, or Bloom is more of a polymath than I could have imagined.

Bloom’s cyber-modesty is in direct contrast to the cyber-hubris of Camille Paglia, who incidentally is a former student of Bloom’s. Paglia directly connects her fame as “America’s foremost female intellectual”<sup>vii</sup> to her success on the web. In an “Interv-Yoo,” for Yahoo!, Paglia asserts that the Internet was “crucial” to her success.

It was essential. It broke the tyranny of the East Coast media and academic establishment which controlled ideas until now. Before I became well-known, the East Coast clique of Cambridge, New York, and D.C., and most of the major magazines and newspapers really froze me out. But something else happened. My first book [**Sexual Personae**] came out in 1990, after being rejected by publishers for 10 years. Right after it came out, I was speaking and someone asked if I knew I was all over The WELL. I didn’t even know what The WELL was. He sent me reams of material reprinted from there – intelligent, serious discussion based on my writings and lectures. I was flabbergasted....The established media were ignoring me, threatened by my ideas, but the people in cyberspace were devouring them, analyzing them, debating them.<sup>viii</sup>

Paglia not only regards the Internet as the source of her success, but she judges the public's attitude towards herself to define its level of comfort in cyberspace. "People who hate me are the ones who hate the Internet – the old guard, leftists, often people who are threatened as the word becomes obsolete." Her own work, she argues, is "like cyberspace." *Sexual Personae* is many things. It is long, full of hard and sometimes tedious learning, resembling many other books, particularly those published before the mid seventies, that relies upon the writer's ability to line up all of her index cards and copy them into a text to make an argument. The argument itself, that sexual types have been reproducing themselves across the century in an essentialist and predetermined way, that sexual conflict is inevitable and essential, is most bold in its post-feminist attack on more "conventional" feminist thinkers who are found guilty of reducing sexuality to a social construction. Paglia's sexuality is dark and dangerous, and women's sexual position is vulnerable and at risk, a condition which seems to excite her and her followers interested in exploring the eternal struggle of the powerful, powerless feminine principle. The exhausting scope of the project, from ancient Egypt to 19<sup>th</sup> century Amherst, Mass, and the excessive number of examples she culls to prove her point make her controversial text feel remarkably old-fashioned, the product of a modern-day Causabon. Leading her reader through examples from the Venus of Willendorf to Sade to Hawthorne, Paglia produces something much closer to a dissertation than to the best selling paperback that it has become.

The book may feel heavy, but Paglia's cyber-punk persona is fast and sleek. As her Home Page suggests, she revels in conflict served up for the consumption of her readers. Fans can click on references to Paglia in the news, where she slams the *Village Voice* (which had attacked her in 1991 for "Intellectual Fraud") for inviting her to debate the future of gay politics:

I had to stifle my uproarious laughter as best I could. For brazen hypocrisy you certainly take the wormy cake...Now that the sterile world of your snobbish downtown coterie is falling around your ears, you bizarrely imagine that I am going to lend my fame and prestige to save you...If the smell of decay is sharp in your nose, look around you. The *Village Voice* is dead.<sup>ix</sup>

The reader can also call up two news articles on "The Dimbleby Walk-Out," in which Paglia "storms out" of an interview with British broadcaster, Jonathan Dimbleby, held in "the sumptuous presidential hotel suite where *Pretty Women* was filmed. "Jonathan Dimbleby was the worst prepared popinjay of a reporter I have ever encountered," Paglia complained. The two articles on the walk out, one by Barbara McMahan, one by Dimbleby, range from amused to dismissive in reporting the event. Their presence in a fan site suggests that all publicity regardless of its content matters in cyber space. And after all, Paglia was a to be interviewed in series that included Janet Reno, Norman Mailer, and Kofi Annan.<sup>x</sup>

Paglia's own position in the academy is a curious one. Her famous cover of *Vamps and Tramps* embodies her combative position. Clad in black, arms outspread, hair punkish, she balances lightly on her black downtown boots, looking like a member in good standing in a downtown coterie, and weirder still, resembling in her funereal

feistiness the new Hillary Rodham Clinton running for the Senate. Her reader, however, is more likely to be a member of the general public than an academic. Paglia doesn't really travel on the academic circuit, but concentrates her energies almost exclusively in larger venues, particularly in journalistic appearances where she holds forth on "Madonna turning Forty," Frank Sinatra's death, and the meaning of Monica Lewinsky. On one level, she represents herself as one who has been rejected by academics whose attentions she sought and failed to win, those tyrants who control the "East Coast media and academic establishment," those "liberal thinkers who have been enslaved by these poseurs, these racketeers, people who are pretending to be liberal but who are in fact just naïve politically," those "people who hate me." Rather poignantly, she includes on her Home Page not only her "first published essay," "Lord Hervey and Pope," 1973, but also two paragraphs praising this essay, "High Hervey Praise," in the *TLS*, 1973, as well as a "Bibliography of Worthwhile Reviews" of *Sexual Personae*.<sup>xi</sup> Since, however, she engineered the critical controversy that is at the core of her first book by arguing that all feminist critics are simple minded in their need to reduce all-powerful sexuality to social constructivism, her tendency to victimize herself is puzzling.

Hardly silenced, Paglia exerts considerable power in the public sphere. I suspect that she learned some of her tactics from her Yale mentor, Harold Bloom. Although Bloom possesses an enormous amount of academic as well as public power, signified by his two high-paying professorial positions at Yale and NYU, he presents himself as a maverick, one who has been thrown out of the academy for non-compliance, a non-conformist at war with the Marxists and feminists and queer theorists. Paglia adopts this position, appealing to a public distaste for ideological arguments that criticize present social and cultural systems. Her own argument becomes both personal and commodified, one that depends upon her audience's interest in the way she looks, the way she dresses, the way she presents herself on a book cover. While Bloom is avuncular, promising a cozy and benign relationship with his reader as long as said reader promises not to believe Foucault, Paglia comes across as a hip dominatrix, offering to scourge her readers' enemies, those nasty ideologues who try to control something as powerful as sexuality.

Such a message can be quite mixed, promising freedom from victimization and sexual liberation while it depends upon an essentialist belief in the power, above everything else, of sexuality. It also depends upon a belief in the necessity of Paglia herself as defender of sexual liberation. Setting herself up as the only academic critic doing "sexually positive" work, she deliberately overlooks the work of Judith Butler, Miriam Hansen, Marjorie Garber, Jane Gallop, and others. In a way, her own Home Page best demonstrates the solipsistic and isolationist position she takes as "maenad, Apollonian and Bacchic" savior.<sup>xii</sup> It is notably lacking in links that would connect the reader into growing networks of like-minded thinkers working for sexual freedom. Paglia's hot links lead back to herself.

When you look up Henry Louis Gates on the Internet,<sup>xiii</sup> he is often connected to Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft. This accidental pairing of Gates and Gates becomes even more intriguing when the most recent publishing triumph of "Skip" Gates is understood. On Martin Luther King Day, 1999, Microsoft published *Encarta Africana*, a CD-ROM encyclopedia of African culture containing 3,361 articles and hundreds of video and audio clips. The project, overseen by Henry Louis Gates and Kwame Anthony

Appiah, realizes W.E.B. Du Bois's dream of creating an Encyclopedia Africana, to promote an international understanding of African culture. That original project originally began in 1909, when Du Bois enlisted major American academic figures to join him in an effort that would tantalize students of African and African-American culture throughout the century. Du Bois's original encyclopedia remains uncompleted, but Gates and Appiah have managed to enlist over 400 contributors as well as Bill Gates's financial backing, to produce an extraordinary contribution to African American Studies. Its reality is directly related to the intellectual brilliance and the philosophical pragmatism of Skip Gates.<sup>xiv</sup>

Gates is without a doubt the leading figure in African American Studies, and one of the most visible academic figures in American culture today. As author and editor of many books, and even more articles in the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*, and perhaps more importantly as the head of the Department of African American Studies at Harvard University, he commands respect, admiration, and envy for his talented intellectual entrepreneurship. As he has moved from Yale to Cornell to Duke to Harvard, he has gained in each post considerable cultural and material capital. His most recent home, Harvard University, has given him the power to create the most influential center of African American studies in the country, one drawing on the talents of Cornel West, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and William Julius Wilson, a center which now produces the next generation of the leading scholars and teachers in African American studies.

Gates began his career producing a work that made a great stir in the theoretical sectors of the academy. *The Signifying Monkey*<sup>xv</sup> brought together post-structuralist theory and African American culture to establish the undeniable relevance of each to the other. African American folk tales and street rhymes were deconstructed and found as gorgeously complex as metaphysical poetry. Gates's success inspired academics to follow his example in taking most seriously the texture and structure, as well as the meaning, of African American texts. In fact, his study empowered students of all ethnic literatures to apply his critical principles to their materials. And while they did so, Gates moved on into more accessible regions of inquiry, producing entire series of autobiographies and slave narratives which served the general public's need to learn more about its African American heritage. Indeed, that need irresistibly grew with each publishing project. More recently, he has revealed more personal parts of his African American heritage in works such as *Colored People: A Memoir*, a celebration of his own West Virginian boyhood. Ever more accessible, leaving the complexities of theoretical discourse to his colleagues and students, he has become nationally recognized in works like *Loose Canons: Notes on the Cultural Wars*,<sup>xvi</sup> as a mediator seeking cultural tolerance and multicultural understanding.

Gates's choices of media signify his development as a public figure. When he left the deliberately abstract and philosophical language of theoretical criticism to pursue editorial and journalistic projects, he crossed over into the public sector. His success in finding Microsoft funding for his recent CD ROM project makes him the object of criticism by academics unhappy with his choice of partners. While Du Bois's original Encyclopedia project remains unfinished, critics note that Gates's reliance on Bill Gates's patronage changes the entire nature of the Encarta Africana, turning it into a commercial venture advertising the CD-ROM technology. Skip Gates, (made even more accessible with his frequently employed nickname) perhaps hardened to criticism after a particularly

troubling portrait of his successes in *Boston Magazine*,<sup>xvii</sup> points to the project itself as the main thing which has prevailed. His mission seems to be most clearly tied to the proliferation of documents in all possible media to illustrate the significance of African and African American culture. By making the strongest case for a multicultural understanding of our national identity, he positions himself to be an interpreter of a different American culture altogether, one which reads race and identity through texts and artifacts which have until now been missing from the general discourse.

What then can we learn from the successes of Bloom, Paglia and Gates? Bloom and Paglia seem to have solidified their positions by appealing to a public distrust in the literary academy. By emphasizing their solidarity with the common reader and deriding theoretical arguments which can interfere with a general reader's appreciation of literary texts, they seem to answer the public's need for affirmation and celebration of our cultural values. They also empower the reader by insisting that difficult critical approaches only get into the way of satisfying understanding of great works. Their optimism seems to me to both false and powerful, and I think that it is important for us in the future to try to imagine a way of reaching readers without diluting or distorting the meaning of our critical texts. To a certain extent, Gates has been able to do this. He has chosen to act as an accessible mediator between African American culture and the general public through his many acts of cultural translation and transmission. Providing so many different ways to understand the African American experience, through slave narratives, critical essays, autobiographies, and now through his new multi-media CD-ROM encyclopedia, Gates has found a way to revise American culture by adding significantly to its texts, its artifacts. He has, however, left the more complicated theoretical work that marked the beginning of his career to devote himself to projects of a simpler and more optimistic nature. We can read into these three "persons of letters" two competing interpretations. One is bleak: the public wants its culture unmolested by critical interpretations; we should forget our critical enterprises and produce new editions of old works and colorful CD-ROMS. But the other brings with it a certain degree of hope. Gates proves that readers outside the academy are waiting to be reached.

### **Becoming a Professor of Letters**

To understand the differences between public and academic assumptions about cultural values, it might be useful to look at the way that specialized literary and academic public spheres operate. I would like to trace the progress of a typical (and wholly fictional) literary scholar making her way in the academic market place. Literary critics and scholars usually begin their work by training in a large number of areas "covering" many centuries in English and American Literature.<sup>xviii</sup> After demonstrating their knowledge in some sort of comprehensive exam, they begin to "narrow" their focus, choosing a certain period, say Elizabethan or Romantic or American Literature from 1865 until the present. The hiring system in universities and colleges reinforces specialization by advertising for positions in particular fields: 20th Century British Literature with a specialization in Literary Modernism, Early American Literature until 1830, Post-Colonial Literary Theory, or Twentieth Century Latino/Latina Literature. My third and fourth categories reflect the expansion of the literary canon. We no longer simply look for candidates to do the centuries. But the new categories are just as prescriptive as the old. We would not suggest to a graduate student working on Willa

Cather that he apply for the Latino/Latina job just because he happens to writing about *Death Comes to the Archbishop*. The graduate student generally chooses a relatively narrow topic for her dissertation -- "Pre-Darwinian evolutionary theory in the work of George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell" -- that reflects her fields of specialization: Victorian prose fiction and feminist theory. Once hired, the candidate will probably be teaching in her fields, although she may be in a small department which encourages or requires her to expand her interest and "cover" "Early Modern English Literature from Beowulf to Dickens." If she is at a University that encourages Interdisciplinary Studies, she may even be working with colleagues across the curriculum to construct courses on "Science and Culture" or "Woman and Victorian Society." But chances are, that she will work, at least for her first book, on her dissertation, possibly expanding it to include "Evolutionary Theory in the work of Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell."

Within the university, the newly minted professor may gain a local reputation for her excellence in teaching by winning the university's coveted award for innovative pedagogy. To achieve tenure, however, she needs to be known outside of her local institution. Once she begins producing conference papers, articles, and books, our scholar might be recognized for her brilliance by her peer group -- The George Eliot Society, for instance, or the editorial board of *Victorian Studies in Literature and Culture*. Her first book, published by Oxbridge University Press, *Tied Tongues: the Evolution of the Nineteenth-Century Woman Writer*, will have a press run of 850 copies, and will be reviewed with enthusiasm in *Signs*, *ELH*, and *Victorian Studies*. If she appeals to a wider audience, demonstrating the ways that nineteenth century women were kept out of scientific discourse by writing themselves into pejorative categories that rendered them speechless, she might be recognized at annual national meetings of the English Institute or the Modern Language Association. At the MLA, such recognition is signified by a "big" room, possibly a ballroom, and by an overflowing and excited audience in contrast to a tiny "salon" half filled. *Tied Tongues* will then go into paperback with a run of 5000. She is asked to be on the editorial board of *Victorian Studies* and *Heresies: a Feminist Journal*. Our scholar will get tenure and become director of the center for interdisciplinary studies at her university.

I am describing the beginning of a career that most graduate students today would envy and attempt to emulate. Desire, however, disturbs the most contented breast, and tenured, the scholar looks for more recognition. She wants to be hired away by a bigger and better university. She wants to reach a wider audience with a more popular book, but isn't quite certain how to interest the public in the vicissitudes of fortune in the writing lives of Victorian women writers. She envies A.S. Byatt's success in writing *Possession*, (although she doesn't think much of the novel) and wonders about writing fiction, or even a screen play.

Our scholar is experiencing a common academic dilemma. Through her writing and her teaching she is reaching a relatively wide audience. Her book, mostly found in university libraries, (it costs \$67.50) will be read by hundreds of colleagues, not to mention the thousands of students writing papers on science and the Victorian women, and she will personally teach four thousand students over a twenty year career. Nonetheless, it is instructive to look first at her desire to become an academic star.

**"Twinkle Twinkle"**

David Lodge could be responsible for anointing one of the better known academic superstars, Stanley Fish, in his irreverently satiric novel, *Changing Places*.<sup>xix</sup> A British literary critic with a sharp eye for the serious absurdities of the profession, Lodge borrowed salient pieces of the young Fish, Miltonic scholar and critical mover and shaker, to produce Morris Zapp. Zapp, a Berkeley Miltonic scholar and all around general hustler, is a brilliantly plausible character appreciated on both sides of the Atlantic for his genius at all things critical, scholarly and administrative. At home in all of the best international airports, conversant with all of the most current critical languages, Zapp knows how to wield power on a relatively grand scale. After *Changing Places*, Fish achieved a certain degree of notoriety just for being the model of such a successful and charming superstar, famous for being the model of a character famous for being famous.

*Changing Places* charts the parallel lives of two literary scholars changing academic positions between a British University somewhere in “The North” of England and an American University which is certainly located in Berkeley, California. The novel is set in 1968, a time of great political unrest, and emphasizes particularly the anti-war protests and the People’s Park demonstrations which make the shy retiring Philip Swallow character, (the Brit astonished by his changed place), a celebrity for being on television at the People’s Park riot. The televised nature of his rise to prominence locates the changed place of literary discourse itself. Zapp stands for the more conventionally brash, aggressive critic who overturns established icons and pieties and gets paid for it in an seductive and exciting new world of international “stardom” What is most interesting about Lodge’s novel is the way it captures two things at the same moment. Just when literary scholars were dreaming about being “stars” jet setting in the name of culture, they were also redefining themselves in opposition to more idealistic interpretations of a coherent and unified national and western civilization. By placing Swallow in Berkeley at a time of critical cultural dissent, Lodge emphasizes (however comically) the way that the Viet Nam War produced in the United States a generation of academic professionals who grew up sharing a distrust of mainstream values. Their dissent revived literary Marxism and feminism, and eventually produced post-colonial theory, queer studies, and Cultural Criticism, critical systems that would question just about everything that “the public” wanted to hold dear.

Almost thirty years after People’s Park, Stanley Fish a.k.a. Zapp is one of the “stars” profiled in two articles written by Janny Scott for the *New York Times*. In December 1997,<sup>xx</sup> Scott warns against the dangers of the “star system,” suggesting that the excessive salaries and perks of a few “academostars” might be endangering the stability of the academy as a whole. Scott’s second article<sup>xxi</sup> fulfills her original prophecy, reporting in November 1998 that the English Department at Duke University seems to have collapsed under the weight of the “star system,” which has resulted in general discontent and defections within the faculty. In her first article, although Scott alludes to the wild successes of star “molecular biologists” and “mathematicians,” she concentrates on the English Department, “transformed after the arrival of Prof. Frank Lentricchia in 1985 led to the hiring of two big stars, Stanley Fish and Frederic Jameson.” After attracting others, particularly Eve Kosovksy Sedgwick and Henry Louis Gates, to Duke, the department skyrocketed to near the top of the national rankings.” Fish boasts that “newly minted Duke Ph.D.’s regularly get jobs at Yale, Harvard and the University of California at Berkeley.” Fish’s pleasure in his new department can be legitimated by the

increase in graduate student applications and in the more general impression across the country that Duke (and the Research Triangle in general) was the place to be.

. For much of her first article, Scott relies on the findings of David Shumway, an Associate Professor of Cultural Studies at Carnegie Mellon. Shumway interrogates “The Star System in Literary Studies” in the journal most associated with the professionalization of the academy: *PMLA: The Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. He argues that the rise of the conference and lecture circuits has helped to create a new form of academic celebrity, one more like a movie or rock star. Tracing the role of celebrity to the Hollywood star system, Shumway suggests that the “star” possesses the “illusion of depth, of a rich, complicated personality that exists beyond film roles,” resulting in “consistent personalities re-created in each new movie in spite of the roles they played.”<sup>xxii</sup> Literary stars developed when literary studies became “criticism” rather than philology and history. While earlier literary scholars “saw themselves as scientists, and they sought to ground their work in disinterested, impersonal judgment,” the post-war critics introduced the “personal” into their work. “Academic critics began to think of themselves as having distinctive voices or perspectives.” The significance of particular stars (Shumway concentrates on Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller and Stanley Fish) is made most clear on the conference and lecture circuit. The growth and proliferation of learned societies and their conferences reinforce the power of particularly brilliant and charismatic “stars” who serve as drawing cards for an audience eager to appreciate the “personality exhibited in the performance of the lecture or paper.” Thus Fish, “a master of the humorous put-down,” follows his scrappy one-liners “with a rapid rhetorical destruction of an opponent,” while remaining accessible and likeable, while Jane Gallop has become famous for her heavy makeup, seamed stockings which seem to parodically feminize performances of her barbed feminist analysis.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Shumway is careful to make distinctions between academic ‘stardom’ and the more general popular stardom of rock stars and media personalities. His academic stars only shine brightly within the academy, reflecting a public glamour which is immediately turned back onto their own professional situation within their institutions. They become hot properties within the university system, candidates for being hired away for more pay and lighter teaching loads, but they do not become public figures peaking for “English Literature on a national level. In fact Shumway suggests that public visibility of certain academics allows the press to deal with them while not having to take the effort to “engage the difficult and arcane matters that they actually write about.”<sup>xxiv</sup> This is a very important point that needs to be repeated. “Stars” are represented to the public as beings who own a professional expertise that borders on obscurantism, possessing a verbal brilliance, twinkling as it may, that can turn dangerously comic. Thus in an interview in the *New York Times*, Jacques Derrida, “perhaps the world’s most famous philosopher,” and of course reputed to be one of the most incomprehensible, is described as a “stylish dresser...wearing a khaki-colored Nehru suit, a dark orange silky-looking shirt and a brightly flowered silk tie.” Reporter Dinitia Smith thinks that he looks like Peter Falk’s “Colombo.” Reducing his famous ideas to one paragraph, (because they cannot really be understood) Smith gives the most attention to his barbecued chicken (he eats it with a knife and fork at the Polo Grill) and his delight in reading a recipe for “deconstructed rabbit.”<sup>xxv</sup>

Scott closes her first article on academic stardom making clear her concern that the star system produces the wrong model for faculty recruiting by ignoring the university mission to nurture talents over the lifetime of a scholar and to develop ethical and societal values. She is influenced here by Shumway and by Joyce Appleby, an historian at the University of California. Shumway predicts that in the current period of “academic retrenchment, the average faculty member’s real wages have been falling” because of the star system, which produces a need for more part time hires while it absorbs a “larger share of shrinking resources.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Appleby predicts that “off-scale” salaries for stars and reduced teaching loads will drain university budgets. It should come as no surprise that when Scott revisits the Duke University English department eleven months later, she finds it in shambles. Stanley Fish is leaving for the University of Illinois Chicago to become Dean; Eve Sedgwick has left for New York. Victim to the “star system,” the department has collapsed from the squabbling and resentments within. Colleagues darkly allude to nasty battles between the “old” and “new” members of the department, in spite of the fact that some of the presumably new “stars” at Duke have been around for about 12 years. Scott’s concern for the star system, reinforced by Shumway and Appleby, interests me particularly for a reason that is tied to a relative invisibility, perhaps even marginality, of the English Profession. In her first article, she cites the example of a “middle aged associate professor at a reputable state university, earning a perfectly respectable \$43,000 a year until he becomes a finalist for a top prize in his field and is “catapulted into the giddy world of academic stardom.” The money rolls in, a \$10,000 raise, \$25,000 to match the offer from another university. But let’s go back to the first number. A respectable \$43,000 a year. We don’t know how many years the middle-aged associate professor has been working at his reputable state university, but we can make a fairly accurate estimation. He would probably be at least seven into his career to have earned tenure and to have become an associate professor. Since a prize winning book needs at least a year to be judged on its merits, I would guess that our prize winner had been working at reputable U for at least eight years after the six years to took him to earn the Ph.D. (The national average is seven, but our candidate is obviously above average.) I am certain of one thing. Our professor teaches in the humanities, either in English or History. No other fields except Art History and Philosophy pay so low. In a society increasingly dominated by the desire for, the need for, the schemes for making money, low pay marks the relative lack of power and visibility that the English profession enjoys.

### **The Economic Argument: Or Who Wants to be a Millionaire?**

When I began writing this essay, I knew that I wanted to look at the quiz show scandals of the late fifties because they mark a radical loss of innocence in American culture and document our culture’s fascination with the accumulation of both culture and money. The public intellectual could never be so secure or so respected again. It seemed to me particularly important that Charles Van Doren, would first capture the imaginations of his viewers with his dazzling displays of erudition and then break their hearts with his confession of fraud and deceit. In his rise, he fulfilled a larger national desire for both intellectual achievement and economic success; in his fall, he complicated this desire by revealing the inherent conflicts that make such a dream difficult, if not impossible.

I sat before the television in the mid-fifties, watching Van Doren sweating it out

in the “Twenty-One” isolation booth, thrilled to see him clench his fists and furrow his brow as he pondered the complex questions that only he could answer. Van Doren was a particular favorite in our south side Chicago neighborhood. So modest, so smart, so cute, so successful, so “civilized.” We wanted to be like him. I remember my aunt, who called him Charley, sobbing in confusion when he was finally exposed as a contestant who had been in on the fix all the while. I don’t think that she ever stopped believing in him; she decided instead that he had been victimized by HUAC.

Robert Redford’s film,<sup>xxvii</sup> *Quiz Show*, a brilliant reprise of what seems now to be a simpler time, illustrates quite movingly the poise and certainty that the Van Doren family possessed before the scandal broke. Redford’s Columbia University in the late fifties seems to be a pre-lapsarian world, ivy-covered, bathed in a golden light. Paul Scofield, playing Mark Van Doren, English professor and Pulitzer Prize winning father of the prizewinner, gazes into the camera with measured and calm authority. Even as his son amasses thousands of dollars in weekly rounds of *Twenty-One*, in spite of the flurry of news reporters and star-struck students invading the cloistered study and classroom, he remains unruffled, remotely tied to timeless truths. “Don Quixote,” he tells his students, “*is* life...If you act like a Knight, you *are* a Knight.” The ultimate disclosure of the corruption underlying the fixed quiz shows becomes all the more tragic because of the great difference between the father’s humanistic faith in “truth” and “the life of the mind” and his son’s more venal fascination with the fluctuating world of celebrity.

An ironic, post-modern nostalgia shapes Redford’s fascination with Van Doren’s fall. Literary gatherings in plain air at the Van Doren’s country home reveal complex arrangements of taste and privilege disrupted by the celebrity son’s unwieldy presence of a giant television set which pushes the literati out of the frame. While Charles Van Doren’s fame unsettles his family’s ideas of order, his downfall disturbs on an even greater level the public’s ideas about cultural authenticity. Boyish, brilliant, unassuming, pedigreed, he was a familiar cultural hero. As Richard Goodwin explains, in his memoir *Remembering America*, at a time when “we were more innocent” the quiz show scandals “violated our misplaced trust in the guardians of the swelling electronic media, and mocked our libidinous urge to believe in their newly revealed breed of intellectual heroes.” What particularly shocked the public was the possibility that the son of Mark and Dorothy Van Doren, nephew of Carl Van Doren, the product of a life time of learning and literary production, could betray so completely his origins. He was both a “newly revealed breed of intellectual hero” and a privileged scion, corrupted by a desire for more -- more money, more fame, more connection.<sup>xxviii</sup> In Redford’s film, when Charles Van Doren, “egg head turned national hero,” accepts a fifty thousand dollar a year job as cultural correspondent for Dave Garroway’s *Today Show* to preside over “the largest classroom in the world.” Sharing billing with a chimpanzee named J. Fred Muggs, Van Doren sits uneasily as he mediates between the popular and the academic.

Van Doren’s family of poets and critics and recorders of the American dream made his ascendancy and his downfall all the more remarkable and poignant. The Van Doren family expressed in their writings a belief in America that emphasized heroic individuals, flowering cultural productions, and progressive movements.<sup>xxix</sup> In 1999, we know the name Van Doren, preserved in a notorious amber, because of the quiz show scandals, but in 1959, before the quiz scandals broke, the name Van Doren represented literary distinction. Whether he demonstrated his intellectual prowess on the absolutely

fixed venue of *Twenty One*, or he edified the viewers who tuned into his cultural reports on *The Today Show*, Charles Van Doren, both heir to his family's reputation and the winner of \$129,000 in prize money, appealed to a national taste for instruction.

We can never underestimate the significance of the money. Before his apotheosis, Charles Van Doren was making \$86 a week as an instructor of English Literature at Columbia University. \$4472 a year -- not an impossibly low salary for an untenured lecturer in 1956. Winning 29 times his annual salary, Van Doren acquired power instantly recognizable in the marketplace. Redford uses Van Doren to point to that moment in post-war cultural history when the literary academy crossed over into the world of popular culture -- that moment when the public entered with some degree of interest "the largest class room in the world." Fans of Charley were looking for a certain degree of cohesion and authenticity from a "cultural correspondent" who was "worth" listening to because he could make money by talking on his feet.

The Van Doren quiz scandal marks a divide between public interpretations of the academic figure. Charles Van Doren delighted television audiences because he revealed a graceful ability to make money demonstrating the dual power of his brains and the American capitalistic system. In fact, his success suggested that in America brains could be sexy and profitable. Van Doren's public scandal, surely the most spectacular to be experienced by any of the quiz show contestants, hauled into question the validity both of his literary pedigree and attainments, and perhaps even worse, his talent at making money. The public punished Van Doren for letting it down, for leaving it with just another egg head who makes \$86 a week teaching Melville. Having outstripped his illustrious family in the fame game as "the smartest man in the world," our answer to "the shocking launch of the Soviet Sputnik," having made the cover of *Time* magazine, Van Doren signified the bright and shining public lie.

As I said earlier, I planned over a year ago to write about the quiz shows because they provided a way to think about the tension between a public need for cultural coherence of the sort that the elder Van Dorens provided and a public distrust of intellectual authority. But I never imagined that reincarnations of the quiz show "Twenty-One"--"Who Wants to Be a Millionaire," "Greed," and the new, improved "Twenty-One"--would dominate networks in the year 2000. "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" is the number one television program in the nation, shown three times a week on the ABC network. Its popularity with the network is understandable. Game shows, even those offering contestants the chance to win one million dollars, are much cheaper to produce than the more expensive sitcoms and dramas. One episode of NBC's "Twenty-One" costs \$600,000 to produce; one episode of NBC's "Law and Order" costs \$1.45 million.<sup>xxx</sup> No wonder the networks love the cost savings, but why does the television audience return with such enthusiasm to a format that disappointed so many in the past? The chutzpah of the name itself -- "Twenty-One" -- suggests a level of cultural forgetting that needs to be connected to the idea of a public intelligentsia in the 21'st century.

Richard Goodwin has been asked to explain the allure of the new game shows. While the old format celebrated outsized intellect, either "showcas[ing] people from one walk of life who had an improbable knowledge of other areas, like Joyce Brothers and boxing...or...mak[ing] heroes out of super-geniuses like Van Doren...it would be impossible to do that today because you couldn't keep contestants on that long without rigging the shows." Media critic Robert Thompson finds the new shows more

democratic, about “people with jobs like ours, answering questions *we* could answer. It’s a much more American model in many ways.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Certainly the questions are easier to answer. For one million dollars, how far is the earth from the sun? (a) 9.3 million (b) 39 million (c) 93 million (d) 193 million.? The original “Twenty-One” expected its contestants to know the names of the first secretary of state, chief justice, secretary of war, attorney general, and postmaster general, all appointed by George Washington. The dumbing down of the quiz shows marks a considerable difference in the public’s need for intellectual distinction. Okay, “Twenty-One” was fixed. When we watched contestants tells us the name of not just the doctor who treated John Wilkes Booth after the assassination of Lincoln, but the names of his sisters and aunts, we believed that it was important to try to know these arcane pieces of information. We believed, and again, I speak as somebody who sat on the sofa next to my Aunt Louise and Uncle Ralph, that we needed to learn all that was humanly possible, to go to college, to read the Encyclopedia. To be brilliant, like Charles Van Doren? Or to get rich, like Charles Van Doren? Perhaps both, but we never dreamed then that the questions being asked in the year 2000 would be so easy, forming a solidarity between viewer and contestant that made the money the most significant part of the transaction. It is interesting to note that January 24, 2000 the London insurance underwriters Goshawk Syndicate filed suit in Britain’s High Court of Justice against the producers of “Who Wants to be a Millionaire.” They argued that the questions on the quiz show are too easy, putting them at risk of paying out too much prize money.<sup>xxxii</sup>

### **Material Culture**

Well, we learned a lot, perhaps not all that was humanly possible, but we didn’t get rich. The difference in pay within the university is a dirty little secret badly kept. It is revealed in countless ways. At my own university, graduate student teaching associates in the humanities make thousands of dollars less, than graduate students assisting in science labs. I learned this when I became graduate director and took to fighting with the administration for better conditions for our English graduate students. Later, as director of an interdisciplinary program, I also found out that it cost our program almost twice as much money to pay for a course replacement for a colleague in the Chemistry department as did to pay for a colleague in the Drama department. The differences reflect the inequalities across the curriculum. After all, the deans reason, scientists and engineers can command more money on the outside, hence, they get more money inside.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

This disparity between disciplines within the university inspired James Engell and Anthony Dangerfield to investigate “The Market-Model University: Humanities in the Age of Money.” Their two years of research in “hundreds of educational and professional journals, studies, books, magazines, and statistical digests published over the last 35 years” produce results that are impressively bleak. Measuring the decline in English majors (as well as History, Philosophy, foreign languages, and Religion) against the rise in Computer and Information sciences, protective services, Public Administration and Business majors, they calculate the differences in faculty salaries:

On average, humanists receive the lowest faculty salaries by tens of thousands of dollars; the gap affects the whole teaching population, regardless of rank, within colleges as well as universities. Nationally, in 1976, a newly hired assistant

professor teaching literature earned \$3000 less than a new assistant professor in business. In 1984, that gap had grown to \$10,000. In 1990, it was \$20,000, and by 1996 exceeded \$25,000.

Engell and Dangerfield add that consulting fees and second jobs also “boost incomes in many disciplines - except the humanities.” In fact, professors in more highly paid fields tend to spend even more time working on outside ventures and commensurately “less on duties at the institution itself,” creating a system which depends upon underpaid humanities professors to take up these duties in their own university service. Also, humanists’ teaching loads tend to be the highest, “with the least amount of release and research time.”

Engells and Dangerfield blame the weakened condition of the humanities for a lower quality of students entering the humanistic fields. Most alarming, over the past 30 years, “a total flip flop has occurred in the proportion of freshmen entering college who expect their higher education to enhance future job security and assure high wage employment (greatly increased) versus those who want to develop values, form a broader social vision, experiment with varied forms of knowledge, and formulate a philosophy of living (greatly decreased.)”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Indeed, the changed value system of the student body has produced a decidedly vocational atmosphere in institutions that formerly professed the “liberal arts.” One American Association of University Professors report concludes that undergraduates choose their majors and classes with a keen awareness of the relative value, reflected in salaries, of their professor’s careers. Their interest in the better paid, therefore more successful teachers creates a rising demand for the better paid professors in the better paid fields, “further accentuating the demand for faculty members in these disciplines,” and creating in the process a “self fulfilling prophecy” that continues to unfold.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Such aversion towards the profession of English becomes a consequence of what Engell and Dangerfield call “The Three Criteria” in the “Age of Money.” Success in the academic world depends upon three things: “A Promise of Money” -- this field will get you a good job with above average earnings; “A Knowledge of Money” -- this field studies money; “A Source of Money” -- this field is significantly funded by outside sources.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The profession of English fails to satisfy any of the above criteria. The occasional superstars, the MacArthur Fellow, the computer genius putting all of Dickens onto a CD-Rom that is being picked up by Disney, the bicoastal screenwriter who has so many frequent flyer points that he can grade papers in business class, represent a connection to the world of money that only reinforces the relative lack of status and power experienced by the rest of their colleagues. I need to add that things may change. Increasingly, English majors gravitate towards the Web as a place to use their critical writing talents. Students who might have aspired to writing the great American Novel now seem to dreaming of becoming WebMasters and Games Developers.

The entire Engell-Dangerfield report is valuable. I disagree, however, with its tendency to blame the “theoretical bickering” and internal warfare for the “degradation” of the humanities over the last twenty years<sup>xxxvii</sup>. This is not to say that the culture wars have not taken their toll. But the substance of the post-structuralist analyses of Western culture has provided significant, vital, necessary revisions of our mission. The problem is not so much one of warfare within the English Profession. In fact, pluralistic and

interdisciplinary approaches to literary studies and cultural criticism seem to be revitalizing the profession and infusing departments with a renewed sense of purpose. The main problem lies within the culture at large, a culture that does not want to be “revised.” Since the eighties, we have been shaped by the pressures that an “Age of Money” demands. Three presidential elections between 1980-92 helped to transform the Democrat Party into a moderate instrument of business, law and order, and compromise. English Literature, professed by academics who came of age during the civil rights movement, the Viet Nam War, and the feminist movement, has produced over the same twenty years a cultural and political discourse uncompromisingly critical of mainstream values. Since the public voice of a man or woman of letters in 1999, whether feminist, Marxist or queer, post-colonial, multicultural, or ethnic, will in all likelihood be critical of society as a whole, this voice has a good chance of being either silenced, trivialized, or ignored. This is one reason why, to get back to our Victorian scholar trying to develop a more public “voice,” she will find it so difficult to be heard. Even if she becomes “a star” who might be “hired away” for her talents, it is unlikely that she will become a public interpreter of her subject. It is not that the public has little interest in nineteenth century women. On the contrary, the market for films and television productions of classics like *Middlemarch* and *Jane Eyre* has never been better. But the public wants its classics clean, clear, transparent. They shouldn’t be interfered with, molested by intolerable, obnoxious theories about sexuality and language, economics and hegemonic control of the discourse. Public aversion to critical tampering applies across the literary curriculum. Thus, the cultural critic interrogating constructions of “whiteness” and “heterosexuality” in the work of Martha Stewart, that icon of postmodern domesticity, is just as likely to be ignored as the feminist Victorian specialist untying feminine tongues.

### **Why the Cultural Critic Finds it Hard to be Understood**

If there is a “public,” it is one particularly resistant to literary and cultural criticism as it is now practiced. This public does not want acts of critical violence or desecration performed upon works seen as sacred. It wants instead acts of cultural appreciation to sustain the public’s belief in its own integrity and meaning. One reason for the Van Doren family’s popularity as literary historians was the positive nature of their criticism, which celebrated an American culture of organic unity with shared values.

There are many publics. Reviews in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker* and *People*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Nation*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*, talk radio shows like “The Connection,” “Talk of the Nation,” and television spots on Oprah’s “Book Club” appeal to readers interested in learning about new publications and rereading old favorites. The popularity of Amazon.com is partially due to the wide range of book reviews offered to an active reading public. Readers might enjoy specialized topics as varied as famous battles in the civil war or the history of baseball, the saga of the Irish in America or studies of expeditions to climb Mt. Everest. But it is unlikely that the sort of texts that literary academics produce will attract the general reader. This is not merely because they are specialized texts, but because they are texts which want to alter their culture. They are designed to unsettle readers, to make them uncomfortable. As Derrida said at Columbia University, “We feel bad about ourselves...Who would dare to say otherwise? And those who feel good about themselves are perhaps hiding something from others or from themselves.”<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Here are the titles and blurbs of four books randomly selected from the advertising pages of the MLA Directories for 1997 and 1998: *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from "The Tempest" to Tarzan*, Beverly Hills, 90210: *Television, Gender and Identity*, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*, and *The Swineherd and the Bow: Representations of Class in the "Odyssey."*<sup>xxxix</sup> These texts are not designed to instill within the reader a sense of complacency, or even a lack of discomfort, about the role that literature plays in the constructions of class, sexuality, gender and empire. Linking the present culture to traumatic acts of the past, they insist that their audience recognize the implications of their own investment in cultural traditions that are still in the making.

The present generations of literary critics actively engaged in creating cultural discomfort tend to be led by scholars trained in the sixties and seventies, heavily influenced by both the civil rights movements and the anti-war movement, and the rebirth of the feminist movement. Employing diverse methods of post-structuralist theory, often divided amongst themselves over differences in their material or psychoanalytical methodologies, they often share mutual desires to turn up the heat, to expose, interrogate, dissect American culture, to advocate a cultural pluralism that is racially, ethnically and sexually diverse. Without agreeing upon a way to find or even recognize objective "truth," they are united in their efforts to dislodge cultural cover-ups. This work takes on a certain urgency in a culture of late capitalism that commits itself to a constant process of commodification, one that the critics themselves are often affected by as they work to sell their books and get "air time" to disseminate their views.

We often hear about the obscure and nefarious ways in which contemporary criticism betrays the common reader. In his attacks on cultural relativism, William Bennet stands completely outside the academy in his attempts to return the entire country to a set of social and family values closely aligned to the right wing of the Republican Party. Less overtly political, Alan Bloom called for a return to the canon to counteract what he saw as a collapse of the humanism values of western civilization.<sup>xi</sup> Most recently, Robert Scholes, alarmed by the disjunction between academic and popular interests, urges the profession to return to the roots of our liberal arts tradition by putting grammar, logic and rhetoric at the core of the curriculum.<sup>xii</sup> Denis Donoghue, arguing against the ideological practices of cultural studies, which he sees as vulgar and crude, insists that we return to a version of I. A. Richard's "Practical Criticism" of close reading.<sup>xiii</sup> In his insistence that we "teach the conflicts," Gerald Graff steers a critical course centered on ideas of a fruitful cultural debate that will result in an enriched curriculum.<sup>xliii</sup> Of the five critics I have mentioned, however, only Bennett has a national reputation, which stems more from his deliberate politicization of his arguments, most recently culminating in his study of the outrages of the Clinton Presidency and the moral laxity of a public suffering from cultural relativism.

One thing unites critics of contemporary critical discourse. It is universally agreed that it is "diminished by rebarabative jargon,"<sup>xliv</sup> or more simply, that it is impossible to read. Particularly abstruse pieces of critical prose are served up to critics of the critics as unintelligible, anti-humanistic examples of doublespeak. I am not going to pretend that some critical writing is not difficult. Philosophical and scientific writings are equally difficult. Critical writing that originates in a philosophical or psychoanalytic argument often retains the specialized language that has been part of its argument from the

beginning. But, and this is an important distinction, literary and cultural criticism is more likely to be clear, coherent, and explicit. The general reader, however, either insists that what is clear cannot be understood, or that what is clear is unusually, uncharacteristically clear. How often do main stream reviewers of an academic book exclaim with delight that the book is not so disgustingly difficult to read after all?

Over the last two decades, The Modern Language Association has become the target for public attacks on ugly critical language. Ritualistically, reporters at the New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, and the Chicago Tribune deride the more outlandish and arcane titles of sessions held at the annual MLA convention between December 27-30, particularly when the convention takes place in those towns. The point of these articles is almost always the silly and excessive proliferation of critical categories that inventive academics keep introducing. Fragmentation becomes suspect in such analysis, suggesting a cultural relativism that makes the reporter yearn for the old days when talks were entitled “Emerson and Moral Truth.”

The internationally infamous prose style of MLA panels even made its way into the British press in the August 29, 1998 edition of “The Editor,” a sort of high powered *Reader’s Digest* published by *The Guardian*. An article entitled “Deconstructing Martha” reprints a piece from *The Quarterly Review of Doublespeak*, published by the National Council of Teachers of English, (Urbana, Illinois). The *Review* “unearthed” a proposal for an MLA panel debate on the significance of Martha Stewart, “America’s most celebrated “homemaker.” Let me offer an example of the “Doublespeak” prose style that so provoked the NCTE defenders of “clear” speech:

Martha Stewart is one of North America’s pre-eminent arbiters of middle-class style and taste. In her multiple and synthesized roles as author and trademark, financial icon and cultural magnate, uber-WASP and Chief Executive Housewife, archetype of white femininity and immigrant dream, Stewart’s influence spreads across the visual and print media and spawns numerous parodies.

The proposal goes on to ask: “How does Stewart’s work serve to construct notions of whiteness and middle class heterosexual identity? - How is Stewart produced by the culture of late capitalism? - Do camp parodies of Stewart represent queer subversion of dominant discourses - What is the significance of Stewart’s aesthetic of cleanliness and perfection...”<sup>xlv</sup> Maybe I am simply infected by the language of my own profession, but I cannot see the “doublespeak” of this proposal. The fact that it was chosen to be sent up twice, once by the NCTE and once by *The Guardian*, makes me wonder about the target of the proposal. The cultural capital invested in the perfectionist fetishes of the super-homemaker may just be too close to the interests of the public to be criticized. Far from double spoken, the proposal seems to me to lay out quite precisely the challenge which Stewart represents as an icon of impossible perfectionism and domesticity. To complicate matters further, the prose itself could be taken from the pages of *The Guardian*’s own articles on style and design which frequently “deconstruct” the domestic surfaces of the post-modern home.

When the NCTE “exposes” the panel “Deconstructing Martha,” it also defines “doublespeak,” as “grossly deceptive, evasive, euphemistic, confusing, or self-contradictory.” Such vilification suggests that the Stewart proposal “lies,” grossly

deceiving through confusing language, when in truth, the proposal itself intends to “expose” the position of Martha Stewart in popular culture. Either the NCTE and *The Guardian* cannot comprehend the relatively simple and clear language of the proposal -- “trademark...icon..magnate..whiteness...immigrant dream” -- or they do not want to expose their own cultural assumptions imbedded in the Martha Stewart icon. Now it is possible, of course, to argue that the topic itself trivializes literary studies. Why interpret Martha Stewart’s *Living*, when one could be counting up the classical allusions in Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*? Because an analysis of the glittering commodification of the Thanksgiving turkey and the Halloween pumpkin exposes the dilemma of the contemporary family starved for personal time. For frenzied women in the work place, reading about Martha personally carving twenty four pumpkins to line her driveway and deep-frying a turkey in fifty-gallon drums filled with boiling canola oil might be a little like reading pornography. Her heroic endeavors offer, perhaps, a fantastical respite from the more pressing labor associated with the holidays. Or do they prod and provoke guilt-ridden women trying to satisfy professional and family demands into even greater and more desperate acts of domesticity? A cultural analysis will help us understand just what her popularity says about our family values. *The Quarterly Review of Doublespeak* does not suggest that reading Martha is a waste of time; it suggests that a cultural, critical reading of Martha is an evil, deceptive, preoccupation, one that should not be made in the future. To discourage such readings, it warns that it will find them incomprehensible. It is worth noting that since this attack on “deconstructions” of Martha, Martha Stewart has “gone public,” and delivered one of the most successful IPO’s in history. This success may assure her future invulnerability. How could any reader comprehend an attack upon her success?

Just what does the public want to read? What will the public find meaningful and intelligible. And who will write it? This is not an easy question. As academics become more involved in their own economic lives, laboring to understand the mysteries of TIAA-CREF stock and bond holdings, we become more connected to the culture that we are trying to instruct and revise. Some of us might have stock in Martha Stewart, or might wish that we had bought in at a lower price. This state of affairs makes cultural activism downright difficult, and sometimes even comic. It explains, however, why Bloom, Paglia, and Gates speak with authority to an audience willing to listen. By emphasizing solidarity with the common reader, they seem to answer the public’s need for affirmation and celebration of our shared culture. We can be capitalistic individuals and be proud of it. They also empower the reader by insisting that abstruse and difficult critical approaches maim and even destroy cultural coherence. Celebrity then depends upon a contract between the speaker and the audience, a promise not to molest or disturb a mutual belief in progressive and individualistic values. Bloom preserves Shakespeare in a carefully tended park for readers who want to own their own reading of a universal artist. Paglia creates a sexually exciting retreat outside the dreary spaces under feminist surveillance, where women can have fun without paying the cultural dues that accompany social protest. Gates offers his readers and viewers a n examination of slave history that connects African early modern history to African American consciousness, a perspective which both softens and strengthens the historical anguish that such stories typically create. You do not leave Gates, speaking from his CD Rom, or from his PBS broadcasts of his travels along ancient slave routes, without feeling reassured by the humanity of his

own presentation. Bloom, Paglia and Gates all manage to make us feel good about our selves and our futures. Cultural critics can't do that without biting their untied tongues.

---

<sup>1</sup> Martin Arnold, *New York Times*, April 9, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Mel Gussow, in the *New York Times*, Nov.16, 1998, interviewed Bloom about *The Invention of the Human* (Riverhead Books), 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Bloom was interviewed by Christopher Lydon December 28, 1998 on "The Connection," a talk show produced by WBUR for National Public Radio.

<sup>4</sup> Bloom's various books and collaborative editions take up one entire four columned page in *Books in Print*. Many of these are his Chelsea House critical editions, often edited by others. His own list of books is impressive, including the seminal *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford University Press) Oxford and New York, 1973; *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford University Press) Oxford and New York, 1980;

<sup>5</sup> Gussow, *NYT*, Nov. 16, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> When I visited Bloom on the net, in January 1999, these things were "true," at least on the AOL search engine. February 12, the Google.com search engine disclosed 12,800 entries for Bloom; a major web site presence was not evident, except for a BLOOM site which promised "Truth is Out There," but turned into a site offering commercial items like perfume and clothing.

<sup>7</sup> Paglia's "Home Page" on the Internet describes itself as "A Fan Site for America's Foremost Female Intellectual." All references to her Home Page, "www.teleport.com/~polettij/Paglia" are from visits in January, 1999. That home page is no longer in operation. Paglia pays homage to Harold Bloom in "A Tale of Two Blooms," Ivory Tower, Salon, November 18, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> *Interv-Yoo*, "Paglia on Her Work," can be reached from Paglia's Home Page.

<sup>9</sup> Quotations are from an interview by Richard Johnson with Jeanne MacIntosh, *New York Post*, May 3. [sic] 1998, published in "Paglia in the News," Home Page.

<sup>10</sup> "The Dimpleby Walkout," Paglia Home Page: Barbara McMahaon, *This is London*. June 24, 1998 and article which seems to be written by Dimpleby, *Daily Telegraph*, London, July 4, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Home Page

<sup>12</sup> "Feministe Fatale," Home Page.

<sup>13</sup> My Gates/Gates connection was made in January 1999, with the AOL search engine.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Feeney, "Skip Gates Makes Dream Real," *Boston Globe*, January 20, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford University Press) Oxford and New York, 1989.

<sup>16</sup> *Loose Cannons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (Oxford University Press) Oxford and New York, 1992; *Colored People* (Knopf) New York, 1994. Like Harold Bloom, Gates fills about a page of *Books in Print* with his productions, although many of the works cited are collaborative efforts, collected narratives and autobiographies which he and colleagues have edited, series of critical perspectives on African American writers etc.

<sup>17</sup> *Boston Magazine*, May, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Gerald Graff discusses the changing nature of the literary profession in *Professing Literature: an Institutional History* (University of Chicago Press) Chicago, 1987.

<sup>19</sup> David Lodge, *Changing Places: a tale of two campuses* (Secker and Warburg) London, 1974.

<sup>20</sup> *New York Times*, Dec. 20, 1997.

<sup>21</sup> "Discord Turns Academe's Hot Team Cold," *New York Times*, November 21, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Shumway, *PMLA*: 112, 1, 1997, p. 87.

<sup>23</sup> Shumway, 89-90, 92.

<sup>24</sup> Scott reports that Shumway "hazards this guess" in her December 1997 article about the star system

<sup>25</sup> *New York Times*, May 30, 1998.

<sup>26</sup> Shumway, 94.

<sup>27</sup> *Quiz Show*, directed by Robert Redford, 1994.

<sup>28</sup> Richard N. Goodwin, *Remembering America: A Voice From the Sixties* (Little, Brown and Co.) Boston and Toronto, 1988, pp 62-63.

<sup>29</sup> Some of the titles of the many publications of the Van Doren brothers suggest the nature of their critical endeavors: *The Patriotic Anthology*, New York(Literary Guild of America), New York, 1941; *The Happy Critic, and other Essays*, (Hill and Wang) New York, 1961; *The Noble Voice, a study of ten great poems*,

---

New York, 1946.

<sup>30</sup> ABC's "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" costs \$750,000 an episode, while a typical episode of "The Practice" costs \$1.2 million. *The New York Times*, February 6, 2000, B1.

<sup>31</sup> "Question: Why is Regis's Show so Popular," *The Boston Globe*, February 6, 2000, A16-17.

<sup>32</sup> *The Boston Globe*, February 11, 2000, p. E14.

<sup>33</sup> The logic of this argument has always, in practice, escaped me. Few colleagues, particularly those in the softer hard sciences like economics and political science, work outside of the academy. In my university, probably the engineers and biochemists seem more linked to the "real" market-place of patents and money. One of the readers of this essay, Brian Martin, Professor of Science and Technology Studies at the University of Wollongong, Australia, notes that in Australia, while there may be inequities in the different fields in the potential for consulting opportunities, base salaries and promotion prospects in different academic fields remain much the same. Professors at the same rank received the same salary in every field and at every university.

<sup>34</sup> Engell and Dangerfield, *Harvard Magazine*, May-June, 1998, p. 48, 50.

<sup>35</sup> Engell, 51.

<sup>36</sup> Engell, 52.

<sup>37</sup> Engell 111

<sup>38</sup> Scholes, *The Rise and Fall of English: Reconstructing English as a Discipline* (Yale University Press) New Haven, 1998.

<sup>39</sup> Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism...* (University of Pennsylvania Press), Philadelphia, 1997; E. Graham McKinley, *Beverly Hills 90210...* (University of Pennsylvania Press) Philadelphia, 1997; James R. Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence...* (Duke University Press) Durham, North Carolina; William G. Thalman, *The Swineherd and the Bow...* (Cornell University Press) Ithaca, New York, 1998.

<sup>40</sup> Bennet, *The Devaluing of America* (Focus Family Press) 1995; *The Book of Virtues* (Simon and Schuster Press) New York, 1996; *The Death of Outrage: Bill Clinton and the Assault on America Ideals* (The Free Press) 1998.

Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (Touchstone Books) 1988.

<sup>41</sup> Scholes, *The Rise and Fall of English*.

<sup>42</sup> Denis Donoghue, *The Practice of Reading* (Yale University Press) New Haven, 1998.

<sup>43</sup> Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (W.W. Norton & Co.) New York, 1992.

<sup>44</sup> Engell, 111

<sup>45</sup> "Deconstructing Martha," *The Guardian Editor*, August 29, 1998.