

PARAPHRASE OF HERESY

Kenneth Gibson

Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, pp. 260.

Even the most extreme esthetic contraventions no longer meet with serious resistance . . . sooner or later, and usually sooner, by way of detours via advertising, design, and styling, the inventions become part and parcel of the consumer sphere.

— Hans Magnus Enzensberger

When Alice met up with Humpty-Dumpty and had that chilling debate over meanings and dominance, we saw perhaps for the first time in fiction an instance of the reigning ideology showing its hand. Certainly the question of who is to be master contains a covert but vital subclause: whoever is to be master controls, among other things, whether meaning is absent or present. If that idea becomes fashionable — if, in short the adversarial potential of literature really supports the dominant ideology — then a number of strategies, purportedly radical, follows in its wake. Crudely put, they are: (1) that literature has only a transcendental meaning; (2) that literature has only an immanent meaning; (3) that literature has no meaning, but great significance; (4) that literature has no meaning apart from the “bliss” or “erotic relations” of its several lexical parts. These positions, and more, attest to the surrender of criticism to the radical, “coöptative” manoeuvres of late capitalism. Indeed, Graff argues that capitalism is radical in that it can simultaneously absorb, and approve, any and all “adversarial” elements in literature *while pretending that such adversaries are still dangerous*. What gets lost in the welter of linguistic criticism, hermeneutics, structuralism, deconstructive poetics, neo-Marxist analysis, and so on, is one important thing we all know of, or about, even if we cannot possess it: something called *reality*.

The fate of reality is one of Graff's prime concerns in this study: “the secret and unacknowledged collaboration between rebellious literati and their philistine detractors remains an unwritten chapter in the social history of art.” This plot, if that is the word, has to do with the autonomy of art; that is, its powerlessness. And Graff cites as the beginning of this plot the Romantic Movement — an event which now begins to look like a secular version of The

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Fall. Romanticism helped to shunt aside the function of literature as a witness to, and commentator on, the real events of the busy world — a curious fate for a movement so centrally devoted, at least at the beginning, to liberalism and even Jacobinism. The writer was found awkward “on the margin,” from which he or she could harrangue, shout slogans, or foment revolt. The “wise doubt” in Wordsworth may have enabled him to accept a sinecure from the Post Office. Critical strategies — some of them, like Arnold’s image of Shelley as an “ineffectual angel”, abusive — would eventually “accomodate” the impotent figure and return it safely home. Swinburne starts on brandy, but winds up sipping “small beer.”

Furthermore, Graff postulates, these accomodative tactics have not changed over the last century, despite belief to the contrary. If this assertion is so, then “modernism,” and especially what Graff calls “the myth of the Postmodern Breakthrough,” are dubious entities. Rather than on a leading edge of perception, we are at the tail-end of the Romantic Movement — as, perhaps, the Beat Generation showed us. Critically, however, this tail-end position consists largely of the denial of any reality-function in language and, by the same logic, literature. Graff turns his coldest anger on the refusal of much contemporary criticism to consider that *language* has anything to do with *things*, (the brutal data of a world which is, whatever else, very much *there*). The Saussurean position that all relations between signifier and signified are arbitrary — that the diachronic is an anthology of the synchronic — may be irrefutable, but it does not begin to answer the whole question. If words and things “link up” only by accident, how to explain why some linkages are more convincing, more pleasant, more striking, than others? If all is hazard here, then why bother to write well? Why search out the most precise wording when the only question that seems to matter is, Who is to be master? More bluntly, why is there “something more” in Frost than in Ella Wheeler Wilcox? No one would seriously argue that Frost was simply contriving “self-consuming artifacts” rather than poems that move through a perceived reality which is nonetheless not wholly created by the poet.

The function of criticism at the present time seems to be to *finish* (partake of its creation) any work of art, and, by this operation, make both itself and the work inoperative. Any theory which so takes over literature in this way, whatever its radical pretentions, is merely a rhetorical imperialism of the sort that Edward Said describes in his influential book, *Orientalism* (1978). An approach arguing that a work of fiction can express *only the dominant ideology and no more*, does quite the same, as does the “deconstructive” approach, well exemplified by J. Hillis Miller, which begins in frank, historical accounting and then, as in his work on *Sketches By Boz*, argues that the book is full of winks, nods, smirks, and nudges — all of them Dickens’ way of letting us know it is “only fiction”. We don’t have to take it seriously, or even enjoyably; it has power to do anything except convince us.

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And so, wherever we are, we aren't really here. History is elsewhere, neither centre nor margin. If literature is again central to our lives, it is so at the cost of being without force and meaning, easily consumed and as easily forgotten. To be told that language is wholly self-referential and thus "meaningless" is to be told covertly that literature is meaningless to read. And we wonder that the schools are in trouble. Graff's fierce and lucid polemic is a direct challenge to the fashionable treasons of our present theoretical constructs.

Department of English
York University
