

Lessons of War

BY CATHY YOUNG

Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education
By Gerald Graff, New York, W. W. Norton, 214 pages, \$19.95

Politics by Other Means: Higher Education and Group Thinking, by David Bromwich
New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 257 pages, \$30.00

The debate over the politics and standards of American higher education began with a frontal assault by traditionalists—Allan Bloom, Roger Kimball, Dinesh D'Souza—that made “political correctness” a household word. The academic left, stunned by its sudden exposure to the harsh glare of *glasnost*, was rather slow to respond, except in somewhat incoherent invective about fascists and reactionaries.

Now, Gerald Graff, a co-founder of Teachers for a Democratic Society, finally offers the lay audience an intelligent and engaging response to the attacks on the radical academic culture. Intelligent and engaging, however, does not always equal convincing.

The premise of *Beyond the Culture Wars*, summarized in the subtitle, “How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education,” is simple enough. Graff, an English professor at the University of Chicago, argues that quarrels over the content and purpose of education—Are the traditional classics “the best which has been thought and said” or merely “privileged texts” by and for white males? Is art the work of individual creative imagination or a socially produced “inscription”?—are clearly a part of today’s academy, whether we like it or not. So far, both academic radicals and academic traditionalists have responded by denying any validity to the other side. Instead of this mutual bashing, why not have a dialogue and get the students involved? Why not “teach the conflicts

themselves, making them part of our object of study and using them as a new kind of organizing principle to give the curriculum the clarity and focus that almost

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Far from undermining the vitality of the classics, Graff asserts, such debate can reinvigorate them. He offers an imaginary discussion between an older male professor, “OMP,” who complains about his students’ indifference to Matthew Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach” (in which the poet urges his love to withdraw with him into a private idyll far from the “struggle and flight” of politics), and a young female professor, “YFP,” who scorns the poem as “phallogocentric discourse” relegating women to the function of consoling pompous males.

Is the poem an expression of universal human yearning, a male fantasy, or

neither? Graff’s point is that OMP’s bored students may actually become interested in “Dover Beach” if they see that the poem is a subject of debate. He suggests that even the vague and bland notion of the “universality” of some values can be brought into sharper focus by challenges that force its defenders to come up with arguments rather than mouth clichés about timeless verities. (Is that really all traditional teachers can do?)

On the face of it, this kind of classroom discussion sounds stimulating and appealing—as is Graff’s own description of how, in teaching Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, he presents his students with alternate views of the novel as a great, universal parable of man’s descent into chaos and primitivism, or as tainted by a European’s condescending, dehumanizing attitude toward Africans.

And yet the “Dover Beach” example points to some serious problems with Graff’s approach. It implies a belief that he elsewhere seems to disclaim: that one’s reading of a work is determined by such characteristics as gender or race. YFP is a woman who “teaches courses in literature by women” and “refuses to forget who she is and where she comes from”—that is, to forget that she is a woman—when reading.

The other side of this coin is the real-life tale, told in *Politics by Other Means: Higher Education and Group Thinking* by Yale University professor David Bromwich, of the female Milton scholar who was warned that her failure to focus on women’s issues in literature could seriously jeopardize her chances for tenure, since that was the expectation with which she had been hired. When the woman replied that no such conditions had ever been mentioned, she was told that “in the circumstances so explicit a directive scarcely seemed necessary.”

Bromwich’s powerful and incisive analysis of the ideological battles sur-

rounding education, published just before *Beyond the Culture Wars*, reads at times like a point-by-point reply to Graff (with whose arguments Bromwich was, of course, familiar). This critique is particularly valuable because Bromwich can hardly be accused of conservatism. Significant portions of his book are devoted to stinging criticism of the Reaganites, especially George Will and William Bennett, much of it reasoned and fair (in spite of an occasional uncharacteristically crude swipe at some right-winger, such as a remark about Robert Bork and his "repellent views").

Thus, Bromwich points out the contradiction between Bennett's embrace of a largely secular Western tradition—classical antiquity, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment—and his insistence on the "Judeo-Christian ethic" as the foundation of American democracy. He also notes that Will, a strong critic of campus speech codes intended to promote racial and gender sensitivity, advocates censorship of pornography to elevate society's moral climate; he and the left-wing thought police "differ only in the choice of sensitivities in whose name they would enforce a selective intolerance."

Yet Bromwich admits, shamefacedly, to "a certain sympathy" with Will's and Bennett's concern about the devaluation of the classics. His aim, however, is to articulate an alternative to the conservatives' defense of established values, a "common sense of liberalism concerning the uses of tradition." To Bromwich, the great books of the past are important because "books which have been tested by a lot of people for a long time seem to me precisely those that teach the most about reading and are likeliest...to foster critical thinking."

He sees such an approach—"to respect tradition even while rejecting authority"—as rooted in the paradox of the very notion of an American tradition. To Americans, the task of preserving our cultural inheritance, which the great conservative Edmund Burke deemed so vital to a society's survival, means "using Burkean means to achieve a non-Burkean end," since our legacy is a political and legal system "made against all Burkean precepts," rooted in rational and consciously

held beliefs rather than custom and habit.

Another American paradox is that our shared identity is a commitment to individualism—a legacy Bromwich cherishes deeply (though he is ambivalent, to say the least, about its economic ramifications). What repels him about the contemporary cultural radicalism of race and gender grievance is that, for all its rebellious trappings, it is an ideology of group conformity. He invokes Emerson's celebrated essay "Self-Reliance," tartly noting that "the author was a white Protestant male who came to

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know...what a sickness group thinking could be for those who were in power. The truths of the essay apply no less to groups that conceive of themselves as out of power and seek a correspondingly surer control over their membership."

This brings us back to what's wrong with Graff's proposal for a "Socratic dialogue" in the classroom between traditional humanists and the ideologues of multiculturalism and radical feminism. The two speak different languages: The former address the students as individuals, the latter as members of groups. In the class that discusses opposite perspectives on "Dover Beach," will the women students be made to feel that if they side with OMP they are being disloyal to their gender?

Bromwich calls the academic radicals "the new fundamentalists," and it may be

just as hard to imagine a conversation with them as to imagine a constructive debate between a secular thinker and a religious fundamentalist. In the Socratic dialogue, the most logical argument prevails. But the radical can dismiss an opponent's argument, if not logic itself, by labeling it an instrument of white male privilege (just as the fundamentalist would label it a Satanic ploy), and by making a final appeal to the presumed interests of the oppressed (as the fundamentalist would appeal to the will of God).

There is also the danger that students may end up spending more time discussing ways to interpret literary or philosophical works than reading and interpreting the works themselves—rather like replacing the evening news with a roundtable discussion of how the news should be reported. Anticipating this objection, Graff challenges the bias against critical theory (poststructuralism, deconstructionism, etc.): "Studying literature is never a matter of 'just' reading great texts but always involves a choice of critical vocabularies and theories," whether consciously held or not.

Of course this is true; but the alarm bells should go off when theory gets so complex it takes a professional to understand it. I find it hard to buy Graff's assertion that to the layperson, "tragic vision" is just as incomprehensible as "counterhegemonic discursive practices." Learning is also compromised when, as Bromwich shows, the analysis of interpretive methods almost completely displaces the analysis of actual literature. When theory reigns supreme, either *War and Peace* or a Harlequin romance will do as "texts."

Graff explicitly defends this omnivorousness: "It does not follow that culturally acknowledged great works generate a more substantial, challenging, and interesting critical or pedagogical discourse than do less valued works." (Not inferior, mind you, but merely "less valued.") As proof, he notes that "very little Shakespeare criticism packs the intellectual power of George Orwell's essays on British boys' weeklies, smutty penny post-cards, and cheap detective novels." Yes, but

there's a catch. Orwell's essays are cultural and not literary criticism; had Orwell been asked whether students in literature (not social science) classes should be analyzing the boys' weeklies and detective novels along with Shakespeare, he almost certainly would have scoffed at the idea.

Such sleight-of-hand is rather typical of Graff, despite his efforts to appear fair and equally critical of the closed-mindedness of both conservatives and radicals. Thus, he sees hypocrisy in the fact that "the alleged harassment of Harvard history Professor Stephan Thernstrom by black students was the subject of a sensational cover story for *New York* magazine.... But little attention has been given to the Harvard Law School's receipt of \$1,645,000 from the [conservative] Olin Foundation for [a] program in law and economics." Well, if we're going to talk about money, what of the millions the Ford Foundation alone pumps into women's studies?

Graff is right to say that reports of the demise of free speech in the universities have been considerably exaggerated. In some instances, his contention that professors who complain of being terrorized by campus radicals are simply irritated by "having to argue their beliefs instead of taking them for granted" may be true. Yet he surely knows that when "a feminist student challenges a teacher's interpretation of Henry James for acceding to a stereotype about women," a teacher who

argues his beliefs too vigorously can find himself the target of a sexism charge, which will cost him endless irritation and hours of composing detailed written pleas of innocence.

So, should the universities "teach the conflicts"? The idea leaves Bromwich cold, because it would mean teaching the students current fads rather than enduring questions. There are plenty of debates and disagreements within the "canon" itself—a fact often overlooked because, in line with fashionable groupthink, profoundly different, even antagonistic writers and thinkers are lumped together as white males. What we get, says Bromwich, is "the treatment of several centuries as a solid block of opinion, and...of the present age as a finely differentiated scene of conflict, to which the most significant attention is owed."

Of course college students should learn about battles of ideas. The question is, would you rather have them analyze and discuss the conflict between the ideas of Edmund Burke and those of Tom Paine or the conflict between a professor who believes Burke and Paine should be read for what they have to say about human political and social arrangements and another professor who thinks the writings of both should be scoured for signs of heteropatriarchal Eurocentrism?

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That may be accurate. In fact, I suspect it is. But Cohodas's Thurmond doesn't even have any real peculiarities. For a successful mid-century Southern politician, he's strangely colorless. This book is an admirable transcript of the words of Southern politics, but the music is heard only rarely. Cohodas just doesn't seem to be particularly interested in the man himself—either that, or she wasn't tuning the right frequencies. True, Thurmond is no Edwin Edwards or George Wallace, but there are these *stories* about him...

For instance, Cohodas quotes the Clemson college yearbook's assessment of the young Thurmond as a "ladies' man of the 'first water,'" but she doesn't mention that that reputation, *mutatis mutandis*, has followed him ever since. (At the time of the Clarence Thomas hearings we were told that Thurmond, among other white male senators, "just doesn't get it." Maybe so, but apparently he still tries.)

Cohodas does record Thurmond's penchant for taking young beauty queens to wife (his first young enough to be his daughter; his second young enough to be his granddaughter), and she reproduces a famous *Life* photograph captioned "VIRILE GOVERNOR demonstrates his prowess in the mansion yard day before wedding." (He was standing on his head). But she simply deposits these data with us and moves on briskly to more dignified matters, not pausing to ask whether Thurmond's amorous impulses are the most spontaneous and human thing about the old goat, evidence that he's interested in *something* besides politics, or just another good career move. It's true that Thurmond's tastes have given rise to a good deal of bawdy humor in these parts, but, as another Southern pol once observed, they do love a *man* in the country.

Similarly, the late Lee Atwater told one of his former teachers (a friend of mine) that Thurmond has almost no sense of humor. According to Atwater, though, the senator loves to hear stories of political dirty tricks—the same ones, over and over. He laughs and laughs. This sort of thing makes the man more interesting, if not more sympathetic, and it is absent from this book.

The Surviving Segregationist

BY JOHN SHELTON REED

Strom Thurmond and the Politics of Southern Change, by Nadine Cohodas
New York: Simon & Schuster, 575 pages, \$27.50

The poet and critic Allen Tate once began to write a biography of Robert E. Lee but abandoned it when he decided that Lee wasn't complicated enough to sustain his interest. With Lee, Tate concluded, what you saw was what you got: a man of duty, untroubled by doubt and apparently by temptation. Nadine Cohodas's political biography

of Strom Thurmond presents another sort of marble man, embodying principles, winning elections, and representing his constituents without reflection or second thoughts. The man portrayed in this book has no discernible interior life at all and not even a private life apart from politics. He's not just a marble man, but a hollow one.