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Review Article

Modernizing Academia: An American and a Canadian Vision

Professing Literature: An Institutional History. By Gerald Graff. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979. Pp. 315. Paper, \$24.95.

English Studies at Toronto: A History. By Robin Harris. Toronto: Governing Council, University of Toronto, 1988. Pp. 310. \$25.00 U.S.

The opening chapter of Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature* is not only a provocative introduction to an institutional history of American academia, but also a thought-inducing companion to Robin Harris's *English Studies at Toronto*. Graff raises a series of questions meant to challenge uncritical assumptions about the nature of the American university. Harris's book seems to provide evidence that Graff's questions, while interesting, are perhaps irrelevant, at least to the Canadian experience. Either Harris is very much caught up in the web of uncritical assumptions that Graff delineates or he has provided us with monumental evidence that confirms once again the difference between Canada and the United States.

Beginning with the fact that Arnoldian humanism has been the reigning ideology throughout the history of the American university, Graff suggests that we should explore the ramifications of educating generations of young people in an ideology that thinks of itself as transcending ideology. He argues the inability of Arnoldian humanism to function as an umbrella concept, a failure which has led to competing views of literature, scholarship, and culture. Yet at Harris's Toronto, where Matthew Arnold's theories ruled from the inception of the original Department of English and History, no such dissent is apparent. Is Harris telling us a different story, one of the triumph of Arnoldian humanism, or is he an insider working, as Graff says of his

American counterparts, to ensure that dissent remains hidden, "exemplified rather than foregrounded by the department and the curriculum" (6)?

Graff presents for our consideration the practice of "field-coverage," whereby each department sought to cover the field of English literature by hiring individual experts in various aspects of the discipline. Consequently, in departments composed of faculty unqualified to discuss each other's portion of the "field," debate was effectively eliminated. "It is only the field-coverage principle," Graff argues, "that explains how the literature department has managed to avoid incurring paralyzing clashes of ideology during a period when it has preserved much of its earlier traditional orientation while incorporating disruptive novelties such as contemporary literature, black studies, feminism, Marxism, and deconstruction" (7). While much of the silencing that resulted from field-coverage in the States was avoided at Toronto where the shared curriculum of the federated colleges forced a certain amount of regular communication, Harris also makes clear that Toronto was just a trifle slow at incorporating change anyhow. At the Toronto of Harris's investigations, even our own national literature was regarded as vaguely subversive. Cause for dissent was therefore minimal.

Graff begins by looking at the classical college of the nineteenth century as a manifestation of an elitist social system. He demonstrates how the initial purpose of education was really an attempt to unify a class born to rule, wealthy enough to indulge the phenomenon of the "boy-man" (a species whose goodnatured cheating was regarded as preferable to the "digging and grinding for a stand" often manifested by the less wealthy), and imbued with the belief that "the social bonds of college life were more important than anything a student might actually learn" (27). It is a story which might serve as an effective caution to E. D. Hirsch's idealistic longing for a return to a shared cultural environment.

Graff also makes clear how the social system was strengthened through the very technique by which Latin and Greek, the mainstays of the original college, were taught: students, bored to death, mastered their subjects by hours of recitation unrelieved by dialogue with the professor and unaccompanied by personal appreciation for the literature they memorized. "The unity of graduating 'class' feeling . . . was possible only within a kind of class society that had been crumbling since the first quarter of the century." Graff concludes that "the fate of the classical system illustrates a pattern that will be encountered again

and again in this history: what originates in an ambitious cultural and educational theory becomes detached from the methodology devised to carry it out, leaving students to grapple with the methodology without any notion of why they are doing so" (34).

Not surprisingly, Graff finds that class biases soon merged with gender biases in a way that entrenched the alienating methodology in both the existing classical courses and the newly developing modern language and literature courses. The new courses were, on the one hand, neglected in part because they "were looked upon as feminine accomplishments." Female academies concentrated on them, but, as women's colleges opened after the civil war, the new curriculum, designed to prove that women were as intellectually rigorous as men, focused on the "masculine subjects of mathematics, theology, Greek, and the natural sciences." Recitation remained the methodology of choice. Literature and classics became further polarized, the only alternative to the dullness of Greek and Latin, the "misty impressionism" of James Russell Lowell's oral causeries (40-41).

Harris, on the other hand, chronicles the late nineteenth century at Toronto as a period of triumphant development. For Harris, what is truly significant about this period is not the way its social ideology determined the slow decline of departments of English language and literature before they were even established but the fact that in 1850 "only a handful of persons were called professors of English. . . . Fifty years later there was scarcely a university in the English-speaking world without not only a professor of English but a department of English" (3).

Ironically, while Harris manifests a more obvious liberal optimism than does Graff, Graff's tale, as he moves into the twentieth century, is essentially the story of the expansion of liberal ideology in the U.S. college system: the rush of progress infused the rhetoric of the period as these words, uttered in 1891 by the new president of Northwestern University, make clear: "'Are we keeping our University in the foremost ranks of modern discovery? Are we taking up the new branches of knowledge as they come successively into existence? Are we meeting the demands which the changed conditions of modern life make upon us?'" (58). Simultaneously, departments began to specialize, furious publishing was endorsed in theory if not in practice (Graff sees the phenomenon of publish or perish as a post World War II movement), and a new faith in the expertise of professionals was born.

In the United States, rapid growth was accompanied by increased secularization. Whereas Harris's University of Toronto continued to

employ professors of English who were also clergymen, Santayana lamented that "many of the younger professors of philosophy" in the States were "no longer the sort of persons that might as well have been clergymen or schoolmasters." Instead, he said, they had "rather the type of mind of a doctor, an engineer, or a social reformer" (61-2).

Harris's story of the growth of the Canadian university system recreates an institution far more conservative in its embrace of the ideology of progress. Harris emphasizes the dual parentage of the universities, the church (all denominations) and the Old Country: the example of the Scottish educational system was crucial to the development of our senior institutions, while the United States took as its primary model the educational system of Germany with its celebration of the specialist as a "bold, heroically individualistic searcher for truth" (63). Toronto's first English specialist was W. J. Alexander, that upholder of Arnoldian humanism who, in spite of his graduate work at Johns Hopkins, was not one to emulate the American "prototype of the new professional" (62). The American experience, whereby "reconciling professional secularism with the traditionalism of liberal culture proved to be a problem" (64), was not duplicated in Canada where a spiritual dimension continued to be valued as part of both culture and professionalism.

If students remained ignorant of the ideological disagreements shaping the future of their discipline in the United States, they might well have encountered the debate which flourished outside the classroom between the Arnoldian humanists and the Teutonic philologists who were succeeding them. In Canada, where philologists were scarce and publication as a form of dialogue still rare, generalists remained essentially unchallenged. American generalists "channelled into literature emotions that, a half-century earlier, would have likely been expressed in evangelical Christianity, Unitarianism, or Transcendentalism, investing the experience of literature with the redemptive influence their ministerial ancestors had attributed to the conversion experience" (85). No such division existed in Canada as a whole where professors of English were often clergymen or at Toronto in particular where the recently federated St. Michael's College (1912) was not only a theological college but one which embraced the students and teachers of two girls' seminaries, the Sisters of Loretto and St. Joseph's.

While it would be easy to dismiss the belle-lettrist tendencies of the early Toronto professoriate, Graff's book makes clear how unappealing and ineffectual the most obvious alternative was. Philologists, with

all their claim to rigour and science, bored their students terribly, and, in fact, the goal of “educating the young” seems to have vanished quite early from the educational system Graff describes. At Toronto, where educating the young remained the primary goal at least until Alexander’s retirement in 1926, the old professor’s passion for inculcating an intangible but inescapably real “appreciation” for literature inspired one renowned student, E. K. Brown, to declare, “Alexander used to say that he enjoyed music, but only as a brute beast might; and until I entered his classroom that was how I enjoyed literature.” Brown goes on to affirm, “All that I can say for my state when I first encountered his teaching is that I at once appreciated how much there was to learn, and that it could be learned from him.”¹ Furthermore, Alexander’s courses, while they may have been taught with an unscientific impressionistic fervour, were nevertheless designed with a careful logic. Harris quotes Alexander’s 1889 inaugural lecture at length. Here are some of the highlights:

“When we have read a book with interest . . . we then naturally wish to know something of its author and the circumstances of its production. We are thus led from the study of single works to the study of writers—from books to men. . . . To complete our understanding of the work, or our conception of the writer, we must know something of the intellectual atmosphere which surrounded him. . . . In doing this, we pass from the study of the individual writer to the study of the period in which he lived—to the history of literature. . . .” (35)

There is nothing haphazard about this design.

Although the Toronto system under Alexander’s tutelage, with its Arnoldian assumptions about the nature of art and its apprehension, was no doubt elitist from the perspectives of class, gender, and even national affiliation, so was its American counterpart with its inherently racist emulation of the German approach. While Edmund Wilson may be right in asserting that it never occurred to Taine (who inspired Arnold who inspired the generalists of both Canada and the U.S.) that “we may ask ourselves who it is that is selecting the evidence [from which we might deduce the characteristics of future civilization] and why he is making this particular choice” (75), philologists, according to Graff’s portrait, managed to ignore all questions pertaining to values. Graff quotes a scholar who expresses it well: “To a conspicuous degree we would rather be right than interesting” (76). To measure “rightness” requires a quantitative methodology, and philology won. As a consequence, in Irving Babbitt’s words, “The great field of virile

ideas is left deserted by the philologists on the one side and the semi-aesthetes on the other" (81).

By the time we reach Graff's Chapter 9: "Groping for a Principle of Order: 1930-1950," we may feel that Graff has been partially defeated by his monumental task. While he continues to provide lucid analysis of the changing ideology in American departments of English, he no longer considers the effect of these various ideologies on the students. Graff has left no doubt in our minds about the tedium students experienced from the daily recitation in the classical courses of the original colleges, but he does not explain how the internal harangue about the value of literary history over a newly developing literary criticism affected classroom experience. More important, as we move into the crucial examination of the rise of New Criticism, surely the parent of contemporary English departments, the student is still absent from the analysis. "As the university increased in size," Graff writes, "the need arose for a simplified pedagogy, encouraging the detachment of 'close reading' from the cultural purposes that had originally inspired it" (145). Graff carefully details what those original cultural purposes were. "Even when [first-generation New Critics] minimized the social aspect of their work, their very way of doing so bespoke a social concern; for emphasizing the aesthetic over the directly social was a way of counteracting what the New Critics saw as the overly acquisitive and practical tenor of modern urban society" (149). He does not, however, explain the effect the simplified pedagogy, orphaned from its socially responsive parent, had on the learning process. Is what we are witnessing ultimately progress or deterioration?

The obsession with the importance of research that accompanied the rise of New Criticism in the States was tempered at Toronto by the image the university had of itself as unique because of "its honours courses in arts and sciences, and its federated colleges" (77). Although the university's competence as a research institution had been confirmed by, among other things, the discovery of insulin in 1921 and the work of Harold Innis in political economy and William Blatz in psychology, the institution took pride in the homier aspects of its organization. "Great satisfaction was expressed," Harris explains, "with the quality of the [honours courses] as a solution to the problem of liberal education and with the effectiveness of the [federated colleges] as a means of combining the resources of a large university with the opportunity for close contact between staff and students that characterized the small college" (77).

With one eye firmly on the teaching of English, Harris makes clear what the student could expect from the reorganization of the Department of English which began to take place at Toronto after Alexander's retirement in 1926. Abandoning its former title of English and History to become English Language and Literature, the Department made important changes to its curriculum when it introduced the honours course. Harris narrates how A. S. P. Woodhouse, supported by E. K. Brown (both of whom had joined the Department as recently as 1929), proposed a course "whereby students naturally adapted for History and Philosophy should have an option provided for them in the English Language and Literature course." Woodhouse describes the results:

"Pass subjects are almost completely eliminated and their place taken by a special feature of the course, six honours options (Latin, Greek, French, German, philosophy, and English history) of which three are taken for two years, two for three, one for the whole four. . . . The assumption is that English is one of the most valuable of humanistic disciplines but that to bring out its full value it requires to be grouped with others. English Language and Literature differs from the courses in which English is one of the two areas of concentration [English and History would be an example] less in the amount of time given to that subject than in the presence of this full scheme of supporting disciplines." (84)

Harris adds that the lectures given by the various departments were always closely integrated. "From the standpoint of the student, it was not simply a matter of taking seventeenth century British history in parallel with Milton and Dryden or a course in Locke, Berkeley, and Hume as a background to eighteenth century poetry and prose. The cross references were often very detailed" (84). The addition of a sequence of courses in Greek and Latin literature in translation signalled the "revival of the classics option in the old English and History course" (87) and the shift from fourth to first year of Canadian/American literature meant that what Toronto was offering in the way of its national literature would receive an extra hour of instruction. (Harris describes this course as 90% American literature). Finally, courses in modern poetry and drama and the modern novel were added and a separate graduate department of English was inaugurated. The restructuring was completed by 1938-39.

Toronto emerges from Harris's portrait of these crucial years as an institution conscious of and concerned by the crisis in teaching English that Graff outlines. Toronto, however, seems to have found classroom solutions by moving with slow dignity towards modernization. The

course it offered in Canada's national literature was unmarked by the patriotism that accompanied the teaching of American literature in the States. The radical move of introducing courses in modern literature was mediated by the simultaneous revival of the old classics option. The seven newly hired faculty members who were entrusted with overhauling the curriculum all had at least one degree from Toronto. The growth of English as a discipline was kept manageable by the continued existence of the federated colleges.

Although some ideological differences must have existed during these years—a certain amount of debate over the relative merits of literary history and literary criticism is implicit in the hirings Woodhouse made throughout the ensuing years of his headship—there does not appear to have been major dissent at Toronto. If serious disagreements were present, Harris is unusually reticent about them: he gives us, for example, all the information we need to draw conclusions on the role of women at Toronto (small) and to estimate the priority afforded Canadian literature (marginal), and he is quite forthright about the remarkable number of Toronto graduates hired back by the institution, but he does not, for instance, document the scholarly predilections of the faculty. The list of new professors suggests, however, that an historically based criticism remained unquestioned: A. S. P. Woodhouse, E. K. Brown, J. R. MacGillivray, J. F. MacDonald, John Robins, and, a little later, F. E. L. Priestley were not the angry young men of Graff's account. On the other hand, they were the quiet architects of a restructured programme previously dominated by the gentlemen scholars of the late nineteenth century.

Less quick to embrace radical change than major U.S. institutions, Toronto achieved solutions to change sooner and with greater ease than did its American counterparts. "It was increasingly understood," Graff says of the period 1940-1960, "that the difference [between history and criticism] was one of emphasis rather than an inherent conflict in principles. Criticism and history, it was agreed, were complementary, and no sound literary education could forego either" (183). "But," Graff asks, "what were the theoretical, practical, and pedagogical terms in which the desired merger would be effected? So long as the dualism was accepted between intrinsic and extrinsic, the work itself and its historical background, there remained a tension at the conceptual level that mirrored unresolved institutional tensions" (184).

It is not, I think, insignificant that the argument against ahistorical criticism that Graff chooses to cite is that offered by Douglas Bush, U.

of T. graduate, in his 1948 MLA presidential address. Bush's argument seems to mirror the Toronto of Harris's account: it recalls Alexander's inaugural lecture of 1889, echoes the rhetoric of E. K. Brown, Bush's contemporary at Toronto and the man who worked most closely with Woodhouse to restructure the Department, and, most recently, resembles the language with which Priestley's students chose to commemorate him.² Bush said:

"The scholar starts with the attempt to see a piece of writing through the minds of its author and his contemporaries, in the belief that, if we understand the work as it was conceived under the conditions of its own age, we allow, consciously and unconsciously, for altered conditions and distinguish between temporal and permanent significance. The critic may start with the author in the act of composition or with the modern reader in the act of reading, but in either case he is likely to analyze the work *in vacuo* as a timeless autonomous entity. Both the historical and the critical methods are essential and, pursued by themselves, inadequate." (186)

Graff, responding to a Bush removed from the context of Toronto, sees evidence of a new compromise between the aims of literary historians and literary critics in Bush's "assigning 'temporal' significance to the scholar and 'permanent,' 'timeless' significance to the critic." Bush, Graff argues, "was conceding in principle that criticism had a rightful place in the literature department. Furthermore, unlike earlier scholarly attacks on criticism, Bush's did not characterize criticism as a subjective activity" (186-7). This address, which Graff isolates as a demonstration of a portentous movement in the American academy, would have been considered fairly standard theory at Toronto.

Toronto's ideology, however, is not part of the mandate Harris sets for himself. It is, nevertheless, an ideology that needs to be clearly and specifically delineated because of the enormous influence the university has had throughout Canada. Essentially Harris's book is the story of the growth of Toronto from a College to a University to a Multiversity, and the changes the Department of English has undergone during this expansion. Fortunately, the history is detailed and pertinent enough to allow us to draw some informed conclusions. The account of the hirings during the Woodhouse years of 1944-1964 is particularly fascinating. "In 1945," Harris tells us, "the full-time staff in English at Toronto, which numbered twenty-seven, included only three persons who had not attended Canadian schools or universities." Seven had "taken a doctorate in the United States" and six had "taken their highest degree in the United Kingdom." "Two-thirds of the staff were

graduates of a Toronto honour course." By 1963-64, "the same proportion of staff members had or were acquiring an American doctorate" and there was "the same proportion of people with British training" (115). The "most striking fact about the appointments during this twenty-year period is that over twenty were to Ph.D.'s in English from the University of Toronto. In 1963-64, more than half the staff, including more than half of those appointed since 1955, were graduates of a Toronto honour course or of the University's graduate program in English" (116). Although Harris offers no opinion about the significance of his figures, about whether we should applaud Toronto for hiring its own graduates rather than importing most of its faculty or whether we should condemn it for chauvinism, Appendix 5 provides a context for understanding the state of graduate studies in English throughout the rest of the country, backing up Harris's observation that "with the exception of the University of Ottawa, which awarded five Ph.D.'s in English between 1937 and 1944, and Université de Montréal, which awarded one in 1942, Toronto was alone in the field" (129). (Dalhousie, for example, did not offer its first Ph.D. in English until 1973).³ Equally interesting is the influence Toronto graduate studies had on the rest of Canada. "All but one of the eighty-three Ph.D.'s of this period," Harris writes, "went on to an academic career" (132).

The history of the development (or non-development) of Canadian literature at Toronto is also worth noting as we consider the progress of those eighty-three Ph.D.'s throughout Canada's academic system. As early as 1944, the Department had recognized that "the time is . . . coming when some provision must be made for the study of Canadian culture (in the literary aspect), perhaps in conjunction with the Departments of History and Fine Art" (130). In 1946-47, A. J. M. Smith inaugurated a course with Donald Creighton (History) in Canadian Studies, but a course in Canadian Literature per se was not offered until R. L. McDougall, risking the Department's scorn, undertook one in 1954. It is not clear from *English Studies at Toronto* whether McDougall's course is the English 4g Harris describes elsewhere as being introduced in 1956. 4g, Harris asserts, "was a solid course, an excellent introduction to Canadian literature." It was not, however, available "to students whose major interest was in English" (120). What is clear is how low a priority the literature of its own nation was accorded by a faculty largely trained in Canada. In 1958, Harris asserts, "the legitimacy of Canadian literature as a subject of advanced graduate study continued to be questioned by some members of the

Department" (130). While this was probably not that unusual a response in 1958 (and perhaps exists in some unspoken form in various English departments today), it is alarming that the Department's submission to the ACAP review in 1982 notes "our strength is the remarkable number of scholars accomplished in other fields who have also chosen to contribute to the study of Canadian literature. Our breadth of perspective and lack of parochialism is notable. Our weakness is the absence of scholars who have devoted themselves without distraction to research and criticism in this area" (184). The relegation of Canadian literature to the status of hobby in Canada's foremost institution is depressing, a reminder that it is still possible to find Canadian literature taught the way English literature was first taught in the academy, as an unprofessional subject that "anyone" could handle.

While, to a large extent, analysis has been crowded out of his book by fact, Harris has allowed himself to comment briefly on the significance of English Studies at Toronto in a concluding chapter. Canada's flagship university has indeed quite a different history from that of American institutions. At Toronto, where the "Wilson-Alexander-Woodhouse approach continues in many respects to characterize English studies" (200), emphasis has remained strong on teaching and the historical method. In fact, Harris asserts that the "chief distinguishing feature of the Toronto doctoral program in English as it developed from 1927 on was a rigorous insistence on the historical approach." While the emphasis lessened in the 1960s, Harris adds, it is "of interest—and of significance—to note that in 1984 there was a return to the traditional Toronto insistence on command of the whole field of English literature" (204). Critical theory, or the "theory of literary criticism" as Harris puts it, has consequently received a "relative lack of attention" (204). The university had elected "not to follow the American model of prescribing a rhetoric course in the freshman year" (201), a decision that meant the Canadian student "devoted more attention in his university English courses to literature than did his American counterpart" (201). Toronto emerges as a bastion of stability, its long (for Canada) history essentially a story of tranquillity and tradition (notwithstanding Claude Bissell's account, in *Half-way up Parnassus*, of student unrest).

Although our attempt to assimilate the facts provided by Harris is helped by the presence of numerous useful tables and appendices, *English Studies at Toronto* desperately needs an index to enable it to become the source book it actually is. The book is remarkable for the

sheer quantity of information it includes. The pictures of the Toronto faculty contribute a marvelously entertaining capsule portrait of the institution (the regal Father Shook, the dignified young Professor E.K. Brown, the slightly mad-looking Wilson Knight as Timons of Athens). Robin Harris himself is a balanced, objective narrator of this history of English Studies, significant not just for Toronto but for all of Canada. The timing of the book's appearance, published so soon after *Professing Literature*, is a fortunate accident indeed, one which enables us to put a Canadian face on Graff's important analysis of American academic experience.

NOTES

1. *Rhythm in the Novel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), IX.
2. John M. Robson, "In Memoriam: F.E.L. Priestley," *Victorian Studies Association Newsletter: Ontario* (Fall 1988), 9-10.
3. Appendix 5 gives the date incorrectly as 1971. There are some inconsistencies between the dates in the appendices and those in the text.