

Letters

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Constructing American Studies

The 1993/94 Fellows Program at the Center for the Humanities is dedicated to “American Studies: Past, Present, and Future,” and is directed by Lewis Perry, director of Vanderbilt’s American Studies Program and Andrew Jackson Professor of History. The seminar was recently the occasion for a visit by Paul Lauter, Allan K. and Gwendolyn Miles Smith Professor of Literature at Trinity College, general editor of the influential *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, and the current president of the American Studies Association. During his visit, he discussed the origin and character of American Studies with Warren Center Fellow Cecelia Tichi, William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of English at Vanderbilt and recent past president of the American Studies Association. The American Studies Association will hold its 1994 national meeting in Nashville.

LAUTER: When I was at Yale in the 1950s, American literature was regarded as something you did because you couldn’t do British literature.

TICHI: There is still some of that in literature departments. And where it comes out is not in open department meetings, but behind closed office doors when the scholar in some field of British literature says to the bright undergraduate, “Surely you’re one of us, you want to work in the real tradition, you wouldn’t want to demean yourself to work in that colloquial, crude, upstart American literature.”

LAUTER: It was very funny at Yale in the 1950s. The reputation of American Studies was that it was at best a marginal operation. They would do it for undergrad-



uates because it was easy, or at least that is the way it was viewed. I became the first teaching assistant for Charles Feidelson, who, the second year I was at Yale, took over the big American literature lecture course. Feidelson had just published *Symbolism and American Literature*, which was a significant departure from anything that had been done before. That gave the study of “American Literature,” or at least that strategy for approaching it, some weight for the first time.

For me, and I think for other people as well, the turmoil of 1968 brought out the question of how we were going to change what was important to do. And I don’t mean whether or not the M.L.A. was to pass a motion against the Vietnam War—big deal. But what are you going to do in class? Who are important writers? We didn’t even have the terms in which to think about these questions! For instance, people didn’t use the term “canon.”

TICHI: Finding the language to express what has been suppressed is a crucial issue. I say this in part as someone who had to study Emerson, who talks to young American men. I felt that I was somehow fundamentally deficient as a scholar of American culture because I couldn’t talk about Emerson without feeling sort of second hand. What I didn’t realize at the time was that Emerson excluded women from

his address, that he defined legitimate participants in American culture solely in these gendered terms. “Let him not skulk...like an interloper in the world which exists for him,” he said, talking about young American men. So the issue of finding the terminology for what you intuitively understand is a crucial matter. As long as groups are denied the vocabulary in which to express their position vis-à-vis themselves and others in other groups, then they are silenced, then they are the invisible. Developing a lexicon which could give adequate expression to a new movement was a profound, pivotal issue. Without that language, this movement could not proceed. You couldn’t just get to “canon” and “multiculturalism.” How do you get space for yourself and legitimate your position as speaker when you have been denied that place? How did you get it?

LAUTER: It just wasn’t thought about that way, and the terminology wasn’t used. What you are saying is absolutely true: if you don’t have the language in which to talk about it, you’re constantly struggling to try even to think what you’re talking about.

TICHI: You were encouraged to think that it was self-evident or manifestly true that certain writers were the “Great Writers.” Part of that is the ideology of post-World War II U.S. politics in which the war came out on our side. We were self-evidently the

dominant democratic power and all our pantheon of writers would ratify that position. There is a book on that called *Creating Faulkner’s Reputation*, which is about him being positioned as the resident U.S. genius in those years. In fact, the Vanderbilt Agrarians contributed to the edification of Faulkner who previously had been regarded as a kind of degenerate version of Edgar Allan Poe.

LAUTER: I did a paper on the creation of Melville’s reputation at the American Literature Association about a year and a half ago. It was a paper about the way in which in the 1920s Melville’s reputation had moved from being this obscure figure on the periphery of literature to being for a lot of critics the most important figure among American novelists. When I was finished, an official of the Melville Society got up in an utter rage because I was somehow demeaning Melville, which is not at all what I was doing. In fact, I said very carefully that I really love Melville and think a great deal of him, but it’s interesting how his reputation was constructed.

TICHI: People experience iconoclasm and it’s outrageous to them. They really don’t want to hear about social forces that operate to valorize or devalue certain

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TICHI: [People] really don't want to hear about social forces that operate to valorize or devalue certain kinds of texts.

kinds of texts. Were you surprised by it?

LAUTER: I was taken aback by it. Even though I had written into the paper a paragraph of apology to say "what you're not hearing is another attack on Melville from somewhere on the left. That's not what I'm doing," he absolutely did not hear this. In fact, it's sort of interesting. An argument I recently had with Stanley Fish has to do directly with this. He was arguing for disciplinary boundaries. He said, in effect, that if you do literary study it has to do with aesthetics, and don't mistake this for doing politics. If you think you're doing politics by doing literary study and changing what it is you teach and things of that sort, you're really not doing politics. Politics is a different thing, history is a different thing. So Fish talked about patrolling the boundaries. As I told him, I'm perfectly willing to grant these disciplinary boundaries. I just don't find it very interesting, because the question to me concerns the objects of study and methods of study within a discipline: what accounts for whether or not you study Stephen Crane or Charles Chesnutt? What accounts for whether you look for questions of ambiguity and irony and all of the new critical vocabulary, or if you look at "change the joke and slip the yoke," or call and response, or signifying, those kinds of things out of African-American experience and culture? How do those things change? What produces this change in your discipline, in our discipline? That after all is politics.

It was the civil rights movement that really put on the agenda the question as to whether we were really going to look at people like Chesnutt, Hurston, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison in the early 1970s, or Alice Walker. Not to the exclusion of Crane, but in addition to him, or maybe finally you do a course that doesn't include Crane or Henry James or whatever. That is a po-

litical question. Politics can't come in the front door because we have our disciplinary boundaries, so now it comes in the window and makes your discipline different. And by the same token, you say you want to isolate your discipline from the practice of politics. So now you're closing the back door. But your discipline is pouring out the window into the political world around. Those are the interesting questions to me, and those are historically identifiable processes.

The first session on the canon at the M.L.A. was hilarious. I know: I organized it. In 1973, we put on a session called "Building a Proletarian Cannon [sic]." I think it was the first time anybody had used the word, and we weren't using it in a very self-conscious way. It seemed like a useful term and it got picked up. When you think about it, it really was a political movement and the people involved in the politics really had to ask themselves, "What does this imply for the work that I actually do?" This was going on in all disciplines. It's going on in American Studies.

TICHI: In some ways, the American Studies Association, though much smaller than the M.L.A., was its mirror image. It was headed up and really run by a school of criticism called "Myth and Symbol" made up of historians and teachers of American literature, mostly from the northeast with a gesture toward Berkeley now and then, and a nod toward the University of Chicago. The organization was sort of sealed off and very hostile to women.

LETTERS: Does the rise of American Studies, if there is one, express what you would see as an overall change in the political landscape?



TICHI: I think that we have to remember that there never is a clean break with the past. At any given time, there are those who envision changes that are not yet in place, there are those who are coping with the conflicts who are in the past, and there are people who are wedded to convictions that they formed very early on. There are people who just don't want to read any more or open up their positions to challenge, and so they are dismissive in terms like "there's nothing new here," or "this represents a degradation or a trivialization."

So I think at any point there are "old guard" people, there are some "middle of the roaders," and there are some people who are leading in new directions. When you were talking about the word canon and the session that began to legitimate it, I was reminded of a big session at the M.L.A. four years ago in which Emory Elliott talked about the canon. Most of the people in the room were feeling that they were considering a forefront, vanguard issue at that moment, and you are saying that this issue was introduced in 1973! We are twenty years down the line, and there were people in 1988 or 1989 thinking of themselves as on the cutting edge because they were in that room. That is an important lesson in the calendar of intellectual process.

LAUTER: It's very slow. You have to be patient and have long range expectations. I think what is happening in American Studies is fascinating. It's growing very quickly as an organization. But it's not growing all that fast in terms of the development of programs on individual campuses, and this is something I really want to look at. On the other hand, it is growing very rapidly overseas, and that has its upside and its downside. There is one

superpower now and everybody wants to know about it.

TICHI: That is right. I hadn't taken in the reason for this development.

LAUTER: But in addition to this, people are becoming dissatisfied with the traditional division of the disciplines. Boundaries are becoming more inhibiting.

TICHI: At our own campus, I see graduate students having to involve themselves in two or three disciplines just to write dissertations. I don't know if this will lead to porous boundaries or if those who want to reaffirm the boundaries will become stronger. In any case the subversion of disciplinary lines is well under way.

Contributing to the erosion of these boundaries are the Feminist Press and the *Heath Anthology*, both of which you helped initiate. These projects are almost like paradigms. They pushed historical change, and you ran the risk of being made into an object of ridicule had they failed. There is a risk in seeking backing for projects which are ahead of their time and at the margins. How did they manage to get off the ground?

LAUTER: With the Feminist Press, there was a national M.L.A. meeting in 1969, a year after the women in the organization demanded equal representation. Only two of that group of women ran for office again, while all the men did. It was clear from this that male "heavies" could get re-elected, while women who would become heavies were rejected. At the time, then, we thought about developing a press. We went back to Baltimore and asked if people would be interested in a press devoted to feminist issues. On return from vacation, we found our mailbox stuffed with responses and some money. We soon convened a meeting and one thing led to another. We began with children's books and some biographies. Then we did reprints, beginning with *Life in the Iron Mills*.

TICHI: These reprints were

LAUTER: We had to point out that human beings were creating syllabi, and there is nothing natural about it.

very important. *Life in the Iron Mills* was written by the mother of a swashbuckling journalist. She was struggling with the way in which those with any sort of talent at all were being stifled. This novel was therefore one by which one could teach about democracy in the U.S., not from the point of view of doctrinaire marxism, but symbolically, to realize dimensions of class bias. The new edition from Feminist Press was very powerful. That and *Yellow Wallpaper*, a psychodrama of a woman oppressed in the name of expertise. Here were texts which were not available in our canon, texts which made a tremendous difference in our coursework.

LAUTER: The problem was this: having texts available was hard enough, and as times got financially tighter, it was difficult to get people to buy them. So we thought, "What if we put those texts into an anthology?" There was already an early anthology of odd western literature texts, but that was it.

TICHI: But any new anthology is typically only allowed to deviate in its content by fifteen percent from all other anthologies. That means that only 15 of every 100 pages can be made up of new material. *Heath* is such an amazing anthology because it did something completely different from anything that had come before it.

LAUTER: Then in 1977 or 1978 we began to think about getting a project together to try to rethink the teaching of American literature called "Reconstructing American Literature."

TICHI: Construction is a crucial word. We were in a time when standards of literary excellence were entirely unchallenged. The notion that a syllabus is a kind of construction just wasn't available, and the assumption was we had an organically whole language or literature that the critic was to decipher. But this formulation is itself rife with construction. So this notion of the construction of a syllabus was not

recognized or understood. You can't devise an alternative program until you realize that the present one is a construction. You must give someone a place to stand in order to point this out. Major things had to happen in order to provide this place.

LAUTER: One major thing was the denaturalization of this notion of organic form. We had to point out that human beings were creating syllabi, and there is nothing natural about it.

Anyway, we got the idea that we could change things, so we began to gather syllabi. We sent letters to the entire American literary profession, and we even conducted an institute on the issue, an institute which was transformative in every way. It turned out to be a high-powered group, both participating and speaking. We eventually produced the book *Reconstructing American Literature*.

TICHI: This was a time when people trained in New Criticism were experiencing diminishing returns, people fighting over smaller and smaller issues. The idea of a lifetime of faithfulness to an approach that was less and less rewarding was bleak. There was a sense across the country of "is this all?"

LAUTER: For the *Heath Anthology*, our group was insistent on bringing together people with established reputations (white men), and cutting-edge folks (Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, for example). I had done some research on anthologies and found that no nonwhite and very few women had ever been on an editorial board. So we talked about it and for our editorial board selected people from the institute and elsewhere who reflected the politics of the essays. But it was more than symbolism and tokenism, particularly since

everyone was in networks. Blacks knew each other, Latinos, etc. We asked all sorts of people to edit their own works, with success. It was quite an interesting experience.

TICHI: And as is well known, the *Heath Anthology* has changed the course of literary study in America. No other anthology is having the impact that book has had. How did you get yourself into a position to know how to do these things?

LAUTER: I went to Indiana to the School of Letters in 1953 to do a master's degree in literary criticism, which was a strange event since I didn't know very much about anything.

TICHI: At that time, literary criticism was a kind of vanguard thing to do, in the sense that a lot of people were still doing more "literary history" in the old school way. New Criticism was still somewhat controversial.

LAUTER: It was very controversial. After Indiana I went to Yale for the doctorate. One of my classmates had been a conscientious objector right after the Korean War and had served his alternative service as a teacher in a girls reformatory outside of Philadelphia. He was a serious pacifist. We got hired at Dartmouth, and he proceeded to do things as he had always done, which was to do things like post a flyer which said "Men of Draft Age: You may be a conscientious objector to war." A very innocent flyer in a lot of ways, but it got torn down periodically. All of this sort of got me involved politically.

At the time, the politics of one thing and the politics of another were never really far apart, so if you were interested in pacifism, you were interested in the development of the civil rights movement. There were just so many

ways in which these movements would hang together. Through the civil rights movement, I became acquainted with other disciplines, history and geography and so forth.

It's hard to describe how influential the civil rights movement was on the people who participated in it. It was a very shaping experience, intellectually and culturally. In the first place, if you were white you got deeply involved in a world very different from the segregated world you were used to. And in the second place, it was a whole culture. It involved song, it involved ideas, it involved ways of interacting, ways of looking at the world which were very challenging, which were quite different from my previous experiences. For instance, in the summer of 1964, I went to Mississippi as part of the Mississippi summer project and taught in Freedom Schools. At one point I taught *Native Son* to a very mixed age group of black kids in Jackson. It was a wonderful class. I didn't know very much about black literature or culture, but teaching Wright to kids for whom this literature was such a part of their lives really forced me to rethink what I was doing and what teaching was like.

In the spring of 1965 I was teaching a big contemporary literature class of hundreds of students. I didn't do anything out of the ordinary until we got to Ellison. A guest lecturer, a Smith graduate who was the director of the Freedom Schools at the time, suggested we break the class up into small groups and have them talk about invisibility. Some of the students went along with it, but other students got enraged and stamped out. Some people came back and shouted, "My parents are paying all this money and here you are not teaching us!" It was a scandal.

TICHI: What was so threatening to them?

LAUTER: It utterly defeated their expectations. The irony of all of this is, just to leap forward



25 years or more, I went to talk at a high school around the Hartford area six or seven years ago. One of the people there came up to me when I arrived, and she said to me, "I've owed you an apology for 25 years." She was in that class, and she said, "You know, it took a few years, but eventually it began to get clear to me what was going on when you were talking about invisibility, yours from us and we from you, and other people's." I have actually met three people who were in that class. It was a crystallizing moment for everybody.

TICHI: Did you know at the time that you had cracked open something culturally profound?

LAUTER: I was trying to understand what the implications were of beginning to look at other works that I had never considered, not that Ellison was one of those exactly, but other things which were sort of on the horizon. I was asking questions like "how do you change your course? How do you change what you do,



how you teach?" We're talking about democratization, about sharing power, things of that sort, '60s educational reform. It really forces you to think about things very differently, but it takes a while to translate that into your teaching practice, much less your daily life.

At the same time, I was an activist. I got busted with a couple of students from Smith during

the Selma to Montgomery march. The county jail was my introduction to Alabama hospitality. There were about five of us, and the whites were put on one side in a very large room, sort of like E.E. Cumming's *Enormous Room*. Everybody had been in there from one to six days, as this had been going on day after day. They all had mattresses and there weren't any more. So we complained and the jailer came along, unlocked the door and conducted us across the hall to another such room, smaller, filled with black men who had been arrested for more or less the same things. There were extra mattresses in there, and he said, "Take a mattress and go back." So each one of us took a mattress and dutifully went back. Only after we went back and the door had closed did we ask, "What did we do that for? Why didn't we just stay there?" But we were so involved and complicit in the practice of segregation in this instance that none of us thought about it. We were back into segregating jails in a movement designed to desegregate the world. It was really those kinds of things that forced changes in my awareness, which really opened the possibility of

looking at work that I had never been taught in school and never had read.

TICHI: You have been describing a sort of recurrent pattern in which your reading, your teaching, your collegial relationships, all forced you at recurrent points almost to a crisis of understanding of culture, literature, and political life. There is a kind of volitional subjection of the self to the kind of conflict that forces change. Because the people who were there would know exactly how a person might take safe shelter in the consensus or majority thinking of that time. But you refused; those shelters or places of respite weren't valid and therefore weren't viable for you.

LAUTER: You do something but you're not quite clear what that entails, what it's getting you into. Once you're into it, it's very hard to go back. Like the class about Ellison. I had no idea when I started teaching that people would get so incensed, that other people would react to that. And what was wonderful about the time was that in the process of one thing leading to another, it wouldn't lead you into trouble, but would lead you into all sorts of wonderful possibilities.

SPRING 1994 CENTER PROGRAMS

The Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities will sponsor a number of programs for the spring semester. As this issue of *Letters* goes to press, the following programs are either in place or are in the planning stages. *More detailed information regarding meeting dates and times will be distributed separately.*

Seminars

Faculty Luncheon Group. On Mondays at noon, faculty members are invited to meet at the Humanities Center for work-in-progress presentations. Spring dates are January 17 and 31; February 14 and 28; March 21; and

April 4. Seminar coordinator: BEVERLY ASBURY, University Chaplain.

The Influence of Afrocentrism in Academia. Currently in the planning stages.

Southern Studies Seminar. Faculty members interested in developing a program in southern studies at Vanderbilt are invited to attend this seminar. Seminar coordinators: LARRY J. GRIFFIN, Department of Sociology and DON H. DOYLE, Department of History.

Women Scholars and Ivory Towers. Cosponsored by the Women's Faculty Organization, this seminar will meet monthly at the Humanities Center.

Special Programs

On January 25 at 4:00 p.m., Professor ALLAN M. BRANDT will give a public lecture related to his work on AIDS and its impact on society and ideas about health, sickness, and mortality. The lecture is cosponsored by Project Dialogue and the Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies.

Professor Brandt is the Amalie Moses Kass Professor of the History of Medicine at Harvard Medical School's Department of Social Medicine and Professor of the History of Science at Harvard University. He served on the National Academy of Sciences Committee on Monitoring the Social

Impact of AIDS. Professor Brandt is the author of *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880*, which focused on the relationship of behavior, risk, and disease in the twentieth-century United States.

In conjunction with the American Studies Program, the Center will sponsor a public lecture on February 15 at 4:00 p.m. by WILLIAM FERRIS entitled "Memory and Sense of Place in Southern Culture." Professor Ferris, director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, is coeditor of the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*.

Charting the Humanities

Paul H. Freedman

In this first communication as director of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, I take the opportunity to express my appreciation for the accomplishments of the previous director, Professor Charles E. Scott. Under his supervision during its first five years, the Center has become a vital presence in the life of the College faculty, serving as a forum for exchanges across increasingly permeable disciplinary boundaries. I am also grateful to Mona Frederick, Assistant Director of the Center, for her resourcefulness and energy which has allowed the Center to achieve solid institutional standing and to anticipate a reasonably prosperous future. My job is rendered immeasurably easier by stepping into a flourishing and well-regarded program that benefits the University in a variety of ways.

The Center is within sight of meeting a challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The NEH has offered \$480,000 to be matched by Vanderbilt at a rate of four to one. The resulting sum is intended to serve as an endowment, the interest of which will underwrite the faculty seminars, guest faculty and lecturers, and other activities of the Center. The work and ambitions of the Center have been greatly helped by this aspect of the Campaign for Vanderbilt. We thank those who have so generously donated to the Center which seeks both to commemorate and elaborate on the legacy of writers and other thinkers associated with Vanderbilt and the South, among them Robert Penn Warren for whom the Center is named.

Our program is rooted in the particular nature of this university community but also participates in the intellectual progress of the study of the humanities. As a disciplinary program within the College of Arts and Science, the humanities have not changed that greatly when viewed in terms of how the liberal arts curriculum is arranged. While my own field of

history is more closely connected to the humanities than twenty or thirty years ago (at Vanderbilt it is still part of the social sciences in bureaucratic terms), the major department components of the humanities remain English, foreign languages and literatures, art history, philosophy, religious studies, and rhetoric. What has changed is how the humanities are seen in relation to a tradition of knowledge attempting to teach and preserve eternal and cultural verities. The position of the humanities within the university and society has been made more prominent by controversies over what is involved in the enterprise of studying texts from the past. If they are not to be regarded as constituting unchanging, grand aspirations—if humanists are not guardians or acolytes at a series of shrines—what are we doing? If we are showing the contingent and political basis of grand narratives, why are our colleagues in the social sciences seemingly so complacent with regard to a society whose troubled foundations humanists endeavor to expose?

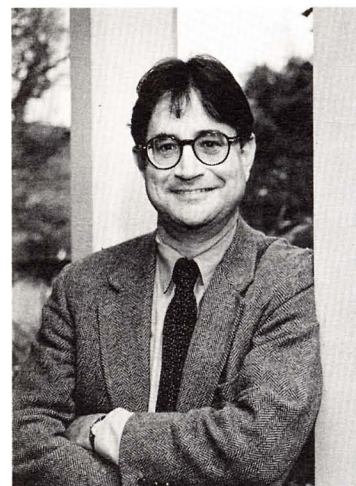
A humanities center is a site for the exchange of critical approaches to art and literature, but not only this. It also exists to preserve and expound ideas of long-standing if not quite eternal coherence as well as to pull them apart. To emphasize the contemporary or the theoretical does not mean abandoning appreciation for the pleasures of the past.

Among the unexpected and paradoxical beneficiaries of shifts in critical approaches are historians who can only applaud some effort at contextualization. Where earlier schools of literary criticism sought to lift texts out of their historical location into an empyrean of the true and the good (or as barricades against the decline of the West), we have at least rediscovered the social and mental worlds inhabited by writers and artists, the greatest as well as minor or neglected ones. To flirt briefly with the confessional, personal voice, I as a college senior

was bitterly mocked for daring to think of Chaucer in relation to medieval social and theological ideas (at that time a heretical idea identified with the late D. W. Robertson of Princeton and Chapel Hill). I am happy that such historicist contextualization is no longer completely unthinkable but even fashionable (in an admittedly rather different key).

Much of the effort of new forms of criticism is to give voice to the past and to rediscover those whose voices have been ignored or difficult to hear. In my field of medieval history, the difficulty of looking at the past in something approaching its own terms has always been a problem. In England and the United States the dominant paradigm of twentieth-century scholarship has been to normalize the Middle Ages, to make it appear less exotic, and to emphasize its status as the foundational era of the modern. This has been a reaction to the Gothic fantasies of the nineteenth century. Medievalists have been at (largely unsuccessful) pains to convince their students that the "Dark Ages" is a misnomer, that the centuries between 500 and 1500 saw not only the birth of Europe but the beginnings of parliamentary democracy, romantic affection, universities, and even the discovery of the individual as a complex, internally contradictory agent in uneasy relation to society.

Such an approach tends to suppress the otherness of this era. Religious heresies become forerunners of tolerance, merchants the originators of the middle class, kings the avatars of the modern state. It has been possible, in recent years, aided by a diminishing confidence in the modern as the epitome of progress, to restore some of the color and strangeness to the study of medieval culture. In this sense, critical theories regarding difference, gender, representation, and embodiment have provided us with a more disturbing, complex,



Professor of History Paul H. Freedman became director of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities in fall of 1993.

and I would argue, truer Middle Ages, one in which the behavior of nobles, saints, clergy, and peasants is understood closer to its own terms than to the supposed modern outcomes. What has occurred is not so much the discovery of new sources as an interpretive shift, from the normalizing to the contested.

There is a danger of reinventing a teleological subservience to the present, however. Instead of giving rise to the modern state or individual, the Middle Ages is presented as the foundational era for colonialism, racism, or the intertwined cults of romanticism and violence. Contemporaneity is rediscovered only if the value given to contemporary society is altered. Myths of origin come to serve a pessimistic construction of modernity which is itself seen as sufficiently grotesque for the medieval to lose its exoticness.

I mention this not as an excursus into a realm of esoterica but as an example among many of the difficulties in charting a future for the humanities. If they are not to form a bulwark of agreed-upon marks of excellence, how much will they trouble, overturn, play with earlier certainties and nostrums?

Team-Teaching: “Political Trials and Trial Narratives”

Laurence D. Lerner

Vanderbilt University Professors James A. Epstein, of the History Department and Laurence D. Lerner, of the English Department, taught a joint seminar on “Political Trials and Trial Narratives” to fifteen selected graduate students at the Humanities Center last May. In this article, Lerner reflects on what he learned from the experience.

Jim and I were both at the University of Sussex, which pioneered jointly taught courses in the 1960s: I taught there from 1962 until I came to Vanderbilt in 1985, and Jim was an undergraduate there in the late sixties. We never met, but when we became colleagues here we soon realized how much our academic interests overlapped: Jim specializes in English history of the last two centuries, and has made a particular study of radical movements in the years after the French Revolution, and I have a strong interest in placing 19th-century literature in its social and political context. The chance for us to teach together came through the graduate program in Social and Political Thought; Jean Bethke Elshtain, who directs it, was very supportive of our project.

We received 27 applications for the 15 places, and choosing was very painful. We had to reject some whom we knew to be very good students. In the end, we took six from English, four from history, two from comparative literature, one from German, and two from law. One of the students of English also had a law degree, and one of the lawyers had majored in political science. A thoroughly interdisciplinary group. For the most obvious definition of interdisciplinary study says that the teachers, and if possible the students, will come from different departments. This is the definition that will naturally occur to an administrator, and it is a clearly useful one, but I think it possible to suggest another. The

great interdisciplinary movement of the mid-20th century has been structuralism—the search for deep structures that link together disparate social and intellectual activities: as in Levi-Strauss’s comparison between the exchange of women in marriage customs and the exchange of goods, or Chomsky’s search for deep structures of grammar that speakers of a language use but cannot formulate. The structuralist, explaining social actions through the analogy of language, is automatically interdisciplinary—as is the post-structuralist, seeing deep structures as inherently unstable, or as political strategies that ought to be destabilized. The difference between the traditional literary historian and the post-structuralist, both operating in the same department, may be more profound than between the former and the historian, or the latter and the deconstructive philosopher.

This points the way to another and perhaps more valuable conception of the interdisciplinary, deriving from the intellectual activity itself, not from who performs it. Interdisciplinary study, I now suggest, occurs when the same text is examined for different purposes, or when the same question is explored through different kinds of text. After reading the death warrant of Charles I, and seeing the obstinate, legalistic integrity with which he refused to recognize the court, we looked at Marvell’s *Horatian Ode* about Cromwell, which compares him to a force of nature (“Then burning through the air he went, / And palaces and temples rent”), and Charles upon the scaffold to an actor playing his part flawlessly among a set of real life groundlings (“While round the armed bands / Did clap their bloody hands”). This was the perfect opportunity to see what poetry can and cannot do in a political situation: it can compress a complex political argument into a balanced sentence—carefully not taking sides in a life-and-death

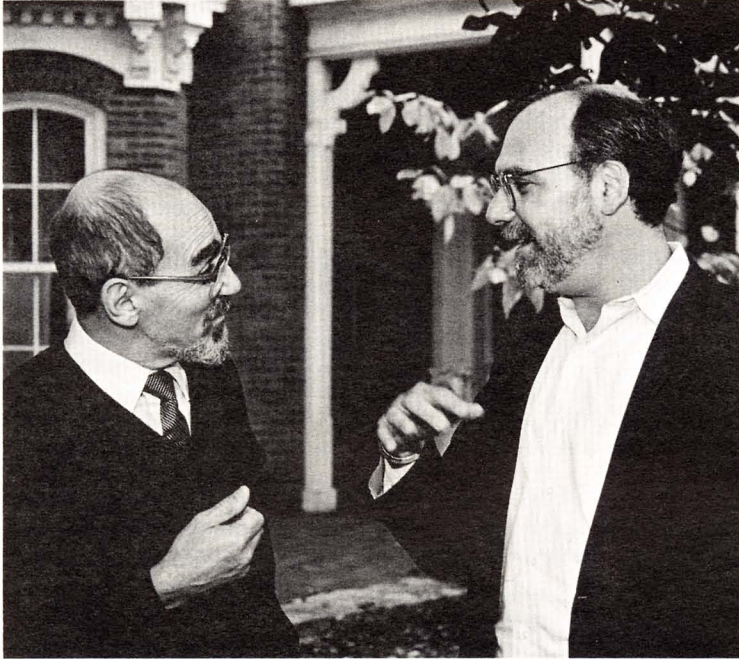
struggle—and beyond that it can reflect on the interconnections between action and contemplation.

What did the seminar actually do? We met for three hours every morning, Monday to Friday; the students had been told to regard the course as a full-time occupation, and there was enough reading to fill the rest of the day. I found it perhaps the most strenuous teaching experience I had ever had, and I had read most of the material beforehand; for the students who came to it all for the first time, it must have been exhausting. We were aware from the beginning of the danger of joint teaching, that it can become a dialogue between two professors arguing with each other from two ends of the table, while the students turn their heads from side to side like the spectators at a tennis match. Our students were so lively that there was in fact no danger of this, but we nonetheless built in what we thought of as a safety device: one of us would take charge of each session, and the other would not be allowed to speak until after the coffee break. This quaint device worked well enough though the self-imposed restraint sometimes proved too much for the passive partner—to the occasional amusement of the students.

And what did we read? We were determined to range in time, so we began with the trial and execution of Charles I, along with the contemporary trial of the Leveller, John Lilburne: trying the king and trying the subject. We read contemporary reports of both trials, along with material on the Divine Right of Kings, and Shakespeare’s *Richard II*. Then we leapt forward to England in the 1790s, to study the treason trials of radicals in the panic following the French revolution, along with William Godwin’s novel *Caleb Williams* (1794), and some discussions of the rule of law in 18th-century England. Then another leap forward, to two prominent examples

of the modern political show trial: the Moscow trials of 1938 (along with Arthur Koestler’s novel on the subject, *Darkness at Noon*), and the trial of Klaus Barbie in France in 1987. Then we turned from politics to domestic violence to look at the trials of women for murdering their husbands, both in 17th-century England and in 19th- and 20th-century America, in order to ask, among other questions, how far these too should be seen as political. In between all this we had two interludes, to look at two brilliant plays that center on a trial scene, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, by Brecht, and Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*. (There is an inherent parallel between trial and theater that thrust itself on us all). Finally we looked at our own methodology, by comparing the study of literature and the study of law, an area of interdisciplinary exploration that has recently become lively and fruitful. We decided that it would be much better to put this theoretical discussion at the end rather than the beginning; there is no shortage today, in the intellectual world that these students inhabit, of discussions of post-structuralism and literary theory, of whether history is a text and whether language is inherently unstable, and our seminar would have lost much of its individuality if it had begun by inviting everyone to take up positions about familiar issues and defend them with familiar arguments that would have made few converts. Furthermore, theory, in my view, takes on its fullest meaning only when applied, and the fact that when we came to the methodological discussions we already possessed a body of common reading to draw on made the theorizing richer and more fruitful.

And what is there to learn by studying such political trials from the past—what, that is, besides satisfying our curiosity (which ought to be insatiable) about what human beings have done to



Laurence D. Lerner, Edwin W. Mims Professor of English and James A. Epstein, Associate Professor of History

one another in the course of history? Here I must speak for myself: it would be presumptuous to try and say what the students learned, but I know that I learned a great deal. I will start with John Lilburne, a 17th-century radical who had always been one of my heroes: a democrat in the age of absolutism, a colorful opponent of tyranny, a believer in the Inner Light (he became a Quaker at the end of his life). Reading the transcript of his trial, I kept feeling thankful that I didn't have Lilburne in my class; his constant legal quibbles (accompanied by fulsome insistences that he was no lawyer), his questioning of the authority of the court on the most trivial pretexts, reminded me of the worst moments with rebellious students in the heady days of 1969. I found myself identifying with the judges (am I getting old, I wondered), realizing how infuriating they must have found his readiness to identify himself with Christ, and his constant insistence on the Inner Light, until finally one of them burst out, "Never talk of that which is

within you; God is in us, as well as in you."

The English civil war often looks like the womb of the future: the sudden outburst of pamphlets in the 1640s that questioned every human and divine institution seems to throw up the entire political philosophy of the ensuing three centuries. A good deal of the future (that is, of our present) can be found in Lilburne: proto-Marxism (property is antecedent to magistracy, he claimed), or Hobbesian views of the state of nature ("If you take away the law all things will fall into confusion"). The students, I found, had more sympathy than I had with the legal quibbles, and I wondered if it was because they were American, and had a constitution.

The treason trials of the 1790s, too, spoke directly to me. John Frost, tried for sedition in 1793, was defended by Thomas Erskine, one of the leading lawyers of the day. Erskine dealt only with the law, not with politics: he ignored the arguments for and against Frost's egalitarianism and republi-

canism, and confined himself to showing that some of these opinions had been held by Pitt before he became Prime Minister, or that when Frost declared "I am for equality, I am for no kings," it could not be proved that he was speaking about the king of England. Joseph Gerrald, tried the following year, conducted his own defense, stating his political opinions and defending them at length: "Every nation has a right, not only to preserve the form of government which is actually established; but also, by the peaceful and calm operation of reason, to improve that form of government, whatever it may be." Gerrald's reasoned statement of the case for democracy made him seem a heroic figure in the history of political controversy, especially when he said to his obviously hostile judges, "Reason alone and not assertion can convert me." Frost and Gerrald were both found guilty.

It has become a commonplace among radical deconstructionists today to interrogate the traditional liberal doctrine of the autonomous subject: the very idea of the individual capable of free and rational decisions, it is claimed, conceals the degree to which we are socially constructed. This argument leads to the claim that asserting one's belief in reason is a way of upholding the status quo, and that true radicalism must involve the subversion of the social codes themselves, the deconstructing of the idea of the subject (a "subject," after all, according to a piece of wordplay now widely cited, is subjected to a sovereign). As a good liberal, I have never accepted this argument; and I felt strengthened in this resistance as I read Gerrald and his fellow radical Daniel Eaton and saw how strongly the belief in reason and individual autonomy has in the past been used *against* the status quo. The true conservative position does not respect the subject, but dismisses the possibility of serious criticism from the "swinish multitude." If

authority is to be subverted, then belief in the possibility of free judgment is not self-deception but the necessary basis for criticism.

One of our students—a historian—expressed himself passionately on this issue. "You are the only one," he declared, "who can constitute your own subjectivity." Existential authenticity, he claimed, is so important that it must not be "objectified into an idea." Our most committed post-structuralist, on the other hand, was a literary student, willing to deconstruct the individual into the social pressures exerted on him or her—of which he or she might not even be aware. It seems worth remarking on the irony that the discipline which has traditionally thought in terms of movements and tendencies is history, whereas literary scholars, reading poetry concerned with the growth of the individual mind, used to be the ones who asserted the importance of subjectivity and the autonomy of creation.

Finally, a word on the twentieth century. As long as we have totalitarianism, we shall have show trials and rigged evidence; so that the trial of Bukharin and his associates, though not all that many living memories go back so far, seemed to be about the present. It came to life startlingly when our Russian student mentioned that her grandparents had been convinced that Bukharin was guilty. The great enigma of the Moscow trials is of course why the accused confessed to monstrous and often ludicrous crimes of espionage and wrecking. As we read the transcript we came across passages like this: "I once more repeat that I am guilty of treason to the Socialist fatherland, the most heinous of all possible crimes, of the organization of kulak uprisings, of preparations for terrorist acts and of belonging to an underground, anti-Soviet organization.... In reality, the whole country stands behind

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Stalin; he is the hope of the world; he is a creator." How could a man of such integrity and intelligence say such things? Many of the seminar members were certain that Bukharin was speaking in code, declaring to those that had ears to hear that he had committed none of these crimes, that the accusations themselves were the crime. Totalitarianism can cer-

tainly lead to such codes, but I am inclined more to the explanation so brilliantly put forward in Koestler's novel, that the accused were still communists, uninterested in individual good intentions, in what is contemptuously referred to as "cricket morality," concerned only with the "objective" political impact of their confessions, and therefore willing to fabricate absurd confessions if persuaded that it would be in the interests of the party. Both these

explanations seem to be startlingly alive today: in a world of spreading fundamentalism, the interests of the movement prevail over truth; and public statements are often enough turned into code, even in a democracy.

I would like to let a student have the last word, and I shall do this on a question that we had not thought of much importance, that the course was not taken for credit, and so not graded. During our post-mortem on the last day,

one student remarked that he had thought he was fairly relaxed about grades, and able to concentrate on the work for its own sake; but he had been astonished at the relief he'd felt in this course, and the ease with which he'd been able to concentrate on the issues. At the same time, this ease may have made everything seem to us all the more existentially urgent. As, whenever I think about it, it still does.

Science and Society

The 1994/95 Fellows Program will examine the topic "Science and Society." The project directors are John A. McCarthy, Professor of German, and Arleen M. Tuchman, Associate Professor of History. Six Vanderbilt University faculty members will be chosen to take part in the year-long seminar. The Warren Center will also sponsor a visiting Fellow with expertise in the area who will play an active role in the program. Seminar participants will explore the historical, social, and theoretical dimensions of modernity and postmodernity in the intersection of the natural sciences and the

humanities. Of particular interest to the two codirectors are the problems raised by twentieth-century research on relativity theory, the uncertainty principle, non-linear dynamics (deterministic chaos), the loci of intelligence and creativity, and the biological basis of human behavior (the human genome project, among others). These areas of research all concern themselves with questions central to a number of disciplines across the humanities and sciences, for each deals in one fashion or another with the tension between determinism and free will. The full agenda of the program will be more carefully defined when the Fellows have been selected.

William Ferris, Director of the Center for Southern Culture and Professor of Anthropology at the University of Mississippi, will give a public presentation, "Memory and Sense of Place in Southern Culture," on Tuesday, February 15, 1994, at 4:00 p.m. The location will be announced. William Ferris is the author of over 100 publications in the fields of folklore, American literature, fiction, and photography. He was made a "Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters" by the French government and served as a consultant on the films *The Color Purple*, *Crossroads*, and *Heart of Dixie*.



Ferris has made over 225 presentations to audiences in 14 countries and was named one of the top 10 teachers in the nation by *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1991.

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Statement of Purpose

Established under the sponsorship of the College of Arts and Science in 1987 and renamed the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities in 1989, the Center promotes interdisciplinary research and study in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Members of the Vanderbilt community representing a wide variety of specializations take part in the Center's programs, which are designed to intensify and increase interdisciplinary discussion of academic, social, and cultural issues.

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