

PROFESSING ENGLISH

Paul H. Fry

I borrow my title from a scholar at Northwestern, Gerald Graff, who used to play golf with Traugott Lawler. Graff's book, *Professing Literature*, was one of the first that raised the question whether literature should be interpreted or processed as social data. At the beginning of my fourth book, *A Defense of Poetry*, I acknowledge the turning point marked by Graff as follows: "A colleague has just come back from a conference of department chairs who had been asked, 'should we focus on some literary text or just bring Graff's book?' 'Definitely just Graff's book,' said the chairs." Graff's essential point was, don't teach the texts, teach the critical conflicts about the texts.

Well, I like to interpret texts themselves, taking all of the scholarly controversies about them into account because interpretation can never afford to overlook anything, and my intellectual trajectory mainly concerns my interpretive adventures and my thoughts about interpretation. I could just talk to you about my views – and I'll get to those both soon and later – but to tell you the truth I don't remember a time when I didn't hold these views, and that appearance of solipsistic stubbornness on my part not only undermines the notion of a trajectory but seems to suggest that I resisted influence during my long academic experience. Not so. Whatever might be said about my imperviousness to correction by my betters, I *have* nonetheless been shaped by many influences, by far the most important right here at Yale. It's one thing to say yes or no or maybe to a proposition (after all, what else can you say?), and quite another thing to grasp its full implications and follow them where they lead. It's in this regard that I have been shaped by mentors, shaped for a time even more than I should have been; yet during this talk there will be times when atmospheres I evoke for the sake of thoroughness are undoubtedly educational without having made a great deal of difference to my intellectual trajectory.

I have always believed that factors beyond our control, including the metaphorical drift of language itself, prevent us from saying exactly what we mean. We are all confident in our knowledge of what reality is, but we forget that that very knowledge, mediated by language, is a kind of screen that keeps us from coming face-to-face with what I call *actuality*, things in themselves. Broadly speaking, what I've just said expresses

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the view called anti-foundational, which is dull enough in itself, and I won't pause to defend it except to say that it has nothing to do with any question about the existence of external things and other minds, as is often supposed. In contempt of metaphysical idealism Dr. Johnson kicked a stone, hopped around in pain, and said "I refute it thus." I couldn't agree more, yet "stone" is still a tricky word, like all others.

The reason I start here is to say that on this point I disagreed with my parents from the very beginning, not long after my dawn of consciousness. My parents, who were intellectuals but never earned a penny from thinking, made common cause with a circle of extreme logical positivists called General Semanticists. The main branch of logical positivism included such luminaries as the early Wittgenstein, G.E. Moore, Bertrand Russell (a friend of my mother's had been a friend of his), and the literary critic I. A. Richards; but the fringe favored in my house followed Alfred Korzybski, whose book, *Science and Sanity*, in turn inspired S.I. Hayakawa's *Language in Thought and Action*. This thinking was disseminated in the academic journal *Etc.*, published for years by Wayne State University. Now, the main premise of these books and their offshoots, ludicrously belied in his later political life by Hayakawa, was that ideology is simply victimization by metaphor, that it is possible to prevent metaphors from distorting thought, and indeed that metaphor should be abolished altogether in all exchanges of cultural and political opinion – that having been the project of the few hundred words that Richards and his philosopher colleague C.K. Ogden had put together and called Basic English. The other group to which my parents belonged, the United World Federalists, believed that transparency of global understanding was possible and was impeded only by the insular language habits of nationalism. The journal of this group was the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, on its cover a clock with hands hovering between eleven and twelve as world news marginally improved or worsened: in other words always pointing toward nuclear doom. About this latter set of ideas one can have pretty mixed feelings, far from unsympathetic, especially today, though today the languages of nationalism everywhere eerily resemble each other; but the underlying premise, that our salvation lies in the achievement of fully transparent language exchange, I thought to be absolute total nonsense. "Transparent," I used to say, "according to whom?" This skepticism, in which I have never wavered, preceded any instruction in such matters outside the home. Like good old Oedipus, I came by it quarreling happily with my parents.

My sophomore through senior years at Palo Alto High School in California softened me up for the career I entered. I had three very good English teachers who were like the three points of a triangle. In my sophomore year Mr. Leon introduced all of us in his class to his guru, Ira Sandperl, to Ira's great friend Joan Baez – two years ahead of me in high school – and to all the other countercultural souls who gathered at a bookshop/coffee house on the El Camino Real in Menlo Park. Remember, this was 1959 and the mood was Beatnik, or at most proto-hippie, with a lot of green corduroy, black turtlenecks, *short* hair for the men, and the finger-snapping and head-nodding

you did to the cool jazz of that era. I can't say I remember too much of Bob Leon on the subject of literature, but his unblushing partisanship is amusing to look back on, and he got me going door-to-door for Adlai Stevenson, a masochistic activity I've never mustered the willpower to repeat for anyone else. The next year Mrs. Turner was a type of the old-fashioned schoolmarm, everything by the book and a tough grader but an infectiously eloquent Jane Austen enthusiast. Mr. Vittetoe my last year was a disciple of the famous scholar-critic Yvor Winters at Stanford, and like Winters in that university across the street he challenged every taste we were proud to have developed. He gave my imitation of Henry James's late style a D and forced the class to agree that the deathbed scene in Ellen Glasgow's *Vein of Iron* was better than Cathy's death in *Wuthering Heights* because it was truer to life. Mr. Vittetoe was a devoted cellist who lived in the everyday world with painful distaste, and I don't think I ever agreed with a word he said (after all, you can see from my Brontë example that he thought literary realism was *what corresponded to reality*), but it was a treat to be taught by someone as learned as he before college, or for that matter before grad school.

My vocation for English was I think already confirmed when I went to Berkeley. But still, a holdout against destiny, I was a double major at Berkeley in English and studio painting. My father was an artist who had graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago in the teeth of the Depression. He needed thenceforth to make a living (his art supply and picture-framing store, where I worked for many years, was in Palo Alto), but he was a very good artist and I grew up painting and hanging around painters. All this did have a long-term effect: not just my occasional painting but also my increasing engagement with art history in recent years, both in teaching and writing. But when I graduated from college I asked my Dad what he thought of my going to art school, and he said, "Oh, you wouldn't want to starve in a garret, would you?" I took this to be a comment on my talent, which in his old age he vehemently denied (so much for transparency of meaning!); but an additional incentive to go to grad school in English was my low draft number. This was Vietnam, and enrollment for an advanced degree in any academic subject exempted you from the draft, whereas training in any of the arts was considered a vo-tech track and there was no exemption for it. So off I went to Harvard to learn how to profess English, having had some good teachers at Berkeley, a lot of fun that I don't seem to remember clearly, the chance to rub elbows with the stars of the Free Speech Movement, and one intellectually memorable experience, to be recorded here.

Between my sophomore and junior years at Berkeley I was paid \$360 to stay on campus and take an experimental seminar on Milton's *Paradise Lost* taught by a smallish young man of perhaps twenty-five who in those days wore Ivy League clothes and smoked huge cigars. His name was Stanley Fish. On the first day he asked us, "What's your idea of paradise?" We all babbled on about angels and clouds and heightened consciousness until he said, "Well, my idea of paradise is a two-week paid vacation at a Holiday Inn in Miami." We were to be the guinea pigs for the infuriatingly well argued

book that launched Stanley's fabled career, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in "Paradise Lost."* Over six weeks he gave us a rapid-fire course in the traditional epics, all of which he made us read, thank goodness. His ideas about Milton seemed to us preposterous, and we all used every strategy we could think of to overthrow them, each seizing the chance of an in-class book report to do so, but we all failed, as we knew only too well. Something about the seminar inspired Cupid: six of us twelve married each other, and four others promptly married persons not in the twelve, leaving Torrey Smith and me in full knowledge of the absence of attraction on either side. Much of Stanley's later work came to influence me a lot, especially the thesis that what we think is conditioned by our membership in what he calls interpretive communities, but I want to emphasize only one thing in what is meant to be a tribute to him here. He's often thought of as a kind of trickster careerist and apostle of insincerity, but I would insist that Stanley is a teacher in every waking minute of his life. There's no neutral gear for him, no two-week vacation, because he never stops emulating his special hero, Socrates.

I'd gone to Harvard because all my teachers at Berkeley were Harvard Ph.D.s and had been through the oh-so-Oxbridge Senior Common Room system I was to go through myself, balancing a glass of sherry under my nose and discussing geography or dictionaries – anything but philosophy – with the likes of Willard Van Orman Quine. My Berkeley teachers – among them a bibulous comparatist named Howard Hugo, who began his lectures with the announcement borrowed from his famous namesake Victor, "Ego Hugo," and who found himself entangled late in life with the Andy Warhol groupie named Viva and came to my rooms in Eliot House to talk about it – my Berkeley teachers just assumed there was no place else to go, so I applied only to Harvard and off I went. Nobody had ever told the eminences at Harvard – and they *were* very distinguished people – that they were supposed to be mentors. They were the opposite of Stanley Fish. You showed up in their classes, they never talked to you and never made comments on papers. Not quite in keeping with that formula, I took Shakespeare with the poet Robert Lowell, whom I actually got to know a bit and helped through some poetry readings. But Lowell refused to admit that it was okay to have ideas about what you read. He insisted on the quality and sound of verse, indifferent to its meaning, or so he wanted us to believe, and his favorite line was Othello's "Keep up your bright swords, for the dew shall rust them." He was of course brilliant, as any of you who have read his poetry will know, and sometimes an interpretive idea would bubble up to the surface and he'd blurt it out before he could stop, but he would immediately fob it off, every time, on his "good friend Adrienne Rich."

Most other seminars were devoted entirely to graduate students' book reports, saving the teacher from preparing anything. In the seminar of the comparatist Harry Levin on American-European literary relations, Levin having been quite deaf, I read a paper on Hawthorne in Italy, featuring *The Marble Faun*, to which Harry responded, "That was a good paper, but you should have said something about *The Marble Faun*." My best teacher by far was the American colonialist Alan Heimert, who knew more

about Harvard than anyone alive even though he was a rough-edged, even boorish guy who looked and acted like Rod Steiger, sometimes even the Orson Welles of *Touch of Evil*, and hung out at the old hard-drinking Garden Spot Cafe in Harvard Square. When Alan was made master of Eliot House, I came in on his coattails to be assistant senior tutor. Alan succeeded the legendary classicist John Finley, who wrote recommendations comparing each of the men of Eliot House to a Homeric hero, and the transition from that byword for patrician fastidiousness to Alan was an abrupt one. At the welcoming party, I was led up to be introduced to Finley and he said, “Oh, one of the New Hampshire Frys?” I said “no,” and he turned on his heel and walked away.

I started a dissertation on Byron, I don’t know why, because I’d been convinced that I was a modernist apart from my brief apprenticeship as an American colonialist, but that’s what I did. One of my two advisers was Walter Jackson Bate, the famous scholar-critic whose lecture course on the history of literary criticism and published anthology of the texts he discussed gave me the reading knowledge I needed to stay afloat as a novice historian of criticism during my first years at Yale. But Jack Bate, whom I knew in person chiefly from the Eliot House Senior Common Room, not only never read a word of my dissertation, I’m convinced he had never read Byron either. My other adviser was Reuben Brower, a skilled interpreter and a recent migrant from Amherst to Harvard who never fit in there and spent as much time as possible at the American Academy in Rome. While I was writing, Brower was regrettably dying in Rome and never read the dissertation either. In the meantime, though, I had drifted away from the department and become involved in a restaurant called Peasant Stock, where my girlfriend was cook and I had a circle of friends. I worked there nightly as everything from bottle washer to maître d’ according to need, and rarely gave a thought to my graduate life. Imagine my surprise, then, when late one spring term I was asked if I wanted to go down to Yale as an acting instructor. Yale had called Harvard and asked “did they have anyone left?” – someone had unexpectedly taken a leave and Yale needed a warm body in the classroom. Oh yes, said Harvard, there’s this one guy who hasn’t been going on the job market, we haven’t seen much of him lately, but he’s alright as far as we can remember. So I went, having recently abandoned the dissertation project for a second time, and was interviewed by the English chair at Yale, Dwight Culler, who knew me because a friend from the Fish seminar whom I had occasionally visited in New Haven was his dissertation student. Dwight told me that if I finished my dissertation in two years I could become an assistant professor. Those were simpler times. Don’t ask me how he could presume to make such a confidently independent offer. He was an unassuming man, no autocrat, so I guess he knew what was possible, because it all happened.

Once I was here at Yale, teaching around the clock as I had also done at Harvard until I wandered off into the restaurant biz, I met my future wife, Brigitte Peucker. She hung out with a colorful crowd, including the Dante scholar John Freccero, and we all used to get together for readings of plays, most memorably Farquhar’s *The*

Beaux' Stratagem in Brigitte's apartment. I needed to get that dissertation written, and it meant starting all over again for a third time, rereading Byron's copious collected writings and everything around them, and when I finally started writing I had only a few months left on the clock I'd been given. It was Brigitte, whom I took to calling Lady Macbeth, who kept me at my desk. When I met Brigitte she was a rising star in the German department, T'Fing for one her mentors, Peter Demetz, in the Literature major introduction to literary theory called Lit Y (then Lit 300), which I later took over. I helped Brigitte stay at her desk as she had helped me, and when she got tenure we became one of the very rare couples in the humanities, perhaps the second, to have tenure at Yale. But I jump ahead. My dissertation got finished and approved. In some ways it prefigures what's being written about Byron now, its title, "Byron's Myth of the Self," perhaps anticipating Stephen Greenblatt's very influential concept of "self-fashioning." But I never thought of publishing a word of it because it was hopelessly out of scale in structure, the first half working out the thesis practically line by line in Byron's very bad juvenilia, the second half galloping with the same thesis through all the rest of his work. This meant that in order to get tenure I had to write two whole books from scratch after the dissertation, and I'll return to those.

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I need to pause now to describe the most important influences on my early work, influences so powerful that they took the form of what one of those influences, Harold Bloom, was always calling "Blake's Covering Cherub." They were all Yale influences, but I was still at Harvard. I've indicated already that while everybody at Harvard was immensely learned and "sound" – you'll remember that old term of approval – there weren't many inspirations around for a fellow of a speculative bent like me. It was a Harvard undergraduate – and of course those *were* extraordinary there – who introduced me to something called structuralism and got me reading a lot of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes. During the later resurgence of historicism – of which Graff's book was a part – and the Foucault-inspired turn to the archive in literary studies, one of Lévi-Strauss's responses to Jean-Paul Sartre was always in my head: "what we gain in information we lose in comprehension." Well, maybe. It might be better to say that each of us can't see the forest for the trees after a different number of trees, many for some, fewer for others. In the meantime, still at Harvard, I was reading my first Yale influence, W. K. Wimsatt, absorbing the formalist premises of the New Critics and trying to work out my own approach to the questions raised by Wimsatt's essay "The Intentional Fallacy." We know that every utterance has an author, but in what ways, if any, can we appeal to the intention of that author to determine what the utterance means? I have never found a rigorous answer to that question, which has many facets and has accumulated opinions like burrs not just from literary and hermeneutic theorists but from philosophers like Frege and Husserl. I console myself by thinking that nobody else has answered it either, they have only made their peace with it.

Also before I left Harvard I had begun reading the Yale Romanticists, who rejected the neoclassical literary canon of their Yale elders, including Wimsatt; and under the influence of Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman I started to realize that I was instinctively a romanticist. That had no bearing by the way on my choice of Byron for a dissertation, as Byron scarcely existed in the Yale School pantheon. Nobody at Yale liked him. The first paper I read before my new colleagues at Yale involved quoting stanzas from Byron's *Childe Harold*, and the first question afterwards was "How can you read that dreadful stuff?" I had by then met the critics I had been reading and their colleagues in person, and everything I've touched on here needs to be approached more slowly.

Wimsatt was six feet eight inches tall and hard of hearing, so during the few times I was to meet him conversation proved difficult. It was no help to sit down with him, as his torso was the longest part of him and he was still too high above the average face to catch the drift of any voices but those he cared most to hear. He was on the verge of retirement, a condition that did not sit well with him, and very shortly after I met him he fell down the steps of the Yale Bowl and sadly passed away in the hospital a few days later. I was asked to take over his seminar in the history of literary criticism, and for reasons I can't recall I convinced the director of undergraduate studies that I could do it best as a lecture course. Here I must stop to explain the origin of my lifelong lecture style. Following Jack Bate's habit of teaching Aristotle before Plato, I entered the classroom on the first day of that course armed with twenty pages on the *Poetics*. I noticed a colleague keeping me under surveillance in the back row, took a deep breath, and began to read. As I turned to the next page I realized that I hadn't numbered the pages and the next page was *not the second*. After a futile search for that second page I threw them all aside and began to ad-lib. It didn't go well but no one walked out, incredibly, so I said to myself it couldn't possibly be worse, and from then on when lecturing I always brought in a few notes and talked away for fifty minutes. You can see me doing that online.

The social and intellectual heart of my first years in the department, which I feel that I really must linger over even though it defers yet again discussing the influences that carried me forward and shaped my reputation, was the collegial group with whom I taught English 129, our then flourishing yearlong survey of Western literature. We all taught sections and took turns giving the lectures. They were good, those lectures, some very good like Jim Nohrnberg's tour de force on the *Inferno*, and they were gathered into a book called *Homer to Brecht* by two of our colleagues, Ed Mendelson and Mike Seidel. My lectures, on Sophocles and Racine, reflect the abovementioned influence of Lévi-Strauss and Barthes. The broadest shadow over our very diverse lectures was that of the great Toronto myth critic Northrop Frye, because his imaginative coherence could synthesize otherwise absurdly disparate materials, and I suppose for a period he was the hero of my theoretical universe. There was nothing profoundly inconsistent in that with my emerging local influences, as Bloom hadn't yet turned

against Frye, and Hartman had deep investments in anthropologists of myth and ritual.

Well, to come to it finally: What was it in Bloom and Hartman that galvanized my first book, *The Poet's Calling in the English Ode*, which won a prize and had some good reviews (mixed with a bad one by Helen Vendler, who thought I must be a student of Geoffrey's and seized the occasion to attack him through me)? I think to tell you the truth that paradoxically their influence was a foretaste of my own one original idea, fully to emerge in my fourth book but mediated at that early stage by the language and to some extent the ideas of Bloom and Hartman. In a book that hubristically covered the whole history of the ode, I argued that in a sense ode and elegy trade places, elegy finding optimistic consolations, often salvific, and the ode even in its rhetoric of celebration burdened with an undersong of death, or deathwardness. With this came too the tendency of all my readings to this day, really in the absence of any systematic claim, to end up showing that the "argument," the progressive beginning-middle-end or before-and-after structure that's apparent in a poem, is undermined by the compulsive repetition of the impasse it tries to get beyond. I think now that the real influence of the Yale School critics on my work was not so much their ideas – though my emphasis on repetition reflects Bloom's emphasis on the repetition of the precursor in the successor's poem – as their prose styles, especially Hartman's, which released me into the sense that I could sustain a network of allusion without the decorum of considering things one at a time. Geoffrey himself was widely criticized for taking this liberty, to which he responded in his book *Criticism in the Wilderness*, not his strongest effort; and in the long run I tried to tone myself down, falling under a very different stylistic influence that I'll come to. But I still think the great essays of Geoffrey's *Beyond Formalism* and *The Fate of Reading* are incomparable masterpieces of postwar critical writing.

My next book, *The Reach of Criticism: Method and Perception in Literary Theory*, was scribbled for tenure, and it was my weakest because it really had nothing to say, although each chapter, taking up a particular text in the history of criticism, was a worthwhile enough detailed reading of the sort that such texts had rarely been given. Nothing to say, I say, yet it made an insistent claim. Written concerning the history of criticism – for which I was given to understand that in the footsteps of Wimsatt I might fit in – the book argued for a canon of critical writings, expressive and anti-formalist, that was systematically opposed to the canon set forth and defended in Wimsatt's and Cleanth Brooks's *Literary Criticism: A Short History*. The trouble was that just as Wimsatt and Brooks for all their urbanity and ingenuity still ended up just saying this is good and that is bad – Aristotle good, Longinus bad – I ended up saying just the opposite, Longinus good, Aristotle bad, and so on. I made Aristotle out to be a proto-structuralist afflicted for that reason with narrow and inflexible standards, so I suppose one could say that the book was my farewell to structuralism and entry into its aftermath, deconstruction, but here again I must pause.

I was never a deconstructionist. Those who *were* knew that and gave me a wide berth accordingly, the practical result of which was that the chief organ of that school, the journal *Diacritics*, found a guaranteed-to-be-negative reviewer for my second book. They did publish my response, which I called “Back in Yale Again,” honoring Brigitte’s North German mother who always proudly told her friends, “My daughter teaches in Jail” – which admittedly sounds different today, with our programs for teaching in prisons. Deconstruction in any case was hostile to hermeneutics and practiced reading to reveal the effects of rhetoric rather than meaning. I never gave up reading to find meaning, even though I was soon to claim that the writing we call literature is an effort to get beyond meaning. And yet: those who were *not* deconstructionists always just took it for granted that I *was* one, and that left very few people indeed who were willing to sit still and figure out what I actually was. I needed to do that myself, and that involved realizing how thoroughly I agreed with the opinions and methods of the mid-century British critic William Empson, perhaps best-known today for his first book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Empson was a nimble and subtle reader, praised – as was my early mentor Reuben Brower – by Paul de Man, but Empson was two things the Yale School for all its intellectual diversity was not. First, he was a radical materialist, with no trace of the displaced idealism in the whole tradition from Hegel to Derrida that marked the intellectual trajectory of the Yale School. And second, he had a wonderfully down-to-earth, deadpan style that made him, as I said in my book about him – my third, *William Empson: Prophet Against Sacrifice* – the only comic writer in the history of literary criticism, if you don’t count Oscar Wilde. Hartman and Derrida and de Man were witty, even funny at times, but no one ever mistook them for comic. Well, I realized that I was a materialist philosophically, pointing toward what was to become a public disagreement with Geoffrey about Wordsworth, and I started trying to make my writing amusing, or at least conversational, when it made sense to do so, because in Empson, and I *hoped* in me, making jokes with no effort at witty wordplay was an external sign of something very important: not taking oneself too seriously. Henceforth, as at least a few readers realized, I was a disciple of Empson.

But I finally had my own idea, which wasn’t Empson’s or anyone else’s, now fully conscious and ready to be groomed as a theoretical statement, and this I poured into a fourth book that I hoped would be my opus maximum, *A Defense of Poetry: Reflections on the Occasion of Writing*. Comprising quite a bit of already published material, now gathering momentum as an *idée fixe*, the book starts with four theoretical chapters, denser than I could have wished, followed by a series of cases in point, as it were, that varied perhaps disconcertingly in style and gravity – or the lack thereof – according to their occasion. The idea, my idea, was this: Criticism had always been driven by referential considerations or by formal considerations or by elegant syntheses of the two such as Coleridge’s “multëity in unity,” still very much at the heart of the New Criticism. But the urge to write, I argued, and certain telltale signs within writing, suggest that the persistence of literature (an odd thing in itself: why do people in all

ages *keep* writing poetry, for example, that strange imposition of lines on sentences?) — the persistence of literature is not fully explained by formal and referential considerations but needs to be understood as frustration at realizing that language no matter how we use it is *compelled* to signify, to mean. The task of explaining what things mean is inescapable, yet it has little to do with what all of us have felt at one time or another, perhaps especially in childhood, namely, the sentiment of being itself. Not that this or that is something in particular but that this or that, with everything else including ourselves, just *is*. That, I argued, is what poetry tries to say, in an indexical gesture toward the sheer presence of things that I call “ontic,” but of course fails to say, the more so for all the referential and formal ingenuity with which it strains at the limits of language.

I believed even in that book that the poet who most fully reflects this idea is Wordsworth, and I devoted quite a bit of space to him on that account. In the course of working back and forth over his writings I had become what Matthew Arnold called a “Wordsworthian,” in other words a Wordsworth buff, and also, in the course of things, a romantic period specialist. It was indeed only gradually and in mid-career that I realized, or perhaps admitted to myself, that I had become a scholar of a particular period. I started teaching our bread-and-butter romanticism courses, both graduate and undergraduate, during a period when many of my romanticist colleagues were happier teaching other things. I published quite a bit in the field and even went to some conferences. I did a textbook edition of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, surrounded by a lot of critical and biographical apparatus, before turning to my sixth book, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are*. I wrote that one *con amore* and think it’s my best-written book, setting forth the thesis I’ve just outlined as a sustained case study covering Wordsworth’s career through 1817. It was then that I announced my allegiance to a “Cambridge school” descended from Empson, Basil Willey, and the still-living poet scholar Jeremy Prynne, as opposed to the Yale School with its vestigial idealisms. Geoffrey’s generous but still aggrieved critique of this apostasy, “Paul Fry’s Wordsworth, and the Meaning of Poetic Meaning,” then appeared in a journal called *Partial Answers*. But neither of us were thinking about that when I helped him teach his last seminars, with their wonderfully serendipitous moments, here in the Koerner Center.

In 2009 my lecture course on literary theory was filmed and recorded for an online series called OpenYale. This was to prove a rewarding venture. For years after that I got an e-mail a day from all over the world (it’s down to once a week these days), especially Asia and the Middle East, thanking me for that course. The OpenYale series was abandoned in favor of for-profit Coursera options, but the Yale Press before then turned a few of our courses into books (I envied the title of Shelley Kagan’s philosophy course, *Death*). I was able to turn my lecture transcripts into readable prose, and I’m quite happy with this book, my most recent, called *Theory of Literature*. Unlike some of my predecessors teaching theory, notably de Man in his famous Lit Z, I prided myself

on treating the whole twentieth-century phenomenon of “theory” evenhandedly. My model was the history of philosophy course I’d had at Berkeley, where the truth you were convinced you’d finally reached in each lecture (Plato was right, Aristotle was right, Descartes was right, and so on) had the rug pulled out from under it in the next lecture.

I’ll conclude with a mention of the activities I’ve been engaged in that were certainly part of an *educational* trajectory, if not always an intellectual one. I well remember my active years in the Whitney Humanities Center, when Peter Brooks was director. The center in those days was closely identified with various speculative avant-gardes, hence not to everyone’s taste, but for me it was an intellectually stimulating and collegial period, as I know that at least one scientist who was there at the time, Bob Shulman, will agree. For many years, 1987–2005, I was a member on the Mid-Atlantic regional committee of a program meant to benefit prospective graduate students called the Mellon Fellowships in the Humanities, chairing it for the first five of those years, as Peter Brooks and Hillis Miller had chaired it before me. This involved reading a couple hundred applications, choosing the best to interview during the course of a February weekend in New York, and hanging out – for some years at the Algonquin – with stimulating colleagues from other schools in the region, sharp questioners all. When the program was finally abandoned I sorely missed those annual weekends in New York and the build-up to them, not least because reading all those folders prepared by the young and ambitious – of course reflecting the opinions of their mentors – kept me up-to-date from year to year with the latest trends across the humanities.

More narrowly in English, I derived the same sorts of benefit from reading the applications to our own program. Nearly everyone in English always read a few folders in various committee rounds, but I at least glanced at all of them during my total of twenty years as director of graduate studies (DGS) for two different ten-year intervals. The first stretch, when I was quite young, was very different from the second. In those early days, although I myself enjoyed talking to all the students and proffering advice, there was very little mentoring for students and little or no emphasis on student teaching. The Yale attitude was frankly *sauve qui peut*, with our students hired at the best places through a network of nods and winks, a chapter of their dissertations – or maybe less – completed at the time. How changed the landscape when I returned to the job! In the new buyers’ market, no student was hired without Ph.D. in hand; jobs were getting scarce; there was a great fuss about “time to degree”; training in teaching had in effect become mandatory, fostering the grad students’ interest in unionization; and everything about graduate study that had formerly been hands-off was now hands-on, nerve-racking for the students and bureaucratized for their supervisors. Whether graduate study in the humanities was a prudent choice at all in a digital and data-driven world was an open question.

My two stints as DGS were separated from each other by the years – 1995–2002 – when I was master of Ezra Stiles, as heads of college were then called. Many of you

have been in that role, and I need scarcely tell you that the job is a steep learning curve and nothing if not educational. While stimulated by the many visitors Brigitte and I were able to lure to the college – Susan Sontag, Frances McDormand, Edward Norton, the Supreme Buddhist Patriarch of Cambodia, Bobby Seale, Kenneth Koch, Martha Stewart, and the Storyteller of the Lakota Sioux, to name a few – and stimulated sometimes too by conversations with students, we felt oppressed in the long run by the awareness that we were all too much *in loco parentis*. Students who were for the most part models of behavior in the classroom – polite, friendly, respectful – acted out in the college as though they were in their parents’ kitchens, and we saw more than we wished to see of what is I believe still called, in psychiatric circles, the entitlement complex. I think it was the complete absence of any sense of entitlement at all on the part of K–12 public school teachers that led to my increased involvement with them over the last twenty years in the National Initiative branch of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, teaching two-week summer seminars on everything from Shakespeare to children’s literature and becoming, with our leader Gary Haller, executive co-director of the program.

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I haven’t said much about my commitment to teaching, but it has always been intense, and it has been fueled in recent years by my interaction with so many who might have taught our children and grandchildren. I was a good seminar leader for them, I think, having taught thirteen seminars in all, because our rapport was always strong, but I should confess that I’m at my best with advanced students. Lecturing is perhaps my natural mode, but in seminar teaching I do best with graduate students and strain more with most cohorts of undergraduates to sustain the balance of discussion they want. It *was* for my introductory teaching, though, that I won a lucrative national prize, the Kennedy Center/Stephen Sondheim Inspirational Teacher Award. I received this, it was said, because I had told an English 129 student who had become the digital technology columnist for the *New York Times* that he should stop writing what he guessed I wanted to hear and start writing what he actually thought. That came as a kind of epiphany for him and evidently led to my prize. I don’t need to tell you, though, that what best characterizes the value of what we do in universities is the unusual degree of disinterestedness with which we teach and write. We like prizes, just as children like presents, but we don’t work for them.