



Snow (right) is “as intellectually undistinguished as it is possible to be,” sneered Leavis (left).

junction,” as it has been called, is simplistic and pernicious.

In his 1959 lecture at Cambridge University, Snow claimed that scientists “have the future in their bones,” while literary intellectuals and other humanists could not even describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which, he asserted, was roughly “the scientific equivalent” of a play by Shakespeare. The result was a traditional (nonscientific) culture devoid of “social hope.” And this, in the context of the Cold War and the rising expectations of “poor” nations, he warned, was dangerous.

Three years later, British literary critic F. R. Leavis (1895–1978) mounted a venomous attack. To link “social hope” and material goods, Leavis said, was “a confusion to which all creative writers are tacit enemies.” Science and technology would never bridge the gap between the individual and society; only language and literature could allow human beings to transcend themselves. Any comparison between the Second Law of Thermodynamics and the sacred sphere of literature was just “a cheap journalistic infelicity,” Leavis said.

“For the historian of science,” writes Burnett,

“a double irony binds these claims” about the Second Law of Thermodynamics. That law, articulated in various ways beginning in the 1850s, holds that while energy is conserved, entropy (or disorder) seems to be constantly increasing in the universe. The implication—that the universe “appears headed for maximum entropy or ‘heat-death’”—was spelled out in popular journals and impressed writers in Britain and France, as scholars have shown. “If you take it to heart,”

wrote the novelist Joseph Conrad, “it becomes an unendurable tragedy.” Thus, Burnett points out, “the very decay Snow decried in the moral fiber of literary culture, it turns out, cannot be fully understood without reference to the history of his own beloved Second Law.”

At the same time, and with equal irony, Burnett adds, Conrad’s *Shadow-Line* (1917), “which Leavis brought forward as a self-evident proof of the irrelevance of the Second Law, would be better read as a parable of its broad cultural significance.”

In the hands of those who use it, Burnett says, the “two cultures” disjunction—given renewed expression, for instance, in *Consilience* (1998) by Edward O. Wilson, the founding father of sociobiology—tends to devalue humanistic inquiry. In Wilson’s eyes, according to Burnett, “the humanities and social sciences represent science’s last frontier,” a domain awaiting conquest. The real need, however, suggests the historian of science, is not to “bridge” Snow’s two cultures, but to recognize that both are part of a larger culture and to understand how they and it came to be.

## ARTS & LETTERS

### *Deconstructing the Professors*

*A Survey of Recent Articles*

All right, so tenured radicals in academe have turned English departments into ideological hothouses for the growth of literary theory. That’s yesterday’s news. The ques-

tion for today is: Have the resulting sunbursts of theory nevertheless lit up the landscape for the humble souls at work trying to create literature? Have writers found the critics’ reve-

lations about the hidden influence of class, race, and gender, all the exquisitely nuanced insights into the literary enterprise, *helpful*?

The overwhelming answer is *not at all*, to judge from a symposium on “The Situation of American Writing 1999” in *American Literary History* (Summer 1999). Of the 26 novelists, poets, and other writers canvassed by the journal, only three give today’s academic critics anything like an unqualified “thumbs up.”

“Literary theorists are creating their own kind of creative writing and no longer producing literary criticism to explain or translate traditional literary efforts. Good on them!” declares Michael Martone, author of *Fort Wayne Is Seventh on Hitler’s List: Indiana Stories* (1993).

Samuel R. Delany, a black, gay writer of science fiction whose 22-page response to the editor’s questions takes up one-sixth of the whole symposium, says that, being a critic as well as a fiction writer, “I have all the sympathy in the world for critics. (Do I have something important to say? I should hope so.)” He calls for “much *more* scholarly consideration of contemporary writing—preferably passionately felt.”

The third yea-sayer is feminist Gail Godwin, author of *Evensong* (1999) and other novels. “Yes, academic critics have something important to say to me. I often read criticism to get fresh orientation.” The criticism she reads, however, is apparently not of the more theory-ridden variety. She credits Richard Poirier’s *Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (1987), George Steiner’s *Real Presences* (1989), and Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (1984) with having recently inspired her. She also “treasure[s] the three book-length studies of my work to date.” Godwin, too, would like scholarly critics to give more attention to contemporary fiction. But she also urges them to be prepared to defend “important literary works” from assaults in the name of “current academic ideologies and current standards of political correctness.”

The other 23 symposium contributors, however, have few kind words about academic criticism today. “None of the theorists

ever said one thing that mattered to me or to any of the writers I know and admire,” comments Pulitzer Prize-winning poet W. D. Snodgrass, whose most recent book is *After-Images* (1999).

Contemporary criticism, according to the stern indictment delivered by William Gass, author of *The Tunnel* (1996) and *Omensetter’s Luck: A Novel* (1966), and an emeritus professor at Washington University in Saint Louis, “has fallen into the clutches of obfuscating ideologues who have no feeling for literary quality, who write only for one another, who are partisan in all the wrong ways and ignorant of what is going on in contemporary literature as a developing art. Philosophically, many of these critics are scandalously careless of evidence, incapable of clarity, eloquence, or rigor. . . . Most writers and most philosophers have nothing but contempt for these ‘movements.’”

Annie Dillard, author of *For the Time Being* (1999) and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), agrees. “Academic criticism has lost all usefulness to literature; it sees writers as mere unconscious spokespeople for their races, classes, and genders,” she says. “The New Criticism [of the 1940s and ’50s] focused on close readings of texts, and as such gave writers heart. Academic criticism today abandons literature as elitist in very concept; it has become mere sociology.” However, she anticipates that “this abuse will stop soon. It’s a dead end.”

“For the whole of my career,” writes novelist Madison Smartt Bell, author of *Doctor Sleep* (1992) and *Waiting for the End of the World* (1985), “academic scholarship has abdicated its interest in contemporary literature in favor of myopic concentration on critical theory. . . . Right now, I can think of only three significant literary critics who are not [also] practitioners of the genre they criticize: Helen Vendler, Sven Birkerts, and Bruce Bawer. . . . and the latter two built their careers outside the academy.”

Scholars should be taking the lead in “defining the shape of literary posterity,” Bell observes. The absence of such criticism today poses “a real problem,” in his view. “Consider the critical rescue and reconstruction of Faulkner’s reputation in the ’50s—

could anything remotely similar happen now?"

In his introduction to the symposium, *American Literary History* editor Gordon Hutner seems somewhat pained by all the hostile responses. "It is unfortunate enough that writers have mostly turned away from what professors have to say, but this rejection is all the more regrettable for being based, as it often is, on 20-year-old perceptions about the academic tolerance for jargon, a conviction about the sterility of the academy for which, with a little bad faith, justification can always be found. Not even three of the 26 respondents have mentioned the scholar-

ly turn to history, much less something called the New Historicism, or cultural studies. Nor do they seem to care much about the nuances in our various, frequently [heated] exchanges over multiculturalism and the canon."

Nevertheless, Hutner believes there is "richness to be found in continuing exchanges" between academic critics and writers. But Gass, for one, disagrees: "Academics are consumed by political issues they have made as petty as themselves. So I don't at this time envision profitable exchanges between such scholars, such critics, and such writers."

## *A Thoroughly Modern Austen*

"Jane Austen Changes Her Mind" by Christopher Clausen, in *The American Scholar* (Spring 1999), 1785 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Fourth Floor, Washington, D.C. 20036.

It sometimes seems that the most popular serious novelist at the close of the 20th century is an author of the early 19th: Jane Austen (1775–1817). All but one of her six novels have made their way to movie theaters and television screens in recent years. Something about Austen's well-regulated bucolic romances, in which the woman gets not only her man, but an estate and a fortune as well, is charming readers and audiences on an impressive scale.

Critics, however, have had difficulty pinpointing just what that "something" is. They have interpreted the social commentary of Austen's tales to represent everything from radical feminism to "systematic conservatism[ism]." But for all that diversity, there has been remarkable consensus that all of Austen's novels are consistent in whatever social ideology they display.

But Clausen, an English professor at Pennsylvania State University, argues that Austen's last novel, *Persuasion* (published posthumously in 1818), "represents an unprecedented shift of direction." *Persuasion* is still quintessential Austen in its plot and the value it places on the happiness of a match well made. But where her other novels hold marriage from or into the landowning, fortune-holding gentry as the standard for success, *Persuasion* promotes different, more modern manifestations of that happiness.

*Persuasion* finds Anne Elliot, the second

daughter of the flighty, spendthrift Sir Walter Elliot, having fallen in love with young Captain Wentworth, but nonetheless being dissuaded from marrying him: Wentworth, without family background or money, is hardly qualified for a match with an Elliot. However, after eight years of separation and a good deal of miscommunication, Anne and Wentworth marry and find their own sort of happiness. True, Wentworth possesses an impressive fortune, but it is a fortune won in his naval victories, not bequeathed along with a title and manor. That the hero of the novel would thus choose and pursue a vocation (and do so enthusiastically and successfully) would be unheard of in Austen's earlier novels. But in *Persuasion*, it is only the sailors and their wives, never the gentry, who find fulfillment in their marriages, wherein men and women appear to have nearly equal status and childlessness does not equal failure. Significantly, Lady Russell, a family friend of the Elliots who can be taken as a stand-in for Austen herself, at long last admits (in Austen's words) that "she had been pretty completely wrong" in her earlier criticism of Wentworth and counsels Anne to marry him after all.

Though Austen herself was silent on the cause of her shift in values (and Clausen wisely declines to speculate), the result is a new spin on the "authentic" Austen novel. And happily for Austen fans, it still makes a pretty good movie.