

ine contexts in which they would be heavier. The wager of my article is that worries about language do indeed have thoroughly empirical and potentially quite brutal consequences. I would not wish to defend my work purely on pragmatic grounds, but my sense of the urgency of these issues derives in part from what I see as the quotidian import of the rather dry and abstruse question of “figuration.” And that question *is* dry and abstruse. One does not have to be David Herman to dislike essays like mine. Would that things were so simple. But it is just such a desire for simplicity that one needs to resist, for reasons that are not just cognitive or epistemological but also political and ethical.

Such resistance is never easy or definitive. One characteristic of “Pynchon’s Postmodern Sublime,” for instance, that looks somewhat suspicious in retrospect is the willingness of the text to leave behind the gender drama it begins by interrogating. In the passage from *V. to Gravity’s Rainbow*, my article repeats, perhaps a little too unself-consciously, the very desire for closure (for, say, a “purely” linguistic closure) that it studies and attempts to demystify. We never seem to be able to ask what “language” is without the distraction of a sacrifice. My essay can at least claim to have elaborated the reading of its own insufficiency, and I persist in believing that this is not an entirely futile gesture.

MARC W. REDFIELD
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Presidential Address

To the Editor:

Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s Presidential Address (104 [1988]: 285–93) rather disingenuously dismisses some serious issues that our profession needs to face. Smith announces that the language of theory, including phrases such as “models of the dynamics of the cultural transmission of privileged texts,” is necessary, “quite precise,” and “not gratuitously esoteric.” But she is a good enough scholar of language to know that one’s choice of linguistic style involves more than just a desire for precision or the expression of otherwise inexpressible concepts. The dialect of literary theory, like any jargon, serves to mark insiders in a group and exclude outsiders. The pseudoscientific terminology of the phrase in question also tries to borrow prestige from other disciplines for a discipline that perceives itself as having little. Authors use the latest Greek or Latin or French buzzwords not just from laziness but from a desire to mark themselves as part of an “in” group, membership in which confers substantial rewards in our profession and exclusion from which can be quite threatening.

Smith makes a brief bow toward acknowledging this ex-

clusion near the end of her address: “We must also recognize other types of exclusion and demotion, however—in particular those that result from rigid divisions of professional roles and responsibilities, archaic hierarchies of academic caste and privilege, and the signs of distinction that mark and maintain both” (291). But she shows no sign of realizing the pervasiveness of these divisions.

She brushes off the idea that “competition for positions” or “avoid[ing] risks” could cause graduate students to study particular subjects such as structuralism, phenomenology, Barthes, Bakhtin, and Kierkegaard (289). But current graduate students could tell her the pressure they feel to “do theory,” to catch on to some trend that can get them a chance at a job. I go next year to a one-year appointment at a large university, having been told that the position will not become tenure track precisely because my specialization in “language and linguistics” has the wrong theoretical emphasis. (I say this not to criticize my new employer but to point out that specializations have powerful material consequences.)

Smith brushes off criticisms of peer review, saying parenthetically, “mean-spirited or ostentatious quibbling . . . of course . . . [is] hardly the norm in the contemporary academy” (289). But any regular reader of the Forum section of *PMLA* will have reason to doubt that. Graduate students in my own department face their oral qualifying exam, and junior faculty members face tenure review, with the intimidating knowledge that “mean-spirited or ostentatious quibbling,” while perhaps not the norm, has been far from unheard of in these reviews and elsewhere.

Smith assumes that the problems of “internal ‘outsiders’” are being solved by the establishment of “various committees” (291), but I see little evidence. The academy is still aggressively elitist and hierarchical. The hierarchism is exemplified by the fact that grad students who teach courses at my university are losing their health insurance (beginning this summer) while regular faculty members, teaching the same courses in classrooms down the hall, receive a pay raise. At many universities, graduate students and lecturers are considered good enough to teach a large portion of the undergraduate courses, but not good enough to share in the decision-making power, benefits, and salary of regular faculty members.

The elitism is implicit in another of Smith’s statements: “one recognizes that the value of [the humanities’] products is measured not by the size of their audience but, like the products of scholarly activity in any field, by criteria such as intellectual originality, coherence, and fertility” (289). But “one” does not seem to recognize that these terms are themselves relative to the elitist structure that measures them.

Sometimes we seem to see our goal as production, or “the development of knowledge” in Smith’s terms, as though the university were a robotic factory or part of some real-estate developer’s pyramid scheme. Until we de-

cide to become an institution that preserves as well as produces and that behaves as humanely as possible to its own members and to those it interacts with (students, parents, etc.), these problems will persist.

G. BURNS COOPER
University of Texas, Austin

Reply:

It is clear that G. Burns Cooper is aggrieved, and I sympathize with a number of his grievances. He has, however, read me carelessly, put words into my mouth, and, I believe, more generally misdirected the force of his antagonism. I shall review his observations and charges accordingly.

1. "Theory"

What I said—speaking not of "theory" but of *contemporary research*—was that, because of developments in literary studies during the past half century, certain familiar terms (such as *endurance* and *great works of literature*) could no longer be used as easily as they formerly were, while various other terms (such as *cultural transmission* and *privileged texts*), "because [they] allude quite precisely to other networks of ideas," cannot be dispensed with or readily translated into more familiar ones. My point was that the occurrence of new concepts is to be expected in any discipline and that such concepts and their attendant "buzzwords" are not produced *in order to be exclusionary*. The use of unfamiliar terms will, of course, *have the effect* of excluding people who do not have access to new developments in the field, or who choose to remain ignorant of those developments, or who, for various reasons, do not have the ability to achieve much mastery of them. But that is a very different way to state the problem and, I think, a very different problem.

2. Opportunism

I did not, as Cooper claims I did, "brush off the idea that 'competition for positions' or 'avoid[ing] risks' could cause students to study particular subjects . . .," and so on. Undoubtedly such considerations operate for scholars in the humanities, as they do for people in most other professions. My comments on this question were occasioned by the report issued recently by Lynne V. Cheney, head of the National Endowment for the Humanities (*Humanities in America: A Report to the President, the Congress, and the American People*, Washington: NEH, 1988) and, in particular, by her suggestion that scholars who pursued *specialized* topics in the 1970s did so primarily out of temerity and/or to increase their chances for professional advancement—this in alleged contrast to the motives and careers of "generalists," who were presumably braver and more high-minded, but (and, perhaps, *therefore*) fared worse (Cheney 8–9). The suggestion is, of course, insulting to many current members of the profession as well as histor-

ically dubious, and my point was that it could hardly have been *risk aversion* or a concern to find *easy* roads to job security that led students, during those professionally bleak years, to pursue the novel and demanding—but also intellectually significant and, for them, intellectually exciting—courses of study that I mentioned. Because some who prosper in a field have behaved opportunistically, it does not follow that only those who fail in it have behaved honorably.

3. Peer Review

Cooper's citation of my comments on peer review similarly obliterates their specific occasion and explicit target. The sequence of words at issue occurs in a passage where I question the implications of Cheney's claim that, because of likely challenges on matters of detail, peer review puts "generalists" at a disadvantage and thereby discourages "a comprehensive perspective" among scholars in the humanities (Cheney 9). My specific question was whether, as it seemed, Cheney was just objecting to the exercise of scholarly standards, and the point of my parenthetical comment was to acknowledge that *objectionable quibbling* does occur, though not to the extent that would support her implication. Cooper's reading of my comment as a whitewash of abuses of peer review is clearly strained, especially in view of the fact that what he ends up saying himself on the matter ("quibbling, while perhaps not the norm, has been far from unheard of in these reviews and elsewhere") is neither more nor less than what I said.

4. Elitism

I did not state, nor do I assume, that *all* the problems of the profession are currently "being solved by 'various committees.'" What I did say, emphatically and at some length, is that the profession is now more actively reformist but that we must continue to update its antibias machinery and also address other, previously unrecognized, forms of unwarranted exclusion and demotion. Cooper should not, I think, underestimate either the significance of MLA committees and commissions (e.g., the Ethics Committee, established last year and charged to investigate, among other objectionable practices, the intimidation of graduate students at examinations, indignities associated with job interviews and hiring, and the economic exploitation of adjunct faculty) or the extent of the changes that have occurred in recent years in the association and the academy. For it is, of course, just the activities of those committees and commissions, and just those associated changes in the academy's practices, that have led a number of other—no doubt more established—members of the profession to complain that it has been "taken over" by "radicals" and "special interests."

Similarly, I did not imply that all academic distinctions have vanished, nor do I believe that all of them *should* vanish. I wrote of "*rigid* divisions" of roles and responsibilities and "*archaic* hierarchies" of academic caste and privilege, all of which I have, throughout my professional