



Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>

*Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.*

---


## **Academic Labor and the Reflexive Turn in Literature and Cultural Studies**

Bousquet, Marc, 1963-

College Literature, 31.4, Fall 2004, pp. 172-180 (Review)

Published by West Chester University  
DOI: 10.1353/lit.2004.0051



 For additional information about this article  
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/lit/summary/v031/31.4bousquet.html>

# Academic Labor and the Reflexive Turn in Literature and Cultural Studies

Marc Bousquet

*Marc Bousquet is associate professor of English at the University of Louisville and founding editor of **Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor***

Giroux, Henry A. and Kostas Myrsiades, eds. 2001. *Beyond the Corporate University: Culture and Pedagogy in the New Millennium*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield. viii + 360 pp. \$72.00 hc. \$26.95 sc.

Williams, Jeffrey J., ed. 2002. *The Institution of Literature*. Albany: State University of New York Press. vii + 293 pp. \$68.50 hc.

“It would be fatuous to imagine that we are able to use the university without a keen sense of the way in which, in return, it uses us.” (Fredric Jameson, qtd. in Giroux)

Both of the books under review collect some of the more recent significant work on academic capitalism with particular relevance to practitioners of cultural studies, theory and literature. Presenting essays previously appearing in *the minnesota*

*review*, *JAC*, *PMLA*, and *College Literature*, together with previously unpublished material, they also will interest the broader readership of those devoted more generally to cultural politics, critical higher education, and the academic labor movement.

Taken as a group, the essays in these collections exemplify the urgently reflexive turn of literary and cultural studies scholarship during the late 1990s. Halfway through that decade, the fantasy propagated by a quietist MLA since the mid-1980s—that “the economy” would somehow magically resolve the crisis in academic labor without any particular effort on our part—finally lost currency. The collective understanding slowly turned toward increased reflection on the material base of scholarship and pedagogy, fueled by labor militancy among the ranks of the permatemp nontenurable faculty and the super-exploited graduate student (for whom earning the Ph.D. in many cases signifies the end, not the beginning, of an arduous teaching career). Increasingly, as Jeff Williams observes, the “institution generates” the field of our scholarship. This happens in several ways: in the softer sense of tradition or custom, in the stronger sense of disciplinary organization and regulatory practices such as tenure, as well as through institutions’ acceptance of the horizons represented by political and social possibility.

The result is a pronounced trend toward embedding in our knowledge production, participation in the public sphere and teaching a reflexive account of how that scholarship, teaching, and social function are “inseparable from our institutional practices and locations” (Williams 2002, 3). From an intellectual-history point of view, this trend probably owes quite a bit toward the larger phenomenon Jameson dubs the “cultural turn” and to the pervasive influence of Geertzian anthropology and British cultural studies. In literature, for instance, literary scholars have moved away from new-critical and structural questions such as what a book means to questions of “book culture.” They now ask questions regarding: how books are produced in a given historical moment, including how they come to be selected for publication in the first place; how books are received (read, misread, annotated, discussed, plagiarized, circulated and censored); the self-understanding of cultural producers, in roles as various as author, contributor, performer, collaborator, mystic, etc; and the role of institutions (such as governments, churches, clubs, schools and educators) in directing the uses, meaning, circulation, and persistence of texts.

But the companion focus, on the institutions supporting the *scholarship* of literature, certainly has independent origins in the crisis of those institutions represented by the flex-labor system, the political assault on democracy and equality, and management domination of campuses and other workplaces. A case might even be made that the crisis in the institutions of liter-

ary and cultural-studies scholarship is primary—that the interest in questions such as “who gets to be an author?” is fueled by the reality of such questions as “who gets to be a scholar?” in a labor system that runs primarily on a disposable faculty, and which increasingly devalues the cultural and critical work of the humanities in favor of the profitable applied research and job-training services provided to corporate capital by a technical intelligentsia.

Giroux’s introduction to *Beyond the Corporate University* surveys the political assault upon the transformative potential of pedagogy represented by vocationalism, privatization, market logic and the commercialization of higher education, crystallizing the question into a powerful collective choice for educators: critical education or training? All of the contributors to the volume share the sense that a free and just society depend on civically oriented education, rather than job-readiness (“training”) through which capitalist enterprise offloads onto society the cost of developing direct skills (such as computer literacy) and the habits of wage labor (punctuality, directed curiosity, respect for authority, etc).

The first of four sections, “Higher Education and the Politics of Corporate Culture,” begins with a brilliant and sobering speculation by Jeff Williams on the shifting role of higher education with respect to the dual meanings of the term “franchise.” Observing the hope of critical educators that their work helps to produce franchise in the classical republican sense of “a purchase in the public sphere” through voting, policy influence, etc, Williams argues that universities are “increasingly conscripted” to the contemporary colloquial understanding of franchise “as a licensed storefront for name-brand corporations.” Tracing the consequences of this shift toward an entrepreneurial self-understanding for areas previously felt as semiautonomous from the profit motive, such as the humanities, he insists that the marketization of higher education “has real and significant effects” on the most everyday aspects of our working lives, including “what counts as academic work” (2001, 17). This means, for instance, that the humanities now feel the pressure of directed curiosity long experienced in the sciences, where corporate, government and military grant funding keep the values of profitability at the center. Areas that earn grants, such as technical writing, have acquired greater influence and respectability in the institution. Less well-funded areas, such as German literature, have been eliminated. The franchise model is especially in evidence by the efforts of established research universities to develop profit-seeking subsidiaries under their “name brands.” The efforts to capitalize on name brands such as Columbia or NYU is accompanied by Wall Street’s surging interest in for-profit higher-ed EMOs such as Phoenix University. Williams also observes the concentrated power of academic administration, akin to the centralized power of management in fran-

chise operations, where the minutest details of the operation, down to the crispiness of the fries and number of croutons on a salad (or the details of a course syllabus), are bureaucratically dictated.

The second section, addressing the struggle over curriculum, is anchored by a thoroughly compelling discussion by Jerry Phillips, "Culture, the Academy, and the Police." Phillips's essay asks us to see the contradictory availability of Arnoldian theories of culture to projects of social control and projects of freedom, identifying the former with conservation of a "monumental culture, allegedly our common heritage, which must be handed down from above," and the latter with a pedagogy of hope, in which "culture is not something we merely imbibe, it is *something we do*" (2001, 110–11). Tracing the double bind of Matthew Arnold's thought in part to "his practical life as an inspector of schools," Phillips captures the sense in which so many educators keep alive the Arnoldian contradiction, dedication on the one hand to "a language of human values beyond the marketplace" while simultaneously working to help capital with its perennial "problem of disciplining workers." For Phillips, Arnold functions as the inspiration and prototype for the contemporary intellectual in service of the liberal bourgeois State, "genuinely concerned with matters of social justice, but rarely [able to] identify with workers as complex social agents," and commonly hostile to the aims and practices of proletarian activism (116).

Essays on Marxist pedagogy by Paul Smith, Barbara Foley, and Amitava Kumar, together with a thoughtful discussion of Jameson by Christopher Wise, comprise the third section, "The Responsibility of Literature and the Possibility of Politics." Kumar's "World Bank Literature 101" seeks to reunite the study of "world literature" with the economic reality of globalization, ultimately arguing "that our students, juggling jobs and working on their careers, when they offer observations on their own lives, also work as producers of World Bank Literature" (2001, 224). He connects the institutions of world literature pedagogy to the labor of teaching, drawing on the 1990s self-organization of graduate employees, the activism of MLA's graduate student caucus, and the documentary filmmaking of Barbara Wolf, especially her 1997 *Degrees of Shame, Part-time Faculty: Migrant Workers of the Information Economy*. Screening Wolf's video as an example of a text which makes connections between the classroom "and the world outside it," Kumar asks, "Is not the moment of pedagogy the moment also of the 'wider context'?" where context means "alternative frameworks for understanding the conditions of global existence under corporate control" (217).

The essays in this section are in particularly close dialogue with one another. Foley's "Subversion and Oppositionality in the Academy" raises difficult questions about the politics of culture as generally practiced by the pro-

fessoriate. Regarding the politics of a canon-reform movement that addresses the positioning of figures by race and gender (but not, for instance, class), Foley writes understandingly of the eagerness with which critics attempt to demonstrate that writers belonging to oppressed groups occupy oppositional stances, but questions the assumption that writers belonging to oppressed groups “necessarily” create literature that is “intrinsically” subversive, and notes a tendency to overemphasize subversive moments in all kinds of literature so that “even the stodgy oldsters of the canon are discovered to have been secretly in rebellion against the dominant ideologies of their time” (2001, 196). In considering Jameson’s praxis as a radical teacher whose pedagogical commitments centrally include the imperative to “make converts,” “form Marxists,” “to teach Marxism itself,” and “the creation of a Marxian culture” (177-78), Christopher Wise considers some of the ways that Jameson’s pedagogy addresses many of the classically historical-materialist concerns raised by Foley. These include Jameson’s emphasis upon reconstructing the historical situation of a text, including the predominating mode and social relations of production. But Wise’s essay also tries to show Jameson’s debt to British cultural studies, for instance in his insistence that texts are always simultaneously utopian and ideological, even in Wise’s view dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense: “Jameson believes that within any single text there coexist any number of political voices” (188), albeit voices related in a complex set of determinations to the struggle between competing modes of production.

As Paul Smith puts it in an essay that acts to articulate a common ground between all of the contributors to the section, a politically responsible teaching would reflexively recognize the role of education in the reproduction of social relations, and is in that respect “already highly politicized” even before accounting for corporate or state intervention in the felt autonomies of education practice. Urging that that we “become involved not so much in the teaching of literatures, but in the teaching of the function and uses of literatures within the *polis* and *oikos* where we find ourselves,” Smith notes that the literature faculty “buy and sell” literature in the direct sense; as teachers

we act as specific agents in and for the literature industry. At this level literature is a commodity that plugs our teaching directly into the industrial circuits of this capitalist economy in which we live. It seems to me self-evident that the place of the literary text in those circuits is intrinsically part of its significance, its meaning. [I] think that it is an enlightening exercise to ask students to investigate the economic details of, for example, Penguin’s publishing and pricing of the “Penguin Classics” series—texts for which the publishers do not have to pay the same residuals as they would have to pay for something like Nancy Reagan’s memoirs; or to ask students to research why they can no longer buy Samuel Delany’s science fiction from shop-

ping-mall bookselling chains; or to ask them to consider the economics of the kind of library (public, college, and so on) to which they have access (or don't); or perhaps most tellingly, to ask where they themselves get the money to buy their classroom texts. . . . Both literatures and teaching itself are also institutions in and around which particular social and economic relations are established, upheld, and indeed enforced. It thus makes sense to me that our first pedagogical task is to allow students to think those relations; to think what are the political, social, and economic contexts of literatures; to think the place of literary teaching itself; and to think the uses of literatures or the uses to which literatures and their teaching are put. (Giroux and Myrsiades 2001, 166-67)

The final section of the volume is devoted to theoretical and experimental exploration of the relationship between pedagogy and political transformation. Of particular interest is Lynn Worsham's essay, "Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion," which unites an analysis of the colloquial "going postal" (apparently "random," "unmotivated" or "senseless" acts of violence) to elements of Teresa Ebert's critique of the "post-al" knowledges that have effectively erased consideration of class struggle or the relations of production from the mainstream even of radical thought. Tracing the logic of "senseless" violence to the violence of exploitation and economic rationalization, Worsham is particularly concerned with the violence manifested in the reproduction of labor power, especially the "emotional labor" of schooling, and the gendered division of labor at work in this "pedagogic violence." Pursuing the relationship between the schooling provided by the affective labor of women, education institutions and the workplace, Worsham attempts to demystify the relationship between a managerial "ideology of nurturance" and domination, relating for example workplace emotional training regimes aimed to contain worker anger to the contradictory result of increasing workplace violence. Simultaneously concerned with the absence of a role for affective labor in theories of social transformation ("undertheorized and mystified," Worsham writes, "emotion appears as a phantom limb" in democratic social theory), this ambitious essay seeks to restore affective work to our conception of the democratic citizen or revolutionary subject. Its final section critically surveys the varying approaches to the affective labor of the classroom current among radical and feminist educators. It ultimately takes a stance historically related to the feminist materialism of Selma James, the beyond-the-factory emphasis upon the super-exploited labor of reproduction current in Italian autonomist thought, and the work of feminists concerned with theorizing "mental labor," such as Donna Haraway and Tiziana Terranova. In urging a radical pedagogy hostile to the academic-capitalist exploitation of women's teaching labor, Worsham asks for the theoretical recognition of the central importance of the super-

exploited labor of nurturance in the reproduction of subjectivity and the social relations of production, as well as the practical “reconstruction of nurturance” on grounds of solidarity, mutual recognition, and the experience of historical agency.

Jeff Williams’ *The Institution of Literature* is based on a mammoth eight-year series of double issues of *the minnesota review* that he produced on the economics of the academy from the mid-1990s to the present, on topics ranging from the function of theory and the paradigm shift to cultural studies, to the politics of publishing, the academic “star system,” and the exploitation of casual labor. Some of the issue topics now serve as the section heads organizing the present volume. About the only complaint that any reader of *mr* familiar with the series could make is that Williams had to leave a few good things out (while somehow finding room for some great new pieces). Fortunately, many of the especially good interviews on the state of higher education contained in those issues will appear in a separate volume next year, also to be edited and introduced by Williams.

The book’s importance is that it conveniently collects some of the best work in this unprecedentedly sustained examination of a critically important series of topics. It includes a number of the essays that remain central to discussions of academic labor and the social function of the academy including Graduate Student Caucus activist Louise Mowder’s seminal “Time out of Mind: Graduate Students in the Institution of English,” which provided an early skeptical response to the institutional knowledge of “job market” provided by William Bowen and others. Observing that the academy admits an enormously larger cohort of graduate students than eventually take the Ph.D., and provides full-time jobs for a much-yet-smaller number than earn the doctorate, Mowder’s essay inspired its mid-1990s readership to wonder: why does the university want so many graduate students—but seems to want so few degreed persons? Mowder’s answer: graduate students are labor, the cheapest labor universities can find, and accordingly “should take a labor perspective” (237). Mowder’s leadership of MLA’s Graduate Student Caucus belonged to a cohort of activist graduate students that tied the unionization effort to professional organizations in a way that hadn’t been seen for more than two decades, since Paul Lauter and Dick Ohmann led the Radical Caucus’s takeover of the MLA presidency in the late 1960s. I was one of Mowder’s readers, a discussant on the e-grad listserv run by Mowder on the Rutgers server and, recruited by one of Mowder’s successors, already an officer of the Graduate Student Caucus when a complimentary copy of this issue of *mr* arrived in my grad-school mailbox. Reading that issue, including work by Michael Bérubé, Crystal Bartolovich, Lennard Davis and Evan Watkins, all reprinted in the SUNY volume, inspired me to write on these



questions as well and, with a little nudging from Stanley Aronowitz, to organize the collective that produces *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor* ([www.workplace-gsc.com](http://www.workplace-gsc.com)).

Williams's volume also includes the essay by David Shumway that inspired the final double issue of *m r* in the series, "The Star System in Literary Studies," motivated a raft of junior scholars to take up the question of celebrity in the literature industry, and helped to extend the conversation about public intellectualism in a new direction. Applying the lessons of a historical-materialist analysis of the cinematic star system that developed around 1910, Shumway notes the increasing "personalization" of celebrity with the consequent emergent of a distinct celebrity category, the "star," whose personality was consistently "re-created" in each new vehicle. The consistency and persistence of personality encouraged audiences to identify with star players, an identification supported by an off-screen publicity apparatus also organized about the star's person. Linking the emergence of an academic star system to the tradition of criticism outside the academy (in figures such as Mencken), Shumway attempts to account for the paradox that today's "stars" may have substantially less public influence than earlier forms of public intellectual, such as the freelance public critic or members of the traditional professoriate on the early twentieth-century lecture circuit. Blaming in part the extreme individuation at work in the cult of personality, which provides an "obstacle" to collective structures (such as the traditional professorial production of knowledge) and depends on "an impoverished community" of professional fans, Shumway sees the impoverishment of disciplinary community and the super-extension of hierarchical differences triggering a legitimization crisis for the discipline as a collective, and leading to reduced public authority in venues such as literary journalism or public commentary on culture—in part because the non-stars have lost credibility in proportion to the expansion of star power, and even the stars themselves are unable to command intellectual authority from the posture of compelling personality: "to the public, academic stars are curiosities rather than intellectual leaders" (196).

Devoney Looser plays off of Luce Irigaray's classic *This Sex Which is Not One* to deliver a compelling investigation of the relationship of younger feminist academics to the history, institutions, and established practitioners of feminist studies: "This Feminism Which is Not One: Women, Generations, Institutions." Central to Looser's study are generational disagreements over the role of theory, the nature of activism, and the academy's role in the super-exploitation of women. By reviewing contemporary analysis and historiography, Looser gets at what is for her the central question of representation: how do feminists represent each other in a moment when some observers feel "that 'we' as feminists are dissolving (or have dissolved) as a 'we'" (2002,

61). On the one hand, Looser questions the helpfulness of older feminist academics' picture of, and relationships to, younger scholars. She sees as particularly unhelpful the hostile stereotyping of the younger generation, forced to struggle for employment in an increasingly exploitative labor system, as self-serving careerists for whom "political activism has been supplanted by a yuppieism" (62). Similarly Looser observes a tendency among some second-wave feminists to condemn their juniors with theoretical commitments as "male-identified" or "esoteric," somehow incompatible with "the sisterhood... created in the 1970s" (62). On the other hand, Looser questions the utility of second-wave versions of what counts as feminism, noting that in some of the most egregious representations, younger women scholars are not even recognized as belonging to the feminist community at all (65). Looser provides a close look at Nancy Miller's well-known "Decades" essay, with its 1992 account of feminism's "middle age," in which Miller asks "Is there life for a female academic after the feminist plot of tenure and promotion?" Looser replies:

Job-seeking feminists might wonder whether or not tenure and promotion are worth excessive worry, as their plots wallow in the before section. Those of us who are not yet fully institutionalized might wonder whether or not we are even part of this middle aging of feminism. Must feminism's age be determined by the chronology of many second-wavers? (Williams 2002, 64)

Looser concludes this reply to second-wave feminism with a rhetorical question haunted by the reality of the academy's grotesque exploitation of women as disposable labor: "To what age of feminism do graduate students and junior faculty who are now experiencing middle age belong?" Ultimately Looser asks feminism to pursue the project of feminist solidarity while preserving room for dissent and difference or, risk, in bell hooks's words, becoming doomed to reproduce "the very forms of domination we seek to oppose" (68).

A copy of each of these volumes should be on the shelf of every literary and cultural-studies practitioner concerned with the way our institutions and workplaces shape the possibilities of our scholarship and teaching.