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Bruce Robbins

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**Bruce Robbins**

## **Less Disciplinary Than Thou: Criticism and the Conflict of the Faculties**

Literary criticism has become too politicized. In following after theory and cultural studies, it has wandered away from its true path, its proper object of study. The present crisis of the humanities should make it clear for better or worse that without disciplinary distinctness, we also find ourselves without public legitimacy. In short, it is time for literary critics to get back to the activity to which their title commits them: the interpretation of literary texts.

I do not share these sentiments. But they are expressed more and more frequently by people I respect. Also, I find myself less and less complacent about answers to which I and others have appealed in the past. In particular, I am dissatisfied with the rationale for interdisciplinarity that combines (1) the argument that commitment to a given discipline represents a willful self-blinkering, a falling away from the intellectual's higher responsibility to truth and justice, wherever that responsibility may lead, and (2) the argument that politics cannot be separated off from criticism, or indeed from any discipline, because "everything is political." In search of a more satisfactory way to frame the debate over disciplinary distinctness and the place of politics in the humanities, therefore, I try in this essay to apply to the present situation an early and influential formulation of these issues: the case for the autonomy of the humanities articulated in Kant's last book, *The Conflict of the Faculties*.<sup>1</sup>

For the humanities and social sciences, a turning away from politics in the large, representative sense in favor of the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and/or a politics of local, corporate self-interest could of course be associated with the traditions of Matthew Arnold and Max Weber. Indeed, the neo-Weberian position of Pierre Bourdieu has recently been applied to the American situation very forcefully by John Guillory. But Kant is perhaps the more interesting source (Bourdieu too goes back to him; see *Homo Academicus*, c. 2) for at least one reason. Unlike Arnold's "culture" and Weber's *Wissenschaft*, his "conflict of the faculties" factors into the question of knowledge-production a political difference or conflict *within* knowledge-production, or rather within the university. Politics could not be kept out of the university, Kant conceded—but it did not belong in what he called the "philosophy faculty." Politics concerns the government alone. Thus the "higher" faculties of law, medicine, and theology, so called because of their proximity to government power, are both more important and also rightly subject to government control. "As tools of the govern-

ment (clergymen, magistrates, and physicians), they have legal influence on the public and ... are not free to make public use of their learning" (Kant 25). It is by renouncing politics and the significance that goes with it that philosophy claims a unique right to autonomy: "having no commands to give, [it] is free to evaluate everything" (27).

Over the past two decades, Foucault's pressing together of power and knowledge into a single unit has been our characteristic interdisciplinary counter-statement to Kant. Politics, we are fond of repeating, cannot be renounced; knowledge cannot be separated from power. Whatever one thinks of its epistemological status, no one can deny that this principle has been an extremely productive one for recent scholarship. For where power or politics is asserted to be present, it is also asserted that the researcher is investigating matters that are *worth* investigating, matters of true and general significance. Politics talk is, among other things, a compelling answer to the implicit "so what?" question that has haunted scholarship at least since it began having to render some account for its budgets to suspicious outsiders. The conflation of power and knowledge that is a defining principle of "theory" and "cultural studies" suggests of course that no quest for knowledge is value-neutral. But it gives back some of the legitimacy it thus takes away. For it invests with public significance a wider range of objects and projects of knowledge, including those occupying areas like "culture" or "the social" or "civil society," as opposed to "the state," in other words objects and projects at a certain remove from the decisions about government policy to which the term "politics" might otherwise have been restricted. And in so doing it invests with significance and legitimacy those who study them.

I do not say this cynically. The continuing benefits of this enlargement of perspective are undeniable; it means understanding how the world looks to more of its inhabitants, how the world works, and how it doesn't work. Still, the productivity of this principle—I am not discussing its validity in the abstract—has clearly come at a certain cost. From the point of view of a left-wing politics *outside* the university, it sometimes seems that there has been an inflation of political statements within it, and thus a devaluation of the particular positions taken, along with position-taking in general. If everything is political, it has been noted, then nothing is quite political enough to matter very much. A misguided attempt to make one's intellectual workplace the exemplary and fully satisfying site of political effort might of course have unfortunate consequences both for the intellectual work done there and for the political seriousness of intellectuals in other sites, in their activities as citizens. Thus, without wanting to return to the Kantian notion of a domain entirely free of politics, one may feel that there are strong motives for a discrimination of kinds, sites, and levels of politics, and that this discrimination within politics might per-

haps also find an echo in a Kantian discrimination of faculties within the university.

To take politics in the restrictive sense of "government policy-making," rather than in a more diffuse sense of "relevance to the maintaining or contesting of the social order," might for example generate a significant difference between, say, the social sciences (more oriented toward policy) and the humanities (less oriented). Indeed, the degree of orientation toward policy-making has probably marked a more significant frontier between the humanities and social sciences in recent years than, say, their respectively postmodern or positivist epistemologies.<sup>2</sup> But how is a given individual located in either the humanities or the social sciences supposed to feel about the relations across this frontier? Or rather, what is the frame or norm, what are the criteria by which such transdisciplinary, cosmopolitan judgments could be made and justified? Isn't politics precisely the word, or a word, that we ask to perform this function? Disciplinary conflicts are perhaps not just "office politics," but their version of politics occupies a smaller scale than the universal rights-and-wrongs, the public emergencies, the constituencies mobilized by issues of national and global welfare. Is there an alignment of these scales? Do the smaller politics line up with the larger politics, or not? Always? Sometimes? Never? On these questions will depend the question of how to *value* identification or affiliation with a given discipline. Is the proper model of disciplinary membership that of, say, family or team or national loyalty? Is there an ethical universality on this level with which it enters into necessary conflict? What sort of political unit *is* a discipline? How should one feel about one's membership in a discipline, or about its struggle with others?

The recent "everything is political" position, which forsakes Kant's boundary between interest and disinterestedness, produces a common sense that is ambivalent at best toward the interests of the disciplinary units it inhabits. On the other hand, Kant's removal of philosophy from politics does not lead to greater clarity on this issue. Could knowledge and power be held apart? In "Mochlos, or the Conflict of the Faculties," Derrida comments that it is "the *publication* of knowledge, rather than knowledge itself, which is submitted to authority." But where "is the beginning of publication?"

Kant ... wanted to make a line of demarcation pass between thinkers in the university and businessmen of knowledge or agents of government power, between the inside and the outside closest to the university enclosure. But this line, Kant certainly has to recognize, not only passes along the border and around the institution. It traverses the faculties, and this is a place of conflict, of unavoidable conflict. This frontier is a front. (23)

This blurring of inside and outside implies some question as to who is actually in conflict with whom. Is philosophy in conflict with the other

faculties, as Kant announces? If so, one might describe his argument as a relatively narrow assertion of self-interest. Or would it be more accurate to say that the *university* is in conflict here with the *state*, a conflict that thus cannot announce itself as such? Even if autonomy in the use of reason could be acquired for philosophy only by a willingness to sacrifice the autonomy of the other faculties (or, to put this differently, by a willingness to concede their privileged access to state power), some of what Kant won for philosophy he certainly also won for other faculties as well. In this case one would have to say that something more than disciplinary self-interest is involved. The same holds if one takes a more negative view of this negotiation. The appeal to a possible higher or broader interest also forces us to ask whether this is indeed a desirable victory. Did Kant give up too much? Did he merely emasculate reason, put a good face on social marginality? Is there a higher criterion by which both philosophy's and the university's victory should be judged? Ian Hunter argues for example that Kant's true antagonist was indeed the state. "[T]he policy threshold transgressed by Kant's *Religion* [whose censure by the authorities prompted him to reply with the first "Conflict of the Faculties" essay] was not one set by orthodox theology but was in fact the state's own threshold for keeping religious conflict out of the civil domain." Moreover, he goes on, the state in this case represented the real, legitimate interests of the people better than the university did. For Kant "was relying not on the university's rational autonomy but on its particularist privileges as an extra-territorial corporation." One might thus imagine that philosophy, committed to the autonomy of universal reason, could take the opposite side from its champion, and even in a sense from itself.

Did philosophy possess a distinct, proper object of investigation? Did it have a disciplinary identity? Derrida quotes Schelling's objection to Kant from 1802. "[A]ccording to [Schelling], there cannot be a particular faculty (or, therefore, power, *Macht*) for philosophy: 'something which is everything cannot, for that very reason, be anything in particular.'"<sup>3</sup>

What then is a discipline's self-interest? Who or what are the agents in political conflict here? Is there indeed such a thing as a conflict?

The existence of a conflict of the faculties cannot be assumed. To assert its existence might be an attempt to *create* conflict, in the sense of meaningful engagement and possible reversal of fortune—a tactic that might be chosen by lesser disciplines, for example, in an effort to turn their static subordination into some pretense or possibility of greater influence. It is certain that the apparent equality of the university catalog politely conceals vast incongruities of departmental size and prestige. But it is not certain that when changes occur in these hierarchies, such changes can be immediately or wholly attributed to a struggle

among the departments. Still, if a conflict of faculties is indeed one general condition of the professional production of knowledge, then a window opens up on the human sciences that seems well worth looking through.

The conflict metaphor carries a lot of baggage. It implies winners and losers, weapons and strategies, a common battlefield, and a judgment of the relative social strength of various knowledges on that battlefield. These assumptions would be quite useful to establish. For they promise a privileged glimpse into what Derrida calls "the power or non-power of academic discourse" (25). Like "fashion," an alternative vocabulary often invoked to describe the rising and falling influence of fields, methods, and ideas, the "conflict of faculties" metaphor suggests that such shifts in the production of knowledge may *not* be tightly bound to regimes of power on the largest social scale; they may only be local, lateral, relatively autonomous and thus relatively insignificant. Unlike "fashion," however, this metaphor offers at least the potential for some larger-scale intelligibility and larger-scale significance.

A conflict of faculties certainly exists at least in a minimal sense. One can often detect disciplinary self-interest underlying instances of scholarly argument that seem to be doing something else entirely. Martin Heidegger argues that death is not cultural, thereby implying that philosophers, rather than historians or anthropologists, have a decisive say about it (see Derrida, *Aporias*, and Robbins). Geographers like Edward Soja, denouncing "the disciplinary chauvinisms of an outdated academic division of labor desperately clinging to its old priorities" (75), defend the explanatory virtues of space at the expense of time. Is Soja truly condemning the academic division of labor, or only jockeying to get geographers a better position within it? Ernesto Laclau argues "the impossibility of society" (21). Is Laclau simply applying his deconstructive principles to an influential concept? Or should we see him, more cynically, as a political theorist mounting a defense of "politics," that is, engaging in a bit of interdisciplinary struggle by seeking to undermine that disciplinary object, "society," which is one of the strongest competitors of "politics" in the human sciences? Who has not played the academic parlor game of identifying, beneath some particularly powerful interdisciplinary argument, the motivation of vulgar disciplinary self-interest? And who has not wondered whether it really is *just* a game—whether, although it has no respectable disciplinary home, it represents a level of analysis that is higher than gossip? How cynical should we be about the disciplinary motives of the knowledge-makers?

To ask these questions is to imply that, if no knowledge-production is disinterested (including knowledge about the limits of knowledge), some forms of intellectual self-interest are more and less pardonable than others. Which is it for disciplinary self-interest—more pardonable

or less pardonable? This issue remains open if we hold not only that scholarship is full of interdisciplinary antagonisms, but that these antagonisms cohere into consequential conflict. According to Richard Rorty's *Consequences of Pragmatism*, literary theory has won a victory over a hyper-professionalized philosophy, thereby assuming a preeminence among the human sciences like that assumed by philosophy itself in the early nineteenth century. With another bow to Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties*, Rorty writes: "The claims of a usurping discipline to preside over the rest of culture can only be defended by an exhibition of its ability to put the other disciplines in their places. This is what the literary culture has been doing recently, with great success" (155). What does Rorty ask us to feel about this "great success"? Statements like his occupy a zone of interesting tonal uncertainty. "Usurping" suggests that theory has engaged in wrongful seizure, and is thus to be sharply condemned. On the other hand, the words "preside" and "put in their places" restore this usurpation to the domain of diplomatic protocol, blunting the sense of criminal violation. If philosophy is theory's "defeated foe" (159n7), should Rorty be so polite? If this was a takeover, why is his language so unconflictual, as if defeat and victory are little more than ripples in the unending stream of intellectual discussion?

Other voices, perhaps more attached to their own disciplines than Rorty is to his, have openly resented the takeover and presented it in a more agonistic light. But the tonal uncertainty persists. Arjun Appadurai, for example, making the unabashedly disciplinary argument that "ethnography must redefine itself," writes as follows:

it is crucial to note that the high ground has been seized by English literature (as a discipline) in particular and by literary studies in general. This is the nexus where the word "theory," a rather prosaic term in many fields for many centuries, suddenly took on the sexy ring of a trend. For an anthropologist in the United States today, what is most striking about the last decade in the academy is the hijack of culture by literary studies. (195-96)<sup>4</sup>

The word "hijack" raises some doubt about the longevity of theory's success; hijackings are usually short-lived. But its main target (as with Rorty's "usurping") is clearly the *illegitimacy* of that success. Or perhaps we should say that the word raises legitimacy as a question. "Hijack" refers us to the lexicon of international terrorism. But the near-universal condemnation of terrorism is surely the exception that proves the rule here, or rather the absence of any rule. If interdisciplinarity is a realm of trans-national transits, as "hijack" suggests, then is there in fact a universal ethical code that is transgressed by disciplinary hijackers? Or should the conflict of the faculties be conceived, rather, as *Realpolitik* in a world of national and non-national agents

beyond the reach of any effective moral authority, a Hobbesian jungle of competing intellectual interests?

In statements like Rorty's and Appadurai's, two varieties of disciplinary common sense collide. One, nationalist and anti-imperialist, imagines disciplines as peoples possessing natural rights to self-determination. Like any sovereign state or ethical individual, they are to be recognized as equals before the law and treated as ends in themselves. Their intellectual property or territory is to be respected. Of course, this common sense offers complacent support for the disciplinary status quo. It stops us, for example, from making lists of disciplines that never would be missed—a privilege without which, I would argue, no discipline can ever be persuasively defended. The other, contrary view, internationalist and/or perhaps imperialist, is suspicious at once of the provinciality and of the privilege of disciplines, seen as self-enclosed and self-interested. No less widespread, it provides the energy behind the most valuable and innovative cross-disciplinary projects. At the same time it is also marked by an indiscriminating piety toward interdisciplinarity as such, irrespective of its particular contents, as well as a dangerous potential for complicity with populist anti-intellectualism.

I cannot hope to resolve this disagreement. All I would like to suggest for the moment is that, if we can see rights and wrongs on both sides, we should also agree not to take a position in principle on either side. That is, we should not declare war on the present in the name of a hypothetically de-disciplined ideal of knowledge, on the one hand. Nor should we, on the other hand, indulge a sort of intellectual pacifism or protectionism, a withdrawal from the conflict of the faculties back into the comfort of our "own" discipline, now naturalized, essentialized, and protected by a metaphorical ethics. Instead, we might redirect our attention to a different issue entirely. The more significant issue—which we are encouraged to consider, I think, by the sort of hostile scrutiny the academy in general has been receiving of late from our various publics—is whether it is possible to think ethically or politically about the conflict of the faculties, or whether it is possible to do so without wishing that conflict away, without thinking of the agents involved (our fields) either as naturalized ethical selves or as pockets of irrational resistance to universal reason.

From one point of view, the conflict of the faculties *cannot* resemble, as on some TV "Nature" show, an amoral struggle for survival among wild beasts. It cannot be beyond good and evil, for interpretations of good and evil are the teeth and the claws of this conflict, the weapons with which the conflict is fought out. This is to say that disciplinary self-interest is always something more or other than simple self-interest. In *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation*, the sociologist Alan Wolfe seems entirely straightforward about his self-interest. He complains that "sociology has become the poor step-sib-

ling of economics and politics" (188). In the name of a reformulated concept of society, society-as-domain-of-moral-obligation, he accordingly attacks the disciplinary objects of these competitors.<sup>5</sup> The economy, he argues, is a domain of amoral, unreasoning authority—"The invisible hand is clenched into an invisible fist" (9)—and so in its way is the state, "an authority with which I cannot converse" (10). As against the disciplines dependent on these objects, then, sociology unsurprisingly wins out, its virtue being its attention to "civil society" and the "realms of intimacy, trust, caring, and autonomy" (38): "If the social sciences are moral theories in disguise, sociology lays claim to all those obligations that are inspired neither by a rational quest after self-interest nor by a fear of coercive external authority. Sociology, in short, has its own turf in the intellectual division of labor called the social sciences" (188).

Cynicism about disciplinary special pleading like this would be both too much, and not enough. Not enough, because Wolfe is claiming so much more for sociology than merely a distinctive niche. He is claiming not only its *own* turf, but the *best* turf. He gives sociology the only *moral* turf there is, and it's only the rethinking of the moral, he argues, that can save American democracy. Thus he awards sociology *priority* among the disciplines, the right to rule. But cynicism would also be too much, because the appeal that he makes assumes an audience that can be appealed to. At some risk of self-contradiction, since he has described the members of those other disciplines as creatures of self-interest and authority, Wolfe posits people outside sociology, presumably including economists and political scientists, who can respond in moral terms to an argument framed in moral terms. Which suggests that the "victory" of the economists and political scientists may not, after all, have been a simple victory of might over right. If it can be countered in these terms, it appears rather as the provisional, perhaps reversible victory of one right over another in a common language of rights.

If this seems to me a relatively honorable way of waging and/or describing interdisciplinary warfare, it is perhaps because I am juxtaposing it with a rising, seemingly very marketable genre of self-reflexive books—everyone has surely noticed its recent flowering—that offer historical, ideological, or rhetorical analyses of particular fields: Thomas Haskell's *The Emergence of Professional Social Science*; collections like *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences* and *The Rhetoric of Social Research* along with Donald McCloskey's *The Rhetoric of Economics* and *If You're So Smart*; Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream* and Sande Cohen's *Historical Culture*, on history; Bruce Kuklick's *The Rise of American Philosophy* and David Ricci's *The Tragedy of Political Science*, and so on. It will come as no surprise if I say that some of these books, while offering critiques of their fields, in so doing also, like Wolfe, make large claims for that field. That

is, they often present the rhetorical structure of the jeremiad, which denounces its constituency only in order to affirm for that constituency a still higher sense of mission. What is striking to me about these contributions to the conflict of the faculties is, first, how much more they claim than a "turf" of their own, and second, the strangely empty ending they give their narratives.

In *The Rise of American Philosophy*, Bruce Kuklick tells a story much like Rorty's. In the course of professionalizing, he says, philosophy "lost its place as the synoptic integrator of the manifold intellectual concerns of human existence" (432); it "lost its synthesizing, comprehensive function" (565). A non-philosopher may want to ask whether this "synthesizing, comprehensive function" was indeed special or exclusive to philosophy. Helpfully, in *The Tragedy of Political Science* David Ricci says about political science precisely what Kuklick says about philosophy—that political science has lost its "all-embracing vision":

Most of the new disciplines could safely shrug off responsibility for the lack of an all-embracing vision. After all, they were expected to tend to their own realms of learning and inquiry. But in the case of political science ... it was not easy to delegate to someone else the responsibility for formulating, or at least persuasively expounding, society's ultimate goals. (56)<sup>6</sup>

From Aristotle on, Ricci argues, politics has been "in some sense a master science over all the lesser realms of knowledge" (213).

If Ricci and Kuklick see their respective fields as fallen from the same "all-embracing" or "synoptic" and therefore preeminent role, they also put the blame in more or less the same spot. Each field has lost pride of place among all the disciplines not to any other particular discipline, but to a transdisciplinary prejudice in favor of specialization and against synthesis. As Ricci puts it: "if any discipline were to attempt to sit, figuratively, on the Temple's roof and comment, from there, on matters jealously guarded by other disciplines, its practitioners would surely be labelled dilettantes and ignored by practitioners of the more specific sciences" (213). And as a result, the loss of preeminence by political science and the loss of preeminence by philosophy—are not merely the catastrophe of one field, but a catastrophe for knowledge itself. Each marks the ultimate falling away of academic knowledge from a role that used to be *public*. The story of philosophy's Fall into professionalization that Kuklick tells, for example, runs together the loss of "synthesizing, comprehensive" thinking with the loss of functions that were "public" and indeed "almost ministerial" (xxiii). "By 1930 philosophy's successful practitioners were purely professional; they tended to specialize within technical areas and even those who specialized in the practical ones lectured only to fellow specialists and

did not apply their ideas to the real world; all popularization was suspect" (xxiii). The Harvard pragmatists "were driven to convey their ideas to the people" (432). But in the end, the effort "to keep alive the public tradition of Royce and James" was a failure (567).

In the end, there is only an immense emptiness, for there is nowhere the narrative can go after the double loss of synoptic thought and public function. In a footnote, Kuklick remarks that "I hesitate to go beyond 1960" (568). Though he sees signs, writing in the mid-seventies, that "the upheaval caused by the Vietnam War" may have disrupted his narrative of remorseless decline, he concludes, defensively, that "other wars have not brought out the best in American philosophers." There is no room in the profession whose history he has written for any hope of renewal, or even for the voice of complaint which he is himself in the process of articulating and which is also, of course, a disciplinary voice. Kuklick invokes an almost biological process of devolution and doom. He marks off the fall in terms of the generations of philosophy students who followed the great pragmatists, beginning with the "young men" who "flocked to Cambridge to imbibe the religious solace offered by Harvard Pragmatism" but went away concentrating on "epistemological and logical conundrums," and then falling still lower: "the students *they* trained did not pick up the public concerns at all and occasionally thought of their professors' vocation as only a job" (432).<sup>7</sup> In his sexualized allegory of professional reproduction, there are two stages: first, a natural, heterosexual exogamy in which the male founder mates with the public, giving birth to greatness; this is followed by a mechanical or incestuous mode which, having turned away from the public, remains perversely prolific, but produces only increasingly sterile and deformed offspring, without any hint of the "greatness" of the founders. And this is true not just for philosophy. All academic thought seems to go conclusively and irredeemably private, hence sterile and deformed, in 1930: "The story of the professionalization of philosophy at Harvard epitomizes the professionalization of the academy in twentieth-century America" (xxvii).

Against the background of this decline-and-fall narrative, the virtues of the "conflict of the faculties" metaphor leap into relief. According to the Kuklick/Ricci narrative, with the respective fall of each discipline, greatness itself has died out of the academic world. There is no longer room in that world either for an unspecialized, synthesizing, all-embracing vision or for a direct, significant link to the public. To see these disciplinary histories within a conflict of the faculties, on the other hand, is to be reminded that synthesis survives, and even thrives—but it does so elsewhere among the disciplines. As Rorty says, synthesis is simply a quality of all real intellectual work. But real intellectual work is not equally present in all disciplines at all times. Some areas have picked up the "synthesizing, comprehensive" func-

tions that others let slip, and it is these, he suggests, that have triumphed, *for that very reason*, in the most recent interdisciplinary struggles. Very schematically, the difference is that Rorty, unlike Ricci and Kuklick and so many others, refuses the common tale of a Fall into Professionalism in which unspecified specialists take over and the equally unspecified Public loses out. Rorty, like Derrida, brings back Kant's conflict of the faculties metaphor in order to specify those specialists who win out over other specialists, and who do so—this is the crucial point—because their ability to sustain or reinvent an “all-embracing vision” is also an ability to sustain a connection to specifiable public concerns.<sup>8</sup>

This identification between intellectual synthesis and public legitimation suggests several corollaries. Common opinion associates disciplinary power with scientific specialization. A characteristic history goes like this (I quote from an essay by political scientist George Ross): “‘universalizing’ fields, such as literature and the humanities more generally, suffered a deflation in prominence at the expense of subdivided newcomers like the sciences and social sciences (first sociology, then political science, and finally ... economics). In mimetic response, these universalizing fields themselves began to move to subdivision and fragmentation” (52). If it is true that literature and the humanities have been subordinated by the natural and social sciences, it is not at all clear that this was because of the latter's “subdivision and fragmentation.” On the contrary, there is reason to believe that for the sciences, as for philosophy and political science, it has been the *universalizing* tendency, their ever-expanding claims to be able to explain subject-matter and solve problems that had formerly been the preserve of *other* fields, which did most to enlarge their influence. In the recent “science wars” that have been pitting right-wing socio-biologists against left-wing ecologists and cultural critics, the lines are drawn not between universalizers and specializers, but between competing universalisms. There are of course benefits to specialization, at least under certain circumstances. But specialization provides neither a guarantee of a discipline's competitive advantage nor, as it now seems, adequate protection against public scrutiny. Despite its relatively direct connection to military power and corporate profit, which would align it with theology and law in any update of Kant's argument, science has shown itself at least somewhat vulnerable to threats of de-legitimation, to public demands for a unifying of specialized analysis with ethical and practical advice, to competing politico-universal syntheses.

It follows that the privileging of disciplinary distinctness, the quest for an object of knowledge that will be proper to the given discipline, forever distinguishing it from all other objects and all other disciplines, is not the most useful response to threats of subordination or de-legitimation. Indeed, withdrawal into identity talk always seems to

involve a discipline in two related mistakes. One of them is explicit in Schelling's objection to thinking of philosophy as a particular faculty ("something which is everything cannot, for that very reason, be anything in particular"); the other is implicit. First, there is the claim that in this special case the particular is actually the universal, and vice versa. And second, there is the claim (often muted, but nonetheless pointed) that in other cases, for *other* disciplines, the particular is just that and no more. The ineffable greatness of my discipline is that it is not really a discipline. The sad fact about yours is that it is. Yours has a distinct object. Mine is about everything.

Whether or not it is likely to supply a winning move in the conflict of the faculties, logic like this offers a sad spectacle. Other disciplines, I imply, which are fortunate enough to have solid and distinct objects to investigate, can claim to be genuine disciplines. My own, alas, does not possess such an object. Yet this lack also means that my discipline is finally stronger rather than weaker than its competitors. For unlike a genuine field, it allows the mind to roam free, undisciplined, as unconstrained as wisdom itself. John Gross illustrates with admirable clarity this rhetoric of selective anti-disciplinarity in the case of literary criticism: "Isn't there a certain basic antagonism between the very nature of the university and the very spirit of literature? ... Think of the whole idea of regarding literature as a *discipline*. Literature ... can be a hundred things—but a discipline is not one of them." Pleading for an amateur criticism, Gross concludes:

Criticism remains the most miscellaneous, the most ill-defined of occupations. At any given moment it is liable to start turning into something else: history or politics, psychology or ethics, autobiography or ethics, autobiography or gossip. In a world which favours experts and specialists, this means that the critic is increasingly liable to be dismissed as a dilettante or resented as a trespasser. But if his uncertain status puts him at a disadvantage, it also makes possible, ideally, the breadth and independence which are his ultimate justification. (297-298, 302)

Here the "ill-defined" nature of literature, which keeps literary criticism from being a true discipline, is offered as criticism's strongest competitive advantage. And, needless to say, it is greeted as such by the discipline itself, which embraces it as a sustaining mythology.

It is thus inconvenient for critics, who cherish the notion that their object is unique both in its flimsiness and in its inscrutability, that this same structure of argument frequently crops up in other disciplines as well. Take for instance Dilip Gaonkar's account of rhetoric. In a helpful alternative to the narratives of Ricci and Kuklick, Gaonkar comments critically on histories of rhetoric that aim at a triumphantly synthetic moment when "rhetoric would reclaim its lost glory as 'the queen of the human sciences,'" when it "would preside over other disciplines as the

metascience of culture in the Isocratean sense" (361). Rhetoric's true disciplinary history is much more contingent, he insists modestly. Though rhetoric has lately made something of a comeback, Gaonkar sees no paradise regained, no great vindication. And yet notice how even this exemplary modesty has its own claims to press. "The fortunes of rhetoric, *more than any other discipline*, turn on the roll of cultural dice. Rhetoric has good days and bad days, mostly bad days. This is one of the good days. If there is a myth about rhetoric, it is that of an outsider whose day of reckoning is deferred, time and again" (360; my emphasis). Is rhetoric really *more* contingent, really *less* able to chart its own history, than other disciplines? If it is weaker, isn't this really a strength? Once again, a claim to disciplinary power masquerades as an admission of disciplinary frailty and lack of substance. Like Gross, if in a more theoretically sophisticated idiom, Gaonkar speaks of "the impulse of an empty discipline to become substantive, to become something other than itself":

It is as if rhetoric were in search of its other, the substantive other, who, when found, would fill out its formal emptiness. But this other which is to provide rhetoric with a grounding, relieve it from that epistemic anxiety with which it has been burdened since Plato, will always elude us. Perhaps this is the fatal game which animates rhetoric and keeps it going. (343)

Its emptiness, its lack of substance or grounding, is finally the discipline's animating principle—which is to say that rhetoric *has* such a principle, which not every discipline can boast. Emptier than other disciplines, it has also survived a lot longer. And it has done so because rhetoric (again like literary criticism in Gross's account) contains multitudes of others. "Like Blanche Dubois in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, we, the rhetoricians, have always relied on 'the kindness of strangers'" (359).<sup>9</sup>

Literary criticism is certainly not alone in bemoaning, that is to say boasting, that its object is characterized by an irreparable effeminacy, a seductively inscrutable promiscuity. From a comparative standpoint, it might seem that the only subjects that get taught at a university are those that flirt compulsively with other disciplines, or (the same thing in reverse) that cannot be taught at all without being betrayed. Along with "rhetoric" and, for that matter, "communication," the counterparts of "literature" in neighboring disciplines would certainly have to include "culture" for anthropology and "society" as Durkheim bequeathed it to sociology. Further afield, there is "space" as it is now discussed by geographers, who are often irate at the spatial allusions, fashionable in other disciplines, that treat their object as uncontroversial, self-evident, available for metaphor. Space too, they remind us, is mysterious; it is anything but a firm grounding. The point is general. All disciplinary objects are clearly obliged to stake out and defend a large degree of inscrutability, if only in order

to guarantee continuing work for the discipline's practitioners, and at the same time both to entice and to repel potential borrowers. A wandering, undefinable object of uncertain borders is by no means a deviation from the disciplinary norm.

These impressions are perhaps a small beginning to the task of sketching out the formal attributes of disciplinary objects. As seen from the perspective of the conflict of the faculties, disciplinary objects would seem to require, for example, the following characteristics: Like "religion" for Durkheim, they should not be entirely false (as religion was for the positivists). Nor should they be entirely true; this raises their value, but reduces the interpretive work that needs to be done on them. The falsity of the object provides work to do, but diminishes the value of the work done. Disciplinary objects should neither be entirely determining, that is, free from the interpretive authority of other disciplines, nor entirely unfree, that is, determined by the object of some other discipline. If the other discipline's object is seen to possess greater causal power (say, the perceived power of history to "explain" literature), then the other discipline wins a comparative advantage. Yet such transactions do not bestow all their benefits on one party. From the point of view of the discipline that possesses the more determining object, the danger is a loss of fruitful controversy. For the ability to open up to controversy an area that has apparently been in danger of coming to a consensus, as terms like literariness, narrative, textuality, and rhetoric have done so well for more positivistic fields, is also a disciplinary desideratum. Disciplinarily speaking, one must it seems desire both a free and an unfree object. One must desire controversy, but not infinite or unrestrained controversy. The controversy should also be *significant*, which is to say capable of engaging a significant quantity of social and ethical concern, mobilizing hopes and fears of a consensus that is at least provisional.

This double exigency—the open mystery of distinctness, the impulse toward closure in social significance—is neatly exposed in Derek Attridge's eloquent account of the concept of literature, *Peculiar Language*. Writers since Wordsworth have always claimed, Attridge says, that literature

can engage with the language and thoughts of everyone who speaks the same tongue, and that it attains thereby the power to intervene in the ethical and political life of a community or a nation. To push this claim too far, however, is to endanger the existence of literature itself as a distinct entity, for if literature does *not* employ a special language, from what does it derive its appeal and its strength? (1)

Hence there are "two mutually inconsistent demands—that the language of literature be recognizably different from the language we encounter in other contexts, and that it be recognizably the same" (3).

Attridge's solution to this problem is in effect to define literature as this very impossibility of definition. At least in one sense, it is a happy impossibility: this is a paradox that literature can call its own.

The problem is that of course it can't call this paradox its own. As Attridge himself notes in passing, "the word *literature*" is "a term like *writing* or *law*, capable of destabilizing the discourses and institutions within which it has its being" (17). Like writing or law—or rhetoric, or society, or space.... If even "law"—one of Kant's "higher" faculties—does the same subversive work, how can this valuable subversion or destabilizing be opposed to the "discourses and institutions"—or indeed to "disciplines"? Is there anything in this description that could effectively distinguish literature from the objects of other fields? Mustn't they too, like literature, satisfy both exigencies?

Literary criticism is accustomed to think of literature as a privileged site. It is perhaps no more arrogant in this respect than the other disciplines among whose competing claims to privilege, or competing universalisms, it carves out its niche. I certainly do not want to argue that other disciplines have a better claim to their space than criticism does, nor that the only true thinking is thinking that renounces all disciplinary loyalty in favor of an unsituated ideal of interdisciplinarity. As Jonathan Kramnick argues, interdisciplinarity can easily be made to serve administrations looking for ways to "restructure" in order to save money. Still, what's needed here is something more than a blind, instinctive assertion of proprietary rights, something more than oscillating back and forth between invocations of a safely utopian ideal of "de-disciplining," on the one hand, and the cynical assumption that of course everyone is (rightly) looking out for his or her own disciplinary interests, on the other. No one can force us to forget the arbitrariness of our "own" discipline or how easily we could imagine ourselves working (no less divided) in another. The point is that being *divided* is, luckily, part of belonging to any discipline. One is always judging one's own discipline, as well as others, by transdisciplinary criteria. For the very vocabulary of public significance in which disciplinary claims are pressed must be transdisciplinary; it would not do its work if it could not serve as a common ethical or political language. It is in this sense that everyone has an interest in acquiring something like "a politics," and for purely disciplinary reasons if for no others. This is the standpoint from which the business of observing (and carrying on) the conflict of the faculties is not no one's business, but everyone's.

To return in conclusion to the example with which I began, what people object to when they accuse criticism of abandoning literature is often not a rejection but a broadening of the literary. Since the 60s, as much under the aegis of theory as that of cultural studies, there has indeed been a claiming of more subject matter to which literariness is

considered pertinent. For better or worse, this expansionist embrace of impurity clearly involves more rather than less literariness. Critics may be less interested than formerly in demonstrating that canonical texts are organic wholes, but they are just as enthusiastic about displaying the operations of literariness in other, no less conventional senses—ironic self-consciousness or defamiliarization or whatever. They show that it applies, however, to a wider field of texts and genres of discourse, many of them outside the canon. Today we teach our students to do to social identities what our teachers taught us to do to lyrics: break them down, show what their wholeness conceals, reveal their slippery ironies and ambiguities. There are reasons to resist this treatment, and not just if one belongs to a discipline that feels it has been colonized or intruded upon. David Simpson is right, I think, to describe this situation provocatively as the “rule of literature”: “the efficient transfer of literary and literary-critical modalities into other disciplines, which then seem radically new” (18).

What follows from this? Not, I think, that disciplinary imperialism must necessarily be condemned. Why assume that disciplinary territories are nations enjoying a right to self-determination? If there is critique, it should be phrased in other terms. In fact, I would speculate that many of those who complain about the abandonment of literature do not do so in the *name* of literature, but (as I complain myself) in the name of vague, unarticulated transdisciplinary standards. One might well complain for example that, *from a political standpoint*, literariness is not always the best lens through which to view phenomena like homelessness or gender inequality or imperialism, inspiring as critics have found it to think so.<sup>10</sup>

What does follow from “the rule of literature” is that theory and cultural studies, although anti-totalizing in content, can be thought of as totalizing in social or transdisciplinary form, and therefore as one, relatively successful version of the claim to be “synthesizing” or “all-embracing” that Kant made for philosophy and that other disciplines also make for themselves. They have offered, that is, a relatively successful answer to the “so what?” question. In this sense, despite all the fuss about hermetic and incomprehensible jargon, theory and cultural studies must paradoxically be thought of as a specifically public impulse or moment for literary studies, its exposure of disciplinary assumptions to some form of public scrutiny. Like the conflict of faculties itself, in which they form a series of running skirmishes, this new literary studies marks the vulnerability of its disciplinary borders, the presence of the enemy within the gates. If it is taken to specialize in the limits of the knowable, this is perhaps because the unknowable of any discipline includes the presence within it of other disciplines, which is also the pressure of the public.

As an instance of the conflict of faculties, theory and cultural studies do the same work as the “inter” in interdisciplinarity. They open up

to the public gaze disciplines otherwise assumed to be closed, private, hermetic. Unlike interdisciplinarity, however, the conflict of faculties metaphor insists that these disciplines are *not* actually closed, private, and hermetic, or at least that they need not be. Some are more so, some less. The particular ways and degrees of opening up to the concerns of the public, and helping to fashion those concerns, are—or so I am suggesting—part of the substance of the conflict. I'm not claiming, finally, either that no field can talk about the division of intellectual labor into fields, or that only criticism can. I'm suggesting on the contrary that any number of fields do so all the time. They can do so for the same reason that professional narratives of specialization and privatization are so mistaken: because some of the rewards of that conflict continue to go to academic knowledge that can provide "synthesis" or "all-embracing vision."

What then am I asking for that differs from business as usual? My title is a plea that we at least stop the false modesty of pretending that only other disciplines are genuine disciplines. Instead of this thinly disguised combination of boast and put-down, it would be better to think harder about both the boast and the put-down, and to articulate them both differently if one really needs to make them. In using the quiet subtitle "*Criticism and the Conflict of the Faculties*," I was choosing not to choose between criticism *in* that conflict and criticism *of* that conflict, and the obvious reason is that I want both of those propositions to remain as questions. Should moves in be subjected to critique of the conflict? Can there be a criticism of the conflict that is not a move in it? Can we think beyond that conflict? Perhaps there's ground to be gained by the true modesty of not claiming *everything* for one's own discipline. The problem of how to adjudicate between universal claims would be easier if it were recognized that other disciplines made them too. But one can also imagine a case for public significance that insisted neither on absolute distinctness (after all, English departments teach information about the past and writing skill as well as the indeterminacies of language and the subject), nor on a universalizing claim to trump and comprehend the knowledge produced everywhere else. For better or worse, an end to disciplines claiming not to be either purer or holier than thou would not be an end to the conflict of the faculties itself.

Let me offer two examples. In his report on happenings at humanities centers, George Marcus describes "a veritable humanities revitalization movement" whose "major source of theoretical novelty" is "literary studies," but with "philosophy, anthropology, history of art, and architecture" also prominent participants:

The ultimate aim of the movement is some sort of disciplinary effacement—in the words of Roland Barthes, "To do something interdisciplinary it's not enough to choose a 'subject' (a theme) and gather round it two or three sci-

ences. Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new object that belongs to no one." While such a seductively unattainable object is not in sight, in the pursuit of it, the category "disciplines," and the canons that stand for them, are objectified and constructed in such centers to refigure and blur the boundaries of the scholarly communities that are constituted by this pursuit. (104)

In keeping with his mild skepticism about the ideal of interdisciplinarity, Marcus has no qualms about asserting that his own discipline, ethnography, has something of its own to contribute. He puts forward as "the special contribution of ethnography to the canon debate" that it "bridges the humanities and social sciences, and particularly gives the humanities a reflexive and empirical sense of its own practices" (105-06). That is, "while ethnography has no special authority or privilege as a form of representation—indeed it is under thorough critique as such—it does nonetheless offer the humanities the means, in a piecemeal, grounded fashion, to remake the sociological landscape to which humanist intellectuals can relate politically" (107).

Like Marcus, David Damrosch aims his case—a defense of classics—somewhere between the extremes of special pleading and specious universality:

In our Darwinian academic landscape, classics has dubious pride of place in the struggle for survival. Few fields have suffered so many slings and arrows. But in an age of rapid social and intellectual change ... even large disciplines can see their positions crumble in the blink of a few years. (Look at what cultural studies has done to sociology). (61-62)

Classics has suffered because it is shackled to the past: "in a culture whose historical horizon rarely expands beyond the last election, any study of the past needs continual justification. It's a justification that can be hard to find" (62). Damrosch organizes in defense of history, which a number of disciplines of course share. His last sentence wisely tries to create an alliance: "The real struggle isn't over the survival of a particular discipline but over the survival of historical study itself" (66).

Incidentally, this argument suggests one response to a question left unanswered here: the question of how recent post-literary claims to public significance compare to older, more strictly literary claims. This is unfortunately not the place for a discussion of how "culture" always exceeded the bounds of "literature" or how Raymond Williams's exemplary appropriation of the Arnold tradition mediates between the old and new disciplinary rationales. But one can perhaps speculate that, if both literariness and a productive tie to social science are in fact continuous, what is really at stake in the division of old and new is less "literature" itself than the *pastness* of the object of study, a quality that sometimes seems to function both in scholarship and in pedagogy as a substitute for the literary. A debate about "presentism" in cultural studies would certainly bring out more enthusiasm from

within cultural studies than a debate over the literary, while it would also be likely to provide a more edifying spectacle for outsiders than others that have been proposed.

The question of how criticism looks in public sends us in fact to at least three different sorts of public: the community of our disciplinary colleagues, which has very nearly full jurisdiction over the validity of individual acts of research; the community of colleagues in other disciplines, who have more to say about what happens inside our disciplines (or so I have been suggesting) than we usually realize; and the wider publics that grant both of these groups their only provisional authority. I say "publics" here in the plural so as to underline one moral of the present legitimation crisis. With all due respect to the *New York Times*, it isn't "the" public that is worrying about the validity of our research, but certain specific publics, and the possibilities for our self-defense do not require some imaginary re-conquest of "the" public, or even the *New York Times*. What is required, I think, in order to beat the "narrow interest group" rap that so interestingly attaches both to academic professionals and to the multicultural concern with race, gender, sexuality, and so on is some strategic cross-overs, connections or re-connections with publics with whom we have a genuine community of interests. To be schematic, in the face of de-funding the providers of intellectual services need to join together with the recipients of those services—in the process, perhaps, changing the nature of the services. And, just as important, they need to join up with other, *non-academic* service providers in a common project of fighting privatization and re-legitimizing the welfare state. For our problems are really only a small part of that larger de-legitimation of the welfare state that is happening all over the country.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The severe underdevelopment of my comments can perhaps be excused if one considers that the conflict of the faculties is a topic that doesn't belong to my own professional competence, or indeed to anyone else's. Whether there can be professional competence on this subject is one of the questions my remarks will inevitably raise, and not just by their example.

<sup>2</sup>Perhaps recent calls for more attention to politics-as-policy, as in Michael Bérubé's *Public Access* and in *Transition* 64 (1994), should be understood as renegotiations of the border between the humanities and the social sciences motivated by the so-called "crisis of the humanities."

<sup>3</sup>Derrida quotes one of Schelling's *Vorlesungen über die Methode des akademischen Studiums* (1802) ("Mochlos" 26).

<sup>4</sup>Appadurai's subject is what he calls the "post-blur blur" that has followed Clifford Geertz's era of "blurred genres."

<sup>5</sup>If the social sciences are taken as *the* [my emphasis] theater of moral debate in modern society, the problem facing modern liberal democrats is not a lack of moral guidelines but a plenitude. Instead of having one source for their moral codes, they have at least three: economics, political science, and sociology. (I

have not included anthropology in this list, not out of lack of respect—quite the contrary, actually—but because its focus on modern societies tends to be indirect.) Corresponding to each are three sets of institutions or practices charged with the maintenance of moral responsibility: those of the market, the state, and what was once called civil society” (7).

<sup>6</sup>“What happened, or so it seemed to me, was that people teaching politics in the ever-expanding universities managed to replace the old tradition of political thought with their own work. This they did by expounding the virtues of a scholarly way of analyzing politics, whereupon, by comparison, any more traditional sort of speculation about public affairs appeared to be either less incisive or plainly mistaken.... Eventually, the new expertise of academicians as a class became so highly regarded that, for political scientists at least, it seemed reasonable to honor the older tradition of political ideas more for its historical stature than for any recent representatives. Ergo the present situation, where most college courses on politics are designed to stress not an aggregate wisdom of the ages but the contemporary conclusions of political science professors.... The peculiar consequence of all this is that, beginning quite recently, large numbers of American citizens have come to learn about public life from a particular aggregation of academic specialists rather than, as in the past, from a tradition based upon the works of great men in many walks of life” (x).

<sup>7</sup>“It seems that once the discipline existed,” he writes, “shaped by its own peculiar techniques and an inherited group of ever more esoteric problems, speculation took on a life of its own” (xxv).

<sup>8</sup>For Julie Thompson Klein, “synthesis” is the keyword for interdisciplinarity.

<sup>9</sup>Gaonkar warns against the temptation to “discover ‘traces’ of rhetoric virtually everywhere” (357). But the disciplinary image that remains is of an emptiness that, unlike Blanche, survives quite well on its dependence on others.

<sup>10</sup>By general agreement, what’s distinctive about theory and cultural studies (and what links them non-antagonistically to each other) is the connection with the social sciences. “Connection” is a deliberately neutral term here for a controversial intersection. Did the humanities open themselves up to the content of the social sciences? Emulate their scientificity? Encroach upon their territory? Did they win anything by the contact, or only display their growing weakness? On this issue there is a lack of consensus, and even lack of engagement. On the one hand, there is emphasis on the *weakness* of the *motive*; according to Guillory, the lower and perhaps falling position of the humanities vis-à-vis the social sciences was the provocation to emulate and/or mix with them. On the other hand, there is emphasis on the *success* of the *result*; Appadurai suggests for example that cultural studies represents a relatively successful takeover of social science territory by literary critics. Appadurai says little about a possible initial disadvantage of the humanities; Guillory says little about what the humanities might nonetheless have won. There is clearly truth in both positions. In both versions, however, the engagement with social science adds to public significance.

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