

ON THE POLITICS OF READING, OR WILLIAM
BENNETT
RECLAIMS GEORGE ORWELL

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for Andy and Elizabeth

It was, of course, a truly unique happening; we don't get fated years too often. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (henceforth, I think fittingly, *NEF*) calendars, editorials, articles, books, conferences, courses--hundreds of them. And allusions by the score: in 1984 everyone called anyone he or she disagreed with "Orwellian." (This is not to say that the adjective is meaningless; one would, however, have hoped for more cogent usage than 1984 brought.) Here in Minnesota there was even a conference on the novel, and its reading and heritage, funded by the Humanities Commission, that led to a series of community book discussions throughout the state moderated by humanists who had previously attended the conference. In short, 1984 saw a *NEF* for every function and every point of view, most of them presented, with some sage verbal pirouette, as *the NEF*, which everyone else had misunderstood. I should confess that I was a willing, indeed quite enthralled, follower of it all, not having participated in a fated year before. I taught a course, attended the aforementioned conference (and several other *NEF* events), led book discussions in the village where I live, followed the publications nationwide, and so on.

Seen in retrospect, last year's *NEF*ism manifested two major modes of America's relating to Orwell's text, modes sometimes working in concert, sometimes quite independently. The first I shall call the attempt to sanitize, to make fit in the USA of 1984. That gesture involved a continuous verbal assuring--just general assuring--that *NEF* was somehow wrong, its "warning" had not come

true, that the book was somehow "O.K." because it had been disarmed by reality. Literally scores of beginning- and end-of-year newspaper editorials took that tack, as did a number of T.V. commentaries as well. It might be pointed out that more than a few analysts of public language have suggested that, by historical comparison, many of the aforementioned media--especially major-network T.V. news--have for some time now reached a state that can be equated to the model of social language profiled in *NEF*: through "happy news," status-quo editorializing, and self-promotion at the expense of content. It is, according to that line of analysis, a kind of censorship according to the commercial structure; in America, "land of consensus," debate and conflict don't "sell," unless they are so sensationalized as to be emptied of much significant semantic content. My other favorite examples of sanitization were the musical review "Or's Well That Ends Well" and the Signet "Commemorative Edition" of *NEF*, complete with gold seal on its cover (Good Housekeeping? 99 44/100% pure?). It dawned on me part way through this wave of *NEF* sanitization that the old Cold War book that we had had interpreted for us in the 1950's, in conflation with *Animal Farm*, as a denunciation of the horrors of Russian Communism was now revealing the flip side that many of us had felt there all along: "not here, not in the land of the whole, unfettered 'individual' human being." (Needless to say, the Cold War reading, which has *now* become the flip side, is still there too; indeed, traces of it will become apparent as I continue.) In sum, *NEF* had become a battleground for interpretation in 1984, and in many cases the first interpretive gesture was one of *ante-factum* sanitization.

The second gesture was all-out struggle for interpretive predominance in *NEF* reading. To be sure, partisan debate at the various academic conferences and in publications that came out during the year was only to be expected. The vehemence of the exchanges, however, was indicative of the stakes: sanitization or traditionalization (the latter being insistence that *NEF* can be correctly interpreted in only one way--a way to be created by an uneasy mixture of paraphrastic and old-fashioned New Critical reading methods, usually leavened with some variety of sanitization) versus a set of oppositionist stances, either resistant

to sanitization and traditionalization or themselves involved in various reinterpretable methods.

A clash in connection with the conference here in Minnesota produced the most interesting instance of such struggle of which I am aware. In the conference's aftermath, one of the participants, a Professor A. M. Eckstein, published an editorial (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Oct. 17, 1984, p. 72) labelling the proceedings "sloppy," "imprecise thinking," "misappropriation" of "the vision" of *NEF*, "motivated by . . . politics" and attacking some of the analytical methods employed ("incomprehensible semiotics"). He ended his diatribe, in good *NEF*ish fashion, with *his* ("Cold War") reading of *NEF* ("it draws its inspiration mostly from Stalin's U.S.S.R.") and the predictable *NEF*ish rhetorical flourish: "distortion of literature and the arts in the service of politics is hardly a new phenomenon . . . It is one of the aspects of our age that most disturbed George Orwell." (I might observe here for the record that I didn't find the conference remarkable in any light.) Eckstein is a historian from the University of Maryland. (Curiously, I seem to have come in contact with a number of conservative historians in connection with *NEF*, all bent on traditionalizing Orwell--one, I swear, in order to carry out that traditionalization, even wrote his own "Orwell" on the subject of the possibility of writing "objective history").

Now Eckstein's editorial was itself ingenuous, patently representing a traditionalistic line of reading genuinely shocked at not seeing itself as the only one on the landscape. It seemed to me virtually a parody of the discourse of William Bennett, then Director of the National Endowment for the Humanities--ironically, an indirect co-sponsoring agency of the conference itself. Indeed, when I first read Eckstein's editorial--and being in one of my cynical moods at the time--I mused to myself that the writer was probably up for a program directorship at the Endowment. As matters turned out, Eckstein's editorial was taken up by columnist Jonathan Yardley who used it as the basis for a denunciatory article ("Academically Abused," *The Washington Post*, Oct. 22, 1984, p. C2). Thence a series of events (as I, a bystander, understand them): 1. the phones at the N.E.H. began ringing about the "expending of public money for such purposes," 2. the N.E.H. contacted the Minnesota Humanities Commission in what was perceived by some there as a threat against funding (a reasonable reaction, since it was felt in several state

Humanities Commissions that the Bennett N.E.H. practiced a policy of funding cuts to those states whose projects it found politically unacceptable), 3. the Minnesota Humanities Commission initiated a letter-writing campaign to discredit Eckstein, 4. the Commission received a second phone call from the N.E.H. applauding the letter-writing campaign and urging its continuation in order that such influence as Eckstein's be discredited (between 2. and 4., it might be noted, Mr. Bennett began his eventually-successful campaign to be nominated Secretary of Education), 5. Eckstein, perhaps seeing that he had been hung out to dry, was last seen defending himself quite well in published letter-writing.

Now, many of the potential approaches to the matter completely aside, the entire process demonstrates the institutional interrelations and stakes involved with interpretation of *NEF* (to be seen now as only as a uniquely-prominent case in point in the year 1984). Mr. Bennett (also a historian, by the way) is, of course,--abetted by conservative columnist George Will--the author of the "five-foot shelf of books" theory of humanistic education and of a number of pronouncements, published over the past few years, against the pernicious influence on analysis of culture of, among other matters, social thought, ideological criticism, psychology, and "French theory" (i.e., Eckstein's "incomprehensible semiotics"). Bennett's most recent major pronouncement, "To Reclaim a Legacy" (the text is printed in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Nov. 28, 1984, pp. 16-21) in essence builds a critique of American educational practice and sets forth a proposal for its reform grounded in that position. "To Reclaim a Legacy" has been widely both praised and condemned in print in the few months since it has been made public, the sides breaking down--very much as with the battle over *NEF* in 1984--according to whether one sees culture and tradition (read, as first premise, "*Western Culture and Tradition*" presumed to be paradigmatically universal) as more or less uniform and their interpretation as unproblematic for all "right-thinking" individuals, as do Bennett, Eckstein, Will, Yardley, and others, or whether one sees it as heterogeneous and its interpretation varying according to the interpreter's location in time, location in geographical space, location within the formations of his or her society, even his or her his-ness or her-ness. (Incidentally my vote for best book on *NEF* in 1984 goes to Daphne Patai's *The Orwell*

Mystique [University of Massachusetts Press], a feminist reinterpretation of Orwell which, in Bennettian terminology, would be "marginal" and "tendentious.")

The point of all this is that the very struggle over *NEF* in 1984, in which many of the traditionalists participated vigorously (to say the least), ironizes their own position on the subject. Not only was the meaning of *NEF* fought over viciously in 1984, but the political stakes bound up with the struggles in relation to that unique confluence of book and year were very much profiled in the process. (The true complexity to which such a congruency of interpretive mode and political goals could attain being emphasized by what would seem to have been Mr. Bennett's attempt to hide the overtly political dimensions of his participation in the process, to the point of disavowing his followership, in order to play a critically-neutral Pontius Pilate before Congress). The struggle over interpretation of *NEF* in 1984 demonstrates for us that interpretation of culture is an activity with political correlatives of one sort or another and that "traditions" are not homogeneous, timeless, and somehow "neutral" cultural constructs that work within nuclear "individuals" but rather, like the societies in which they are produced, heterogeneous, evolving, ideologically-motivated (and, as our *NEF* lesson shows, ideologically-propagated) ones that are participated in differently by different groups of people. (In my view this does not lead to total cultural relativism, nor to the conclusion that a cultural artifact has no authority in its own interpretation, but the arguments are much too long to be rehearsed here.) What was most especially dramatized was precisely that the claim, advanced by such as Bennett and Eckstein, of "value-free" "correct" readings of cultural artifacts is in fact a very "value-loaded" first ploy--consciously understood as such or not by its perpetrators--in what is a totally political posturing. Mr. Bennett's project involving the five-foot shelf of master works of Western culture, with, as "To Reclaim a Legacy" makes very clear, the traditionalistic camp's pre-designated mode of reading (grounded in the liberal humanist notion that the "reading" of somehow-pre-designated "great works" is somehow abstractly good for the ["individual's"] soul) thereto attached, represents, then, in this context, a cultural politics. It is a politics of de-historicization and homogenization aimed at interpretive practice and its dissemination through criticism and teaching.

Moreover, its primary historical target is the very development, since the mid-1960's, of a range of critical stances, most of them decidedly anti-"traditional" (in the limited sense in which I use the term in this writing)--a development in which this journal has played a modest though definite role. For such as Bennett and his cohorts, the perspectivism that that development bespeaks is of course discomfiting, for the wish that their "reading" be accepted as universal is therein destroyed. The gesture of "reclamation" that Bennett's title proclaims is, then, revealed as one that is hardly "neutral" but instead is freighted with many highly doubtful premises about culture in general and American cultural history in particular. Moreover, the report's articulation of the specific premises of cultural homogeneity and immanent meaning bespeaks the attitude of hegemonic class discourse endeavoring to maintain/re-attain (i.e., "reclaim") its social ascendancy.

The implications of this situation should be looked at carefully, for they involve aspects of the working-space of the American intellectual--and have an international impact as well. First of all, the entire matter raises questions, both general and particular, about the articulation between the institutions of society on the one hand and research, education, even propagated modes of reading on the other. The fact that Mr. Bennett's pronouncements must, at minimum, be taken seriously by American educational curriculum developers and administrators suffices to illustrate the issue in immediate terms. But the questions raised go far beyond the immediate. Aside from its categorical scope, its pure blatancy, and its peculiar reactionarism, is his stance not in fact similar, in broad functional terms, to what preceded it? Is there not always a "cultural politics" of some degree of cohesiveness at work in society? And isn't it always promulgated through some structure of social dominance, albeit, perhaps, usually a more complex and pluralistic one than our traditionalists seem to wish? All those questions can be answered in the affirmative, though some argumentatively so.

And it should be observed too that there is an international--perhaps it might better be termed "geopolitical"--aspect to the question. What is being "decided" in Bennett's proposal is, among other matters, how "we" will read "others"--"others" in time, in space, in point of cultural base. Bennett's mode of reading, grounded

as it is in a specific notion of immanent meaning, would have "us" turn "them" into "us" as we read--and tell them so in the process. The implications, both internally and internationally, are powerful. (Note that for rhetoric's sake, I here accede, momentarily, to the proposition that there is some broad-based, self-identical "us"; in fact, the same mode of reading attempts to enforce that sense as well.) "We" are, then, told that the world is really at its core homogeneous and patterned after "our" own consciousness. (We are simultaneously told the opposite in other areas, such as those of quality and legitimacy, but the issue is too broad to be touched on here.) "We" are therefore authorized to read in ways that are guaranteed beforehand to reject cultural diversity and deny any specificity to cultures other than our own--and to propagate that interpretation of experience. Another term for this practice is cultural imperialism--and let us not forget that the "we"--"they" dichotomy is internal as well as international.

An appropriate intellectual reaction, and one that would provide the basis for political counteraction of such projects as Mr. Bennett's, would be for those who study literature in specific and culture in general to dedicate more work to the institutional dimensions of cultural production, now usually treated quite abstractly and schematically. I suspect such studies would have the immediate effect of making such blanket propositions as Mr. Bennett's much less tenable.

Most social scientists--even many conservative ones--see societies as heterogeneous and dynamic, and social relations and their interpretation as therefore involved in process. Why, then, should those of us who attempt to interpret cultural artifacts, the most obvious mediators of social relations, accept analytical models grounded in immanent meanings and cultural master codes? It is the equivalent, methodologically speaking (and the analogy need not be left only in the realm of the methodological), of asking a historian to write a history of the U.S. using as analytical paradigm the doctrine of manifest destiny. Moreover, the intellectual argument for that doubtful program has in effect been contradicted by its partisans themselves in their participation in the NEFism of 1984.

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RESUMEN

Se plantea que el poema de Rafael Landívar, *Rusticatio mexicana*, publicado en 1782, es una anomalía en la literatura hispanoamericana tanto por su lugar de publicación en Italia--donde este jesuita guatemalteco vivió el exilio de la Compañía--como por el hecho de haber sido escrito en latín. Ante esta anomalía, la crítica literaria existente ha manifestado una incertidumbre en el tratamiento del poema: se acepta la calidad de su poesía, pero se la concibe como un caso aislado, de escasa relevancia en la cultura hispanoamericana de la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII. Discrepando con este juicio, John Browning afirma que, si se confronta el poema con el contexto intelectual de su época, éste aparece como una importante obra de historia natural y una significativa propuesta de reforma política. La obra de Landívar debe ser entendida sólo en parte como la expresión de nostalgia de un exiliado por su terruño; pero, además, es preciso considerar dos aspectos centrales: su propuesta sobre la diversificación de la economía, propuesta que hacían muchos centroamericanos de la época, y su severa crítica de la representación científica de América hecha por Buffon, De Pauw y otros, quienes presentaban el continente americano como una región malsana, poblada de seres degenerados. Landívar llamó la atención de los criollos guatemaltecos sobre la vastedad de los recursos naturales de la región, cuya explotación traería importantes cambios sociales y políticos. *Rusticatio* pertenece al corpus literario jesuita de los años 1780 que brotó de la inquietud y descontento criollos en los años finales del siglo XVIII, y que contribuyó a las independencias futuras.