Undocumented Ideas, or the Limits of the Ivory Tower: A Piece for Richard Ohmann

Jamie Owen Daniel

Leather patches on tweed coat—is that the best you can do? —Morrissey

I

One of the most perceptive essays written about the development of the industrial novel in English is actually not about its development, but rather about why this particularly English contribution to the history of the novel form did *not* develop in a particular British context. Raymond Williams's "The Welsh Industrial Novel," first published in 1979,[1] begins by noting the depersonalizing sense of horror with which the early English novelists typically described the supposedly "gloomy horrid Satanic character" of the industrialized landscape. "What we can observe [Williams writes]…is a genuine sense of shock at the unaccustomed site of an industrial landscape, and the mediation of this shock through received conventional images…". Importantly, there are few if any individuated people in these early "Satanic" descriptions, since "the apparent chaos of their labour [sic] has within this perspective obliterated or incorporated them" (214).

But the form is then taken up and developed by "a group of middle-class novelists, for the most part not themselves living in the industrial areas, [who] began to explore this turbulent human world." Novelists like Dickens, Disraeli, and Gaskell tried to imagine and to represent what it must have been like to live in these landscapes. Referring to the obvious example of Dickens' description of the inhabitants of Coketown in *Hard Times*, Williams contends that the perspective in such novels is overwhelmingly an "external, incorporating perspective" that is "highly class conscious" and thus class bound (215). But it was also one that nonetheless succeeded briefly in peopling the novels with working people who were individuated enough to garner the sympathy of middle-class readers.

But this period was short-lived. After the political crisis that came to a head in and around Chartism subsided, the English novel was used less and less often as an agent of class reconciliation (if not actual meaningful social change), and increasingly functioned instead as a cultural means through which to reinforce not just class difference, but middle-class social dominance—as the nineteenth century comes to a close, Williams argues, the novel came to reinforce "a distancing between the lives of working people and the values of literature, a distance which has become institutional in the dominant fraction of English writing" (216).

The transition Williams makes here intellectually is subtle but remarkable. He moves from a historical mapping of examples in the development of a literary form to pinpointing the moment at which this form openly became an enforcer of class dominance—no longer a tool for exposing class inequity, it becomes a weapon for naturalizing it. He moves in just a few paragraphs from close readings of literary texts to the sort of broader social close reading necessary to ideology critique; from practicing literary criticism to a critique of "Literature" as an institution.

Williams moves on from this openly critical general evaluation of the political work done by a literary form to explain why, given the ideological functions the novel came to exemplify par excellence, such a thing as "the Welsh industrial novel" did not and could not have developed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rather than arguing, as might someone writing from "an external, incorporating" perspective, that the Welsh were overwhelmingly working class and therefore unlikely to be able produce a novelist until the twentieth century—that is, that the Welsh were not yet up to the task, he contends that the fault lay with the inadequacy of the form, not with any inadequacy in the Welsh working class.

> [O]ne might [he begins] risk the hypothesis that Welsh industrial working-class life was relatively inaccessible to the new kind of fiction because of the combined influence of the types of working-class community (which were also still inaccessible in English), of the relative lack of motivated and competent middle-class observers, and perhaps prepotently, because of the problems of the two languages and the relative unfamiliarity, in Welsh, of the appropriate realist form. (217-18)

It is the formal limitations—the class-specific and therefore ideological limitations—of the novel that make it inadequate to the task of representing Welsh working-class subjectivity and experience. This is true not only because of the language barrier as such, but because of the class-cultural barrier revealed in the language barrier; working-class writers would not just be writing in or translating from a different language from the one in which they had lived and worked, but from a different sense of what was being repre-

sented through the act of writing. Williams argues that the work of working-class novelist Joseph Keating, writing in the late 1890s through the 1920s, exemplifies the formal difficulty faced by a man of his experience wanting to write prose. The two forms available to him were the novel and the autobiography, and "for several generations it was the autobiography that proved most accessible." Why? Not because it was "easier" to write in the first person, but because there are "central formal features of the autobiography that correspond to [the class-specific] situation [of such a writer: an autobiography is] at once the representative and the exceptional account." That is, writers like Keating wrote very self-consciously as both representatives of their communities and as individuals who are exceptional within it, and the autobiography as form allows them to represent this doubled sense of authorial voice—that of an individual nonetheless very much grounded in and indebted to a specific working-class community and culture for his sense of identity. "The formal features of the novel, on the other hand, had no such correspondence" (219), Williams writes, and the reader can anticipate here the finally insurmountable difficulty D. H. Lawrence would encounter in trying to master the novel form as a structure through which to represent his painfully conflicted relationship to his own working-class experience.

How in this essay do we see evidence of Williams' understanding of his professional responsibilities as a scholar? He was, after all, a Professor of Drama at Cambridge University at the time the essay was written, but the essay is about the novel form, not about drama; he was a chaired professor at one of Britain's most elite and elitist universities, but his class perspective—what might today be referred as his class-based identity politics—is unmistakably working class and unmistakably evident in the essay. His class politics and loyalties are in fact obvious and unequivocal in everything Williams ever published, regardless of where and how he was employed. While employed by Cambridge, ought he to have limited his scholarly inquiry to the form that was his ostensible field of expertise? Ought he to have refrained from taking such an obviously and unequivocally class-partisan position from which to practice his profession as an academically-based literary scholar and critic?

II

> Some people, when they see an idea, think the first thing to do is to argue about it. But while this passes the time and has the advantage of keeping them warm it has little else to recommend it. If there is one thing we have learned from the Marxist tradition it is that ideas are always representations of things people are actually doing or feel themselves prevented from doing.
>
> —Raymond Williams, "The Writer: Commitment and Alignment" (1980: 77)

According to Stanley Fish, the answer to this question would be an unequivocal "yes." "Why We Built the Ivory Tower," a briefly debated editorial piece published in the *New York Times* in June of 2004, it is entirely consistent with his supervisory practice as a humanities dean. Fish leads with a reminder of his seniority on the job so as to add weight to the defensive argument he goes on to make. After noting that he has spent "nearly five decades in academia and five and a half years as dean at a public university [the University of Illinois at Chicago]," he cuts to the chase. If academics are properly "doing their jobs," and this is something he clearly wants them to do, they will "not cross the boundary between academic work and partisan advocacy."[2] They must instead diligently "police the boundary between academic work and political work." Anyone "signing on" to a tenure-track job should expect that doing such a job properly will include agreeing to function as a kind of de facto border guard, vigilantly patrolling the parameters of one's discipline in order to keep out the teeming hoards of undocumented ideas and practices that threaten to overrun it.

But, the novice scholar might object, those undocumented ideas can be so attractive, so charming, so un-tweedy, so much more…well…interesting. How can a diligent scholar be sure that alien "political work" won't seduce her academic work, establish an intimate relationship with it, and—heaven forbid!—possibly result in miscegenated, hard to control bastard offspring such as "engaged scholarship"? Well, she can protect herself by throwing cold water on the temptation to think and write and engage outside disciplinary parameters and take a vow to practice only "safe politics." Academics should, according to Fish, think narrowly while on the job and only

> engage in politics appropriate to the enterprise they signed on to. And that means arguing about (and voting on [!]), things like curriculum, department leadership, the direction of research, the content and manner of teaching, establishing standards—everything that is relevant to the responsibilities we take on when we accept a paycheck. These…include meeting classes, keeping up on the discipline, assigning and correcting papers…and so on.

As anyone who has ever sat through a series of departmental committee meeting knows, this sort of work can be as tedious and deadening intellectually as any assembly line work in a factory, but it is usually necessary to the daily functioning of the workplace. Much as we hate it, few would argue that these sorts of responsibilities should be abandoned. However, daily responsibilities essential to the maintenance of the department are not what Fish is really talking about here—he's much more anxious about safeguarding standards and the proper borders of "the discipline." One can therefore only imagine a conversation between Raymond Williams and Dean Stanley Fish, were the former to have been working at UIC rather than Cambridge:

> **Fish**: Uh, Professor Williams, let me come right to the point. I see you are writing about the "Welsh industrial novel." I thought I, er, I mean I thought *we* hired you to teach drama?
> **Williams**: Well, certainly, but I was having a discussion in one of my tutorials one day with a young man from Cardiff who is working on Lawrence and it occurred to me…
> **Fish**: Lawrence? But he's a novelist, isn't he. And not a very good one, at that! Too many words…
> **Willams**: Well, perhaps, but there's an obvious reason for that. You see, as a working-class writer, the formal constraints of the novel, and the modernist novel especially, were inappropriate for the representation.…
> **Fish**: Whatever…but, hey, that reminds me— why are you talking about "class"? All that's over with…and besides, you're not a sociologist!
> **Williams**: Well, not strictly speaking, but…
> **Fish**: Not strictly speaking? Not at all! Damn it, man, I hired you to teach drama. So I'm afraid I won't be counting this article towards your promotion.
> **Willams**: With all due respect, sir…I am a chaired professor, there's no higher position to which you could promote me.
> **Fish**: No higher position? There's always a higher position! Don't you want to be considered for the Deanship of the College of…
> **Williams**: Oh, bloody hell…

"Why We Built the Ivory Tower" was clearly written as a provocation, like much of Fish's writing, but it also serious in its endorsement of a model for the proper conduct of the professional academic whose intellectual efforts are supposed to be contained within the narrow borders of the institutionally defined disciplines. Many of the initial negative responses to the piece object to what they (correctly) understand as its antipathy to the recent tendency of younger scholars to engage with particular communities and constituencies as part of their research, and to understand the relationships they form with people with whom they work in doing so as ethically reciprocal. This reciprocity might well, as Fish writes, result in a sense of obligation to use one's "status" and relative privilege as a professional academic to advocate for the constituencies that are part of one's research, i.e., to do "political work" beyond the framework of the department meeting or indeed the university as such. But this objection to engagement and the subsequent argument about whether or not it is "proper" to combine scholarly research and political advocacy doesn't get to the underlying assumption about what it means to be a professional academic and the separability of scholarly and overtly political work that underpin both Fish's polemic and the legitimation structures of the institutional disciplines generally.

In a 1998 discussion with Bruce Robbins on his concept of "worldly criticism," the late Edward Said discusses different paradigms for understanding the role of "the intellectual." He criticizes the turn in Foucault's later work toward an understanding of the "specific intellectual" as someone so defined not simply because he or she "masters a particular field and has a discrete competence," such as those delineated with and by the conventional academic disciplines to which Fish is apparently so cathected. Rather, this person "has a particular subjectivity which is constructed as part of his or her selfhood and therefore legitimates the notion of selfhood in a particular context or setting." Said continues, "[i]nsofar as the specific intellectual is a retreat from world of the general, of the historical, of the social, it's an anti-political position… and an invidious distinction" (335).

The "specific intellectual" referred to here is, I would argue, more properly referred to as a "professional academic," and is not necessarily an intellectual at all. This fact is what lies at the core of Fish's argument, and to his credit, he isn't assuming the scholars he admonishes to "do their jobs and not someone else's'' *are* intellectuals. If he assumed they were, he would certainly not order them to, as it were, pull down the shades and lock themselves in their studies (or rather, their departmental offices), because he would realize that intellectual energy cannot do *its* work properly if it is quarantined and constricted in this way. If one is an intellectual, one takes the intellectual questions that motivate and anchor one's work to whatever contexts, whatever sites of contestation, provide ground for answering them.

I can take my own intellectual development as a case in point. My modest contribution to scholarship on the public sphere, which I consider my most socially valuable intellectual work, is equally indebted to two contexts. The first is my formal academic training in the tradition of German Critical Theory, especially the work of Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the more recent collaborations of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. The intellectual commitment and discipline necessary to understanding, evaluating, and in some cases translating this work was considerable, and it often required long stretches of typical scholarly self-isolation to accomplish. But, while very much grounded in this demanding tradition, none of my own critical work would have been likely to develop into much more than explications of the theoretical models provided by Critical Theory had I not also actively and intentionally rooted my work in the social justice struggles taking place within the public spheres and counter public spheres of the city of Chicago. In particular, these have been the labor movement, which is more complex and frustrating and tenacious here in Chicago than perhaps anywhere else, and the coalitions that have formed around the city's disinvestment in public housing and resulting displacement of tens of thousands of mostly Black, mostly very desperately poor women and children.[3] These movements have been absolutely essential to my development as an intellectual, as a scholar, and as a teacher—they have formed the sites of departure,

the "proving grounds" as it were, for my work on subjectivity and on the limitations of current theories and practices of the public sphere. This work has been vitally informed and structured by the habits of mind I acquired through my scholarly engagement with Critical Theory, certainly, but it would have remained merely theoretical had I not been able to ground it in these living, local, decidedly non-academic struggles.

In the course of thinking about how and whether labor's institutions can be considered counter-public spheres, I came across a Gramscian definition of the role of "organic intellectuals" that corresponds to how I understand both my own intellectual indebtedness to actual sites of contestation within the public sphere, and the broader social role of those of us who feel an obligation to "repay the debt." George Lipsitz writes: "Organic intellectuals… hold no formal status as 'intellectuals.' Social action constitutes the indispensable core of their activity. Organic intellectuals not only analyze and interpret the world, they originate and circulate their ideas through social contestation."[4] Their work is enriched, rather than contaminated because of this, and it is thus often characterized by the complex sort of "social density," to use Edward Said's term, that is so gratifying in the work of intellectuals like Raymond Williams or Walter Benjamin. Likewise, I would argue, the demeaning credentializing rituals to which professional academics are forced to submit, including the pressure to just "do their jobs," at least until they have tenure, has a pernicious and homogenizing effect on much of the scholarship they produce, preventing it from having any broader social impact. But it is precisely this gutting of any social density, any organic connectedness to sites of struggle outside the sanitized confines of the "Ivory Tower," that is demanded by Fish's argument.

III

> **Edward Said**: My view is that the intellectual role is essentially that of, let's say, heightening consciousness, becoming aware of tensions, complexities, and taking on oneself responsibility for one's community. This is a non-specialist role, it has to do with issues that cut way across professional disciplines….
> **Interviewer Richard Kearney**: And you would introduce here an ethical scruple of responsibility for one's fellow citizens.
> **Said**: Yes, that's the essential thing.
> **Kearney**: And if that means a contamination or confusion of realms, then so be it?
> **Said**: So be it, exactly. (385-386)

The work Richard Ohmann may not at first seem to have much in common with that of the Edward Said. Said, after all, was internationally known as both a theorist and a practitioner of exile. Like Theodor Adorno, whose experience and work were so important to

his own, Said was a twentieth-century intellectual-in-exile who wrote about world literature and world politics, whereas Ohmann has concentrated his efforts on the very American context of the development of English as an American academic discipline and, more recently, on the shifting place and value of composition within that discipline. What does it suggest that a scholar of Ohmann's considerable intellectual powers has chosen to engage with that most deskilled of the traditional skills associated with English as a profession—composition?

As numerous interviews and his work with *Radical Teacher* and other journals reveal, Ohmann is concerned and engaged with what composition teachers do as both a scholarly and a political question—after all, who needs composition classes? Not students of privilege, who often have benefited from years of private prep school writing training before they ever set foot on a university campus. Rather, they are those for whom "the ivory tower" was for so long a symbol of class privilege and exclusion from opportunity, rather than access to options.

But in his work on composition studies, Ohmann is also engaging in the sort of thinking-in-relation or critique that characterized the work of Willams, Said, and other intellectuals, who also happened to be working as academics. He recognizes the irrevocable structural transformation of English studies that has resulted in the deskilling of composition as part of larger, extra-disciplinary historical shifts. Likewise, he is interested in "the profession" not because he wants to maintain its "standards," but because he both understands and wants to expose its role as an "enforcer of class dominance" and, as importantly, seeks creative and subversive ways to recuperate its enormous potential as an agent of progressive social change. His work thus exhibits none of the nostalgia for fixed hierarchies and ahistorical standards that supposedly once existed that has characterized the recent work of Stanley Fish and his admirers.[5] Edward Said referred to this tendency in Fish's work and its implications for political involvement as early as 1986, when, in an interview in *Critical Text*, he linked Fish's "going on about 'professionalism'" to a kind of "quietism and resignation" (65) that includes the acceptance of "an extremely powerful and entrenched hierarchization of functions, authority, and styles of work. And the connection between the university and the corporation in America is rarely looked at with the kind of rigor that it ought to receive, nor is the connection between the university and the state" (66).[6]

One of Richard Ohmann's most valuable contributions has been precisely his critical examination of the "connection between the university and the corporation [and] between the university and the state,"[7] and thus his work could be said to expand Althusser's famous claim in *Reading Capital* that "there are no innocent readings" to "there are no innocent professional standards or hierarchies." His work exemplified the social value of using one's intellect in the service of something other than clever performances, of what is called in German *Uberklugkeit*, literally, the over-cleverness into which many careers that are rooted in nothing beyond the terms of "the profession" seem to degenerate.

But more than anything, his work offers us a critical toolbox. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley have defined critique as a practice, in the sense of truly critical inquiry, which is something quite different from "criticism" as it is usually understood within the academic context. They write:

> Critique is…a practice that allows us to scrutinize the form, content, and possible reworking of our apparent political choices; we no longer have to take them as givens. Critique focuses on the workings of ideology and power in the production of existing…possibilities. It facilitates discernment of how the very problem we want to solve is itself produced, and thus may help us avoid retrenching or reproducing the problem in our solutions. (26-27)[8]

And in offering us these tools of scrutiny and discernment, his work offers us hope.

Notes

[1]Reprinted in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London and New York: Verso, 1980): 213-229.

[2]The piece can be downloaded at the conservative "Frontpage" website created by David Horowitz, <http://frontpagemag.com/Articles/printable.asp?ID=13593>.

[3]My writing on public housing has appeared in a seemingly eclectic but, when seen relationally, politically logical variety of contexts, from weekly newsletters photocopied for targeted housing project residents to mainstream magazines to more obviously "scholarly" publications. For an example of the latter, see "Rituals of Disqualification: Competing Publics and Public Housing in Contemporary Chicago" in Mike Hill and Warren Montag, eds., *Masses, Classes, and the Public Sphere* (London & New York: Verso, 2000): 62-82.

[4]From *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988): 132.

[5]A sense of the breadth of Ohmann's thought-in-relation can be found in his March 2003 interview with Marc Bousquet, "Education, Solidarity, and Revolt: A Conversation with Richard Ohmann," in *WorkPlace: The Journal of Academic Labor* Issue 5 (2003) at <http://www.louiusville.edu/journal/workplace/issue5p2/ >.

[6] Edward Said, interview with Gary Hentzi and Anne McClintok, reprinted in *Power, Politics, and Culture; Interviews with Edward W. Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan (New York: Vintage, 2001).

[7] See as a recent the interview with Bousquet, mentioned above, in which Ohmann addresses the politics of the war in/on Iraq.

[8] Wendy Brown and Janet Halley, eds. *Left Legalism/Left Critique* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2002).

Works Cited

Brown, Wendy and Janet Halley, eds. *Left Legalism/Left Critique*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2002.

Fish, Stanley. "Why We Built the Ivory Tower." Reprinted in <http://frontpagemag.com/Articles/printable.asp?ID=13593>.

Lipsitz, George. *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.

Viswanathan, Gauri, ed. *Power, Politics, and Culture; Interviews with Edward W. Said*. New York: Vintage, 2001.

Williams, Raymond. *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays*. London and New York: Verso, 1980.