The Politics of Career

Jeffrey J. Williams

Richard Ohmann was born in 1931, did graduate work in English at Harvard in the 1950s (MA, 1954; PhD, 1960), started publishing on stylistics in the late 1950s, and landed a job at Wesleyan in 1961. Riding the first wave of the expanding postwar university, he and his cohort were on the fast track. Alongside him at Harvard, Paul de Man, though of a slightly older generation (b. 1919), did graduate work in Comparative Literature during the fifties (MA, 1958; PhD, 1960), before moving to Cornell; Hillis Miller, born in 1928, whisked through a bit earlier (PhD, 1952), before starting at Hopkins; and Edward Said, born in 1935, did a degree in Comparative Literature in the late 1950s and early sixties, before settling at Columbia. Down the coast at Yale, Fredric Jameson, born in 1934, did graduate work in Comparative Literature (PhD, 1959), before his first job at Harvard; and Stanley Fish, born in 1938, studied under New Critics like William K. Wimsatt (PhD, 1962), before launching his precocious career at Berkeley. A train ride away at Columbia, Sandra Gilbert, born in 1936, was among the first of a group of feminists to make her way to the PhD (1968), although she was not so fortunate in first jobs, starting out at Cal State-Hayward. Ohmann was part of the generation of critics who invented contemporary literary theory and changed the face of the study of language and literature.

Ohmann was in the right place at the right time. His dissertation advisers were the legendary teacher and New Critic Reuben Brower and the famous comparativist Harry Levin. Brower and Levin were also de Man's advisers (de Man pays warm homage to Brower in "The Return to Philology"), and Levin was one of Said's advisers. Capping his graduate years, Ohmann won a princely junior fellowship (customarily a term of three years) at Harvard's Society of Fellows, as had de Man, a visiting Jacques Derrida for a term, and linguists like Noam Chomsky. While a fellow, Ohmann crossed the pond to study at Oxford for two terms with the inventor of speech act theory, J. L. Austin. If there was an aristocracy of

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criticism of the time, the Ivies, especially Harvard and Yale, were the houses, and Ohmann and his cohort were the heirs.

Ohmann made his mark early in stylistics and in scouting the new terrain of linguistics for literary criticism. He was on the roster of the 1958 English Institute, announcing his project with the rather immodest title, "Prolegomena to the Analysis of Prose Style." His first book, *Shaw: Style and the Man* (1962), which applied speech act theory as well as Chomsky's new transformational grammar, studied Shaw's quirks of usage (with appendices on the frequency of subjunctives like "would") to define the patterns of his thought. Ohmann's essays over the decade unfolded the relation of grammar and style to meaning, and he was in the thick of things. He is cited, at length and approvingly, in "Semiology and Rhetoric," the opening chapter of Paul de Man's prolegomenon to deconstructive criticism, *Allegories of Reading* (1979), and he is a primary interlocutor through several chapters of Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980). But history intruded, and he responded. As Ohmann recollects, "events of the sixties opened up a wholesale critique of our society's major institutions unprecedented in my own conscious lifetime" (*English* xvi), and he brought that critique back to English. Soon he realized "that I was writing an unintended book" (xviii), a long way from the thickets of grammar and style. Like many paths in life, it might have started with a simple choice, like calling for a date, going to a march, or picking up a certain book, but it came to determine his career.

Since then Ohmann has stood apart from the mainstream of criticism and the preoccupations of his generation. The unintended book of course was *English in America* (1976), and beginning with it he cut a different path, talking about literature not in terms of language and readings but in terms of professions and institutions, and he has persistently tried to explain how literature and culture relate to modern capitalism. In *English in America*, he posited that "the growth of our field was not isolated, or a consequence of intellectual history, but rather a consequence of material history" (255). The specific material history was the military-industrial complex that underwrote the postwar university (we might update it now to include the medical-pharmaco-technology complex). And he further observed that we in literary or composition studies do not simply pass on literature and its humanistic values, but

> train young people, and those who train young people, in the skills required by a society most of whose work is done on paper and through talk, not by physical labor. We also discipline the young to do assignments, on time, to follow instructions, to turn out uniform products, to observe the etiquette of verbal communication. And in so doing, we eliminate the less adapted, the ill-trained, the city youth with bad verbal manners, blacks with the wrong dialect, Latinos with the wrong language, and the rebellious of all shapes and sizes, thus helping to maintain social and economic inequalities. (230)

He pointed to the profession's new clothes and the complicity of English in the striations and injustices of our society. Although the book arose from its sixties context, it was also a throwback to *Culture and Anarchy* or *Culture and Society* in assessing the place of literary culture in current society, and he might well have named it *English and Society*.

Ohmann's observations were not particularly welcome in the crowning heights of the profession, and his path was largely uncharted.[1] The quasi-Marxist critic Steven Marcus dismissed *English in America* in the *TLS* as "Deficient and inapplicable... irrelevant... [a] collection of tendentiousness and claptrap."[2] It was irrelevant to the tacit self-definition of the profession, that we serve the best that has been said and thought, but Ohmann's point was that such a self-definition was askew, if not an outright delusion. To say the profession has no clothes is not the most dependable way to win professional accolade. Tenured at Wesleyan, Ohmann was not consigned to the wilderness, but theory continued apace on its traditional path of "literature and language," its course bending toward the new "linguistic turn." Contrary to the commonplace that criticism operates as a conversation or dialogue, criticism actually often works by cutting off dialogue, through forgetting or turning off the hearing aid, ignoring what does not fit with normal practice and the tacit definition of the field.

"Pathbreaking," designating innovation and originality, is ironically an overused term in the profession. What it usually means is that someone has taken a familiar line of interpretation and gone against it—as Stanley Fish once remarked, you find out what everyone is saying, then say the opposite. During the theory years, it entailed not only variant readings, but infusing interpretation with a larger conceptual frame—for instance, talking about literature in terms of speech act theory. It has been an immensely productive method, generating research in literary studies through the postwar years, and Fish has applied it brilliantly. In the face of the New Critical caveat against the affective fallacy, he declared that the affective fallacy was a fallacy itself, and that all meaning resided in the reader and his interpretive community. But, however original his infusion of hermeneutic theory, the field stayed largely the same: Fish still tilled the furrows of interpretation, for instance in his reading of *Paradise Lost*, his twist showing the bumpiness of meaning instead of the raked smoothness of a New Critical unity. Interpretation was the primary game and how you made your mark in the field—and for the most part still is, reaffirmed in recent calls for a "return to reading" for instance from Fish and Walter Benn Michaels,[3] and even if extended to less exalted cultural artifacts like television or fashion.

Ohmann forewent the habit of literary interpretation and stepped outside the worn footpaths of the field. Rather than the achieved harmony, the warring forces of signification, or even the political unconscious of literary works, he looked at the political economy of the field itself.[4] His struggle was to find out how the field came to be materially constituted—who paid for the stadium and what

they got in return, how the players got there, and what it gave those who filled the stands. He cleared the paths of institutional history and showed us how English is not the natural manifestation of the great works but an historical agglomeration; he drew in work from the sociology of professions and demonstrated how we function not only as purveyors of literature but members of the professional managerial class; and he turned light on the university and how it serves the military-industrial complex, and how even literary education does its share.

Ohmann's path led from our home turf of the English department to other literary institutions. His landmark essay, "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-1975" (1983), examined how publishing, advertising, and book reviewing form the contemporary novel. Such institutional channels are usually considered peripheral, the assumption being that literary works are judged on the merits of their literary value. Ohmann demonstrated how taste is shaped by the material protocols of the latter day capitalist institutions producing literature, which are geared toward profit; contrary to the myth of the romantic artist in his garret whose works are later discovered and cherished, almost all novels deemed to have high literary value were bestsellers or otherwise recognized through standard market channels. Ohmann also showed how taste is shaped by the class position of those working in such institutions. As in *English in America*, he pointed out how the interests of the professional managerial class dominate and inflect literary culture. He observed that the favored fiction of the period tended toward the motif of "illness stories," which represented the feeling—alienation—of the PMC. Ohmann did proffer an interpretation, but that interpretation served as evidence for the classed nature of literary production rather than the pleasure of reading.

In "The Author as Producer," Walter Benjamin disabused the usual understanding of the politics of literature. We customarily think that the politics of a literary work result from the attitude of the author and statements in the work. But Benjamin argued that the politics of a work more consequentially result from its position in the mode of production; a radical novel published by a leading publishing house and becoming a bestseller foments profit more than it foments revolution. Ohmann pointed to the position of contemporary fiction in the mode of production. In contemporary theory, descended from Nietzsche's critique of causality, we tend to shy from claims of cause and effect. Causality is indeed a many-headed hydra, but it is impossible to have a sense of history without a sense of causality; the problem is not that causes do not exist but that they are interwoven and difficult to tease out. One strong move of Ohmann's work has been to try to ferret out the strings of causality and discover how literature and culture result from the mode of production.[5] While the past twenty years have seen the burgeoning of historical readings of literature, the tendency is to look at the statements in or the cultural contexts contiguous to literature, but not to the capitalist institutions that produce literature. "The Shaping of a Canon" remains a rare investigation of those institutions and provides a model that more people should follow.

Ohmann's focus on the connection of the mode of production and culture culminated in his 1994 book, *Selling Culture*. In it, he stepped back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at the moment of fruition of monopoly capitalism, which saw the coalescing of national markets, the advent of mass magazines, and the invention of popular advertising. Together these formed the ground for modern mass culture and what we have come to call consumer society. Again, Ohmann pointed to the classed nature of culture, and the formation of the professional managerial class that makes and imbibes culture. Magazines and advertising were, in a sense, the educational institution of the new professional middle class.

Ohmann did not shy from giving a genealogy of cause that generated culture:

> the real causes come first ... the real causes have to do with big capital, factories, machines, products, and profits; secondary causes include the labors of middlemen to move products about and win over consumers; farther downstream are the projects of writers and editors, then those of the new middle class that bought magazines and the commodities advertised there; and at the end of the causal flow come representations, meanings, ideology. (340)

Again, literature does not operate solely according to its own lights and internal rules, Homer passing the torch to James Joyce, but Ohmann showed it is tied up in material, class, and cultural history, and determined by those histories. Much current criticism calls itself cultural studies because it unearths an intriguing cultural event or context that bears on a literary work, but its sense of culture is partial, limited to that piece of culture. *Selling Culture* remains a model for American literary and cultural studies because it attempted to fill in the big picture of culture, sussing out the broad web of determinations.

Most recently, Ohmann has turned his sights on the contemporary mode of production, "flexible accumulation," a favorite reference point he takes from David Harvey's classic *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Harvey demarcates the shift, around 1970, from Fordism to post-Fordism, or from monopoly capitalism to what has variously been called consumer, postindustrial, multinational, or postmodern capitalism. (Fordism designates the era of production that saw relatively good labor conditions for the working class, exemplified by Henry Ford's policy to pay his workers a comparatively high wage so that they could be consumers of the products they made, whereas post-Fordism designates the era of global production that relies on outsourcing and offshoring, resulting in the decline of labor conditions.) Updating the story begun in *Selling Culture*, Ohmann has suggested some of the effects of flexible accumulation in the age of television in a collection he put together, *Making and Selling Culture* (1996), and, updating *English in*

America, the effects of flexible accumulation on literary studies in essays such as "English after the USSR" (1993). Those effects have been direct, ushering in a bipartite system of flexible or casual teaching labor—which, in Ohmann's diagnosis, is part of the dissolution of the larger professional middle class.

His focus on bread and butter issues like teaching labor is another way that Ohmann has stood apart. It is remarkable that none of the master critics of high theory, particularly those with progressive politics, descended from the heights of interpretive theory to consider teaching, particularly composition, which generates the bulk of teaching hours in any English department. (In this, they departed from their teachers; New Critics like Cleanth Brooks had perhaps their most far reaching influence with a series of introductory textbooks like *Understanding Poetry*, and Brower was famous for starting the Hum 6 general education "Introduction to Literature" requirement first at Amherst and then at Harvard.[6]) Composition has historically been relegated to the basement, and the conditions of the postwar university intensified that professional hierarchy. The infusion of post-Sputnik funding for research induced what Christopher Jencks and David Reisman called "the academic revolution," whereby professors came to define their primary job as research rather than as teaching. Interpretive readings fulfilled the research imperative, and those who did them took the mantle of the higher faculty, composition consigned to the prestige-deprived realm of teaching. Ohmann did not abide this hierarchy. A prominent part of *English in America* foregrounded composition and what we really train students for, and he was among the first to point out that "the part of our job that justifies us to others within and outside the university is the part we hold in least regard and delegate to the least prestigious members of the profession" (243). Much of Ohmann's writing on the profession is pitched against the elitism inherent in it, and his dwelling on composition was a career choice that set him apart from his cohort.

The choice entailed not only commenting on composition, but co-editing two textbooks on introductory writing and, from 1966 to 1978, serving as editor of *College English*. Ohmann was not afraid to get his hands dirty with the "service" work of editing. (This is another way that Ohmann's generation departed from its predecessors; New Critics like John Crowe Ransom edited *Kenyon Review* and the New York Intellectual Irving Howe founded *Dissent*, whereas none of the major figures of the theory generation deigned to take on the responsibility for a journal.) During his editorship, Ohmann fostered work on institutional history, the politics of literature, and the status of composition, as well as some of the first articles published on feminism, including Lillian Robinson's "Dwelling in Decencies: Radical Criticism and the Feminist Perspective," and on gay studies, notably the special issue "The Homosexual Imagination."

One more way that Ohmann has stood apart is in his style. Rather than the heavily Latinated, continentally-referenced mode of most theory, it is plainspoken and direct. It is perhaps an Anglo-

analytic style, in the manner of J.L. Austin, that eschews pretense. It is conversational, leading through points like a Trollope narrator or a lecturer. For instance, you will often find connective phrases like, "I bring this up because," or "I have run this sketch in order to," so that you know where he is going and why he is doing it. While his style is colloquial, the points, however, are not; they are large conceptual points, about the politics of knowledge, hegemony and how it is maintained through our meritocratic institutions, the consent wrought by commercial culture, and the pervasive influence of the mode of production. They are difficult, intellectually demanding points.

The primary defense of the difficulty of theoretical writing is that it is necessary to represent thought that is difficult. The style presumably mimics the thought or relays the experience of the thought. To read Hegel or Bhabha thus becomes a phenomenological experience of difficulty. This follows a kind of modernist credo, that criticism, like stream of consciousness in a novel, should show rather than tell its difficulty. But, as some critics of the modern novel have noted, psychological representations like stream of consciousness are no more valid or closer to reality than a narrator telling you what a character is thinking. They presume an unmediated representation, but, even without tag lines like "he thought," the stream still comes from a narrator. Ohmann's style is told rather than shown; it suggests and points to where the difficulties are. Ohmann's writing, since his early work on stylistics, has been fully theoretical, if theory is taken as the effort to provide a general explanation of the world in which we work and live, but it has set itself apart from the mainstream of the profession and its dominant idiom.

Ohmann's style is not just a choice favoring an Anglo-analytic idiom, but a disposition. In its plainspoken stance toward its topics, it deliberately resists adopting or producing doxa, system, or a master theory; it dovetails with his stance toward the profession, resisting its established modes and rote forms. One way to characterize *English in America* is that it diagnosed the way that English produced docile bodies and enacted power through knowledge. But Ohmann did not promulgate an edifice or reproducible method as Foucault, despite his critique of "the author function," in fact did. One might follow Ohmann's direction, but there is no Ohmannian doctrine as there is an identifiable Foucauldian one. In his disposition, Ohmann probably has had most affinities with Edward Said, who eschewed the systems of high theory and castigated the lack of independence of most forms of professionalism, and Noam Chomsky, who has attacked the manufacturing of consent at every turn. Though the three of them have had estimable careers, they have walked against the grain of normal academic practices and topics. And they have each turned a critical eye on the places, uses, and politics of knowledge, especially the university.[7]

While eschewing doxa, one theoretical preoccupation that runs through Ohmann's work has been form and content. In an interview, he joked that, "Well, I never wrote the [book] on stylistics. I

was going to settle for good the question of form and content, but unfortunately the world will have to wait for my reincarnation to solve the problem" (91). One way to understand his subsequent work is that it has dwelt on the same problematic, the traditional literary rendering of form and content as style and meaning supplanted by literature and politics, culture and society, the aesthetic and capitalism. (It is perhaps one way that he has remained a literary critic rather than, say, a sociologist.) The difference between the former and latter renderings is not a matter of validity. It would be foolish for those in literary studies to deny the importance of form and content, and it is usually a fundamental part of teaching, of, for example, how the terse, hard style of Raymond Carver's fiction captures the bleak content of Carver's vision of late twentieth century American life. Rather, the difference is a matter of choice and of which one deems to have priority. To spend one's time on the problem of style and meaning is a defensible choice, but places priority on the intricacies of language and literary interpretation. The choice to examine the material institutions that produce literature is usually cast as peripheral to language, but Ohmann showed that they in fact determine the form of literature. The choice, finally, derives from the belief in the political obligation of criticism.

Another preoccupation has been hegemony, one of the few Latinate terms recurring through much of his work.[8] Ohmann's version of hegemony derives from Gramsci, but also melds with Chomsky's concept of manufacturing consent. Hegemony expresses the disposition against system, naming the systemic effects of a base that can't be captured by a doctrine, one that morphs and assigns different functions to culture over time. In an era of flexible accumulation, it aptly characterizes the nature of flexible domination. In a sense, hegemony describes the way that content rules form, and in turn how form exceeds or is semi-autonomous from content. Ohmann's insight has been that institutions and professional forms, even of humanistic culture, are the medium of hegemony. Hegemony is how form shows its teeth, "making," as he put it in *English in America*, "inequality seem fair" (234). After coming to this insight, it is hard, in good conscience, to turn back to the halcyon path of the pleasures of literature or the intricacies of language. At least not until reincarnation, or after the revolution, when we might interpret literary works in the evening.

In this profession, we are trained to spot errors in argument. For instance, in "Anti-Professionalism" Stanley Fish charges that Ohmann often slides to an overly sweeping dismissal of professionalism in *English in America*.[9] There is some truth to this criticism, but most of the time such points are quibbles and only offer minor amendments to the course of the argument. While I myself am not averse to argument, sometimes arguments are beside the point. We fail to keep our eyes on the prize, as they used to say in the 60s. Ohmann has kept his eye on the prize of figuring out the conjunction of society and literature, capitalism and the university, and flexible accumulation and culture. That is one of the lessons

of Ohmann's work and career, and whether we are liberals or Marxists or somewhere in between, it is a lesson worth bearing in mind.

Another lesson is about how to fashion one's career and what paths to choose. Part of the purpose of graduate school is to show novitiates the range of available choices. The paths are usually well-trodden, with well-marked gates. Now, probably the best marked gate, with the most traffic, ushers you down the path of becoming an historicist, reading literary texts in conjunction with particular cultural texts. Nearby a plainer but still substantial gate beckons the tried-and-true path of literary scholarship and recovery. Set a bit apart is a recently refurbished, small but ornate gate, welcoming a return to aesthetics and the appreciation of literature. The lesson of Ohmann's work is to pick the topic that is most pressing, regardless of the menu of normal practices and the rewards that lie at the end of them. People tend to get used to inequality, and in turn find it tiresome for others to point it out. Especially given the state of the university, of academic labor as well as student labor and indebtedness, I think the priority now is the relentless critique of the inequitable institutional ground under our feet.

Notes

[1]To be sure, his path was not entirely solitary, its company including those who rebelled against MLA and appeared in the collection, *The Politics of Literature: Dissenting Essays on the Teaching of English* (1972), notably its editors, Louis Kampf and Paul Lauter. One of the chapters of *English in America* first appeared there. Still, Ohmann was the only scholar to carry out a full and sustained investigation of the institution of English.

[2] Qtd. in Ohmann's new introduction to the reissue of *English in America* (xxi), where Ohmann surveys some of the initial response.

[3] See my interview with Fish, where he says, "What surprises me, though, and heartens me, is the survival through all of these changes of some commitment to close reading ... It still remains, at least in my experience, the most powerful pedagogical tool which can really awaken students' interest..." See also the essays in the collection, *Revenge of the Aesthetic*.

[4]To be fair, Jameson heroically cut a path that brought Marxism back into the field, in large part by trying to infuse interpretation with a Marxist horizon. The problem is that such a model is often used simply to augment the machine of interpretation, rather than to do something about the inequality that texts represent. As Wittgenstein remarked in *Philosophical Investigations*, interpretation has to come to an end somewhere.

[5]Ohmann was of course aware of the difficulties of cause and effect, and their dialectical relation; as he remarked in "The Shaping of a Canon," "One need not subscribe to conspiracy theories in order to see, almost everywhere one looks in the milieu of publishing and reviewing, linkages of fellowship and common

interest. Together these networks make up a cultural establishment, inseparable from the market, both influencing and influenced by it" (*Politics of Letters* 75).

[6]See William Pritchard's account of Hum 6 in his memoir, *English Papers* (85-106); Pritchard was also a Harvard PhD student in the 50s before landing at Amherst.

[7]Some of Chomsky's most searing essays are on the university in the 1960s; similarly, Said has criticized the academic invention of orientalism, propounded a "secular criticism" against doxa and system, and formulated his credo for independence in his 1994 *Representations of the Intellectual*.

[8]For instance, see "Teaching as Theoretical Practice," *Politics of Letters*, 129; *Selling Culture*, 346; "English and the Cold War," 95; new introduction, *English in America*, xxvii.

[9]It does seem that professional complaints are a significant part of professional life, but Fish fails to discriminate among better or worse versions of professionalism. Ohmann himself notes a number of self-criticisms, including that he would "reemphasize here, as I did not in *English in America*, the ways English defined itself in *opposition* to the social arrangements on the American side of the Cold War" ("English and the Cold War" 85).

Gerald Graff's chapter in *Literature Against Itself* was one of the few serious engagements with *English in America*. Despite some disagreements, he finds Ohmann's general argument accurate, and himself assimilated Ohmann's lesson to write his own path-breaking *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987). Ohmann's work also spurred other institutional histories, like James Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality* (1987), to some extent those by feminists that focused on the institution, or others coming out of the GRIP (Group for Research on Institutionalization and Professionalization) project in the 1980s, such James Sosnoski's *Token Professionals and Master Critics* (1994) or David Shumway's *Creating American Civilization* (1993). It also tamped down the footpath for other people writing on the profession, like Bruce Robbins, John Guillory, me, and, most recently, Marc Bousquet and his critique of "the managed university."

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