

ture, the sovereign nation-state) is challenged by disintegrative forces of self-determination that may bring us a world with independent identities such as Quebec or Scotland or a Palestinian state. But this is not incompatible with the integration that may link such ethnonationalist entities, as well as more traditional states, with larger economic and normative combinations as indicated by integrationist trends.

Ronen's analysis emphasizes "is" over "ought." He contends that the international system and its component elements can best be explained by his exposition of the nature and operation of self-determination. One is left uncertain as to how committed he is to the normative "oughtness" of his concept. He appears to be very committed. Ronen's next task is to elaborate the origins and nature of the right of individual self-determination and the right to pursue it through many aggregate groups, as balanced against whatever community or corporate rights such groups may rightly claim.

William V. O'Brien is Professor of Government at Georgetown.

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LITERATURE AGAINST ITSELF: LITERARY IDEAS IN MODERN SOCIETY

by Gerald Graff

(University of Chicago Press; 260 pp.; \$15.00)

Martha Bayles

...Then a ragged urchin stepped out from the crowd and said in a clear voice. "Look, look. The Emperor's not wearing any clothes."

To those of us who have been hanging on the corner watching the latest in advanced fiction and literary criticism parade by, Gerald Graff is that one clear, welcome voice. Unlike the urchin who just points out the obvious, Graff sets himself the further task of unraveling the whole hoax, warp and woof. *Literature Against Itself* explains and refutes an impressive number of literary ideas in an impressively short time, showing that in most cases a literary idea is a perfectly good idea from somewhere else, down on its luck because the literary intellectuals have got hold of it, usually by the throat.

From structural linguistics, for instance, the idea that the forms and sounds of words bear no necessary relation to their referents has fallen into

the hands of such structuralist critics as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller, who stretch it to absurdity. Graff writes:

"From the proposition, unexceptional in itself, that no signifier can mean anything apart from the code or sign system which gives it significance, one infers the conclusion that no signifier can refer to a nonlinguistic reality—that, as Perry Meisel puts it, 'all language is finally groundless.' There is, then, no such thing as a 'real' object outside language, no 'nature' or 'real life' outside the literary text, no real text behind the critical interpretation, and no real persons or institutions behind the multiplicity of messages human beings produce. Everything is swallowed up in an infinite regress of textuality."

From the philosophy of science, the idea that truth is a function of intellectual "paradigms" that may or may not correspond with the ultimate nature of reality gets carried to the extreme of saying reality doesn't exist, and all our statements about it are equally "fictive structures," "shadowy manifestations of the ego." And from fiction itself, the fictive status of characters and plot elements gets extended first to theme and

content, then to the readers and writers of fiction, and finally to the world. In the words of one critic: "To create fiction is, in fact, a way to abolish reality, and especially to abolish the notion that reality is truth."

Graff is patient with all this, bringing in Wittgenstein's observation that "the act of doubting can only take place within a system of beliefs, that programmatic skepticism itself takes for granted that many things are known and established." Over and over Graff reveals how these critics beg the question, argue a priori, and torture ideas most outlandishly. We wonder why he bothers; surely such illogic will eventually collapse under its own weight. But Graff is doing more than refuting certain recklessly trendy ideas. He is trying to place them in a broad historical and social context.

Ever since the Romantics, he tells us, literature has retreated before the advance of science and technology. Structural linguistics is not the first scientific discipline to invade literature's territory, nor the first to be assisted in the task by literary minds all too eager to use its insights to further diminish their own truth-claims. They have done this, Graff argues, because, like the emperor's subjects, they wished to appear virtuous. In an effort to keep from being contaminated by bourgeois rationalism, the Romantics and the great modernists held up art as a substitute for lost religion. But for the same reason religion was lost, art was lost, because it was defined as having no authority to find or speak the truth. They had already conceded that authority to science. Then came the New Critics and today's postmodernists, each in different ways reinforcing "the division of labor which made 'imagination' the province of the artist and abstract thought, logic, and common sense the monopoly of other people."

All this in the name of virtue. After all, who would want to defend literature, or claim that it has anything to do with reality, if doing so entailed defending reality? Who would want to deny that reality rots, especially social reality? Who would want to defend it, after all it's done to us? Not even Graff dares stray this far from the ranks of virtue. His final point places him right back in the literary-intellectual crowd, turning up his nose with the best of them at what he calls "the regimentation and determinism of a mechanical

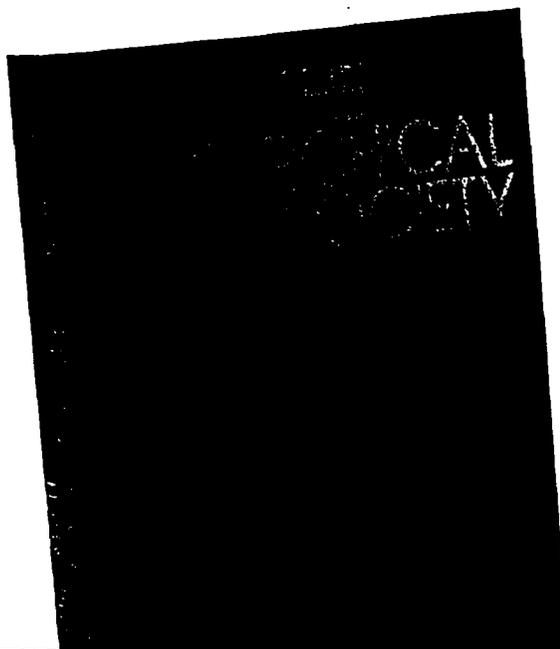
society...mass man's drugged acceptance of his status as a manipulable object."

It is unfortunate that, after arguing so lucidly that literature must not lose touch with social reality, Graff should offer a version of that reality that is not rooted in lived experience but patched together from sociological smatterings. Like so many ideas before them, the lonely crowd, the end of ideology, the mass society, the cultural contradictions of capitalism, and others are appropriated and exaggerated by Graff exactly as though he were just another literary intellectual spinning out an-

other literary theory. He ends up justifying today's antirealist fiction on the grounds that it portrays the utter unreality of our crass consumer society—a justification as hopelessly academic in its own way as those of the worst deconstructionists. We are disappointed, because the rest of *Literature Against Itself* has led us to expect a clearer, more promising conclusion: that there are still human beings living on this planet, and that literature must concern itself with them or disappear.

Martha Bayles, a novelist, teaches writing at Harvard.

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