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RICHARD OHMANN: AN APPRECIATION

Most academics carry with them a mental short list of thinkers who have changed their lives—who have made it impossible to go on believing what they had believed, doing what they had been doing. For me the top of that list has been occupied for some quarter century by Richard Ohmann.

What impresses one most is Dick's courage. As editor of *College English* from 1966-78, Dick was the first editor of a major journal in English studies to devote an issue to what was then called "The Homosexual Imagination" (November, 1974). He was among the first editors to call into question the "literacy crisis" by asking his readers whether in fact they experienced such a crisis, and, if so, how they explained it. (One of the most chastening critiques of the profession I've ever read is the editor's column in which he expresses his disappointment with the insularity of the responses.) Perhaps most importantly, as Marc Bousquet points out in the interview that follows, Dick was among the small but powerful group of academics whose opposition to the war in Viet Nam prompted them to challenge, and change, the MLA hierarchy. For persons of my generation, just a bit younger than Dick, his example was an inspiration.

Another mark of courage is Dick Ohmann's remarkable respect for his readers. To read Ohmann well, to "get" him, you don't have to have read everything he has read in exactly the way he read it. Many recent critics of the profession tend to grab their readers by the lapels and drag them through two centuries of continental idealism before concluding that things are in very bad shape. By contrast, Ohmann (who is entirely capable of leading you not only through idealism but the British analytic tradition as well) does his readers the courtesy of assuming that even if they can't tell their *aufhebung* from their elbow, they are prepared to understand the ways in which the university system (and the place of English Studies within it) is a product of, rather an escape from, the circumstances of capitalism. Moreover, he makes us see that these circumstances are not merely infelicities or corrigible lapses in taste, but rather events in which we are all implicated. Such a rhetorical move is courageous now, but it was stunning in the days of "high theory" when people made their names by being obscure. Although his own immense erudition is everywhere apparent, Dick wears his scholarship easily, almost casually, because for him the objective has always been to advance political awareness rather than his own career.

Dick Ohmann does not regard it as beneath him to write for students. One of the most impressive chapters in *Politics of Letters*, in my view, is "Teaching as Theoretical Practice," an essay that includes the letter to his undergraduate American Lit students at Wesleyan that Dick included with his syllabus, a letter that explains why his course is different from the others they are likely to take, and why he asks the kinds of questions and makes the kinds of assignments that constitute that difference. It is not, he writes, a "totalizing consciousness" to which he aspires for the privileged undergraduates before him. Rather he "starts with something like close reading" (117), encouraging "students to read and ponder literature as

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part of the historical process, and in engagement with some ideas about how history happens and how consciousness and culture interact with material life” (116). Such tactics facilitate seeing ideology as “the bridge between fictional texts and the historical process” (122).

To that end, throughout his work, he encourages us to look critically at the day-to-day material conditions of our existence. He then reads these texts closely, demonstrating how they call us into being. One example is his reading of the CBS Evening News for “Election Eve, 1976,” (“TV and the Sterilization of Politics,” in *Politics of Letters*) highlighting the ways in which “our political reality” is organized into “safe and familiar patterns” (173): the reduction of immense complexity to winner/loser binaries, the election as horse race—or football game—the emphasis on individuals rather than on groups of persons with needs and interests, the presentation of life as a series of problems to which commodified solutions are available. But then, Ohmann reads the juxtaposition of the news with its interspersed commercials as yet another dimension of that organization of political reality and its effect on us. If laxatives can solve problems overnight, why can’t the government? If Nyctol can fix sleeplessness, why isn’t there a pill for peacelessness? In *English in America*, he takes fourteen ordinary textbooks and shows his audience how they create students outside of history who follow directions. These textbooks show students how to write compare/contrast or analysis themes but not to ask about the basis of the comparisons or the assumptions behind the analysis. Thus, Ohmann’s book shows how the generation of students who came of age in the early seventies and went to work as part of the professional managerial class were able to compare/contrast a putative “communist” southeast Asia with a “free” one—or to apply the domino theory—but not to wonder about why they were being asked (or ordered) to do so. Whether he is reading textbooks in composition, cover stories in *Newsweek*, announcements in the Modern Language Association’s *Job Information List*, or the ads in the *New York Times Book Review* and their relation to the “best seller list,” Dick Ohmann is *reading* History.

What he calls “Big History” is never out of his consciousness. In his “English and the Cold War,” for example, he decries the ways in which the new critical “insistence on the autonomy of the literary work” allowed and even encouraged literary theorists and critics to ignore the text’s relation to its world. In “A Case Study in Canon Formation,” in *Politics of Letters*, he and Carol Ohmann look at the rest of the newspapers in which the first reviews of *The Catcher in the Rye* appeared—finding news of the Korean War, and its inherent conflict between two ways of “organizing human beings socially, politically, economically” (46). “The kind of reality in the front pages belonged to one world; the new novel was about to be assimilated into another, into a world of culture, which was split from politics and society” (47). This disengagement is so prevalent that, even in the late nineties, when I read Dick’s essay on “Style and Ideology” with a group of self-identified leftist graduate students, they were uncomfortable with his critique of Updike and Vonnegut as authors “whose talents and instincts are directed into pathways so little likely to create a new consciousness, and help lead us out of the bourgeois reality that both writers powerfully render, and that apparently causes them as much distress as it does me” (106). Their teachers, my colleagues, were still insisting that they separate art from politics.

Because he engages big history, Dick Ohmann simply does not allow himself to be confined by university disciplines. *Selling Culture* and *Politics of Letters* are works of history, sociology and economic analysis as well as of “criticism.” The breadth of the scholarly vision is staggering—but the deft and caring pedagogical hand is everywhere apparent. Whenever a student asks me what Althusser means by structural causality, I recommend the first chapter of *Politics of Letters*—that elegant enactment of the complex relations among railroads, the media, labor, the professional managerial class, Harvard, assessment, literacy and English studies. It was clear to Dick long before it dawned on the rest of us that if we are to understand the culture in which we live, it is necessary for us to see how that culture emerged and grew to be the “dominant.” Hence his monumental studies—*Selling Culture*, an account of the 1890’s as a locus for monopoly capitalism, and the new *Politics of Knowledge*, a reading of the 1970’s, the time/space of multinational capital.

I've noticed a tendency toward memoir lately in Dick's writings and in interviews like the one that follows. I'm glad. We all need to know more about this man from whom we have so much to learn.