

# Book Reviews

**Richard Ohmann.**

**ENGLISH IN AMERICA: A RADICAL VIEW  
OF THE PROFESSION.**

**New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.**

**344 pp. \$15.95.**

Richard Ohmann has impressive credentials in the academic field he surveys. Until recently editor of *College English*, he has published important scholarly work on stylistics and literary theory, and has served as provost of Wesleyan University. None of this would prepare an unwary reader for a "radical" view of the profession; but anyone who has been reading Ohmann and *College English* over the past decade would not be surprised.

The book is in part a collection of Ohmann's reflections on the field from 1966 to 1975, with room for self-criticism and second thoughts. In 1966 he was still ready to accept the liberal humanist justification of the profession, particularly the idea that "literature is in itself a civilizing, moral force," and that the literary profession was self-contained and could make itself more responsive to its own ideals through largely internal adjustments. But his involvement in the anti-Vietnam struggle on campus and his experience as provost were disenchanting, leading to his 1975 position that "institutions don't exist in vacuums or the pure atmosphere of their ideals. They are part of the social order and help to maintain it."

The book pursues this theme through four sections. Three deal with the way the profession studies and teaches literature, the way it teaches writing, and the way it organizes and runs English departments. The fourth deals more generally with the way the modern American university developed in response to the needs of industrial capitalism after the Civil War.

Two major propositions inform the central chapters of the book: that English teaching and scholarship are dominated by the spirit of professionalism, and that withdrawal from politics is a form of politics, the endorsement of the status quo. These are argued not systematically but through examination of such aspects of the profession as the Modern Language Association, the Ad-

vanced Placement Program, the New Criticism, composition textbooks, the English department. Ohmann tries to show that society wants us to “sort out young people for various kinds of work,” thereby helping to justify social inequality, and to provide a literature and criticism that support the social order. In what may be the best chapter in the book, “Teaching and Studying Literature at the End of Ideology,” he maintains that the New Criticism provided this support by denigrating action and presenting the aesthetic experience as a withdrawal into a state of apolitical contemplation.

The chapters on writing underscore the ironic fact that although professors value themselves for their involvement with literature, society values them, if at all, for their (or their juniors’) teaching of writing. The growth of industry and bureaucracy in the nineteenth century made writing a “tool of production and management.” English departments arose largely to instruct a growing university population in writing. Through an analysis of a group of composition textbooks, Ohmann argues that the composition course serves social needs even if it is of dubious value in actually improving writing. The student is treated as though he had no history, no politics, and is compelled to write by the classroom situation, not by interest or desire. The result is to trivialize the whole writing process. Yet such “training” may produce writers who can turn out memos mouthing arguments that are not their own, like good Organization Men. In an ingenious but not entirely convincing chapter, Ohmann analyzes writing by futurists, liberal political scientists, and memo-writers in the *Pentagon Papers*, arguing that these writers and student writers, both, are encouraged to abstract from historical circumstance and to reduce political and moral issues to problems in need of solving.

The section on “The Professional Ethos” takes a knowledgeable look at the way English departments justify themselves to themselves and to others, and suggests that what they actually do is “discipline the young to do assignments, on time, to follow instructions, to turn out uniform products, to observe the etiquette of verbal communication.” In so doing they also eliminate those who can’t adapt. But rather than confront these facts, departments defend themselves by appeal to the professional ethos, like so many other groups. Would-be professionals define themselves as offering society a needed commodity, along with objectivity, expertise, and formal training in a body of necessary knowledge. In return, professionals ask society for independence from the marketplace and from lay evaluation of its work.

This recourse to professionalism is natural in a bourgeois society: apart from financial rewards, professionalism allows people to regain some control over their work and avoid the alienation of labour under capitalism. It is a claim to human dignity — but at a cost to others.

A final section on the history of American universities under industrialism indicates that what Ohmann says about English departments applies to the whole university: for it prepares young people “to do committee work, to make

reports, to synthesize information from diverse sources, to cooperate with others. . . ; in short, to be organization men.”

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Ohmann’s analysis of the situation is acute, and he convinces me that there is a great distance between what we do (serve industrial society and protect our group interests) and what we say we do (serve humanistic values). But the alternative he proposes to the current state of affairs is less compelling, perhaps because it is so sketchily outlined in the book. Ohmann insists that universities cannot be reformed from within, since they exist to serve capitalism. They can only be changed by a “socialist revolution,” one in which enlightened teachers must join.

But the participation of academics in “socialist revolution” poses enormous problems, and Ohmann gives neither detailed practical suggestions nor a theoretical foundation for action. He shows well enough that the university’s service to capitalism is mystified by its self-serving apolitical ideology. But this same ideology somewhat protects it from attacks by the right. Those who attempt to demystify it from within may objectively assist its right-wing opponents, and help destroy an institution that for all its faults provides some protection for radical critics of the society. Ohmann acknowledges this problem (pp. 251-2n, 305, 332) but in my opinion underestimates its seriousness.

Another problem is the place of scholarship. Ohmann treats it as though it had no other function than to justify our claim to professional status and prestige. But even though much or most conventional scholarship is immediately consigned to the archives, as he says, some of it is important; and what about radical literary scholarship? Ohmann scarcely hints that there might be a need for a radical re-examination of literary history and theory, one which would make it possible to imagine new goals for literary scholarship and education. Those who have begun to think about these issues are mostly Marxist or Marxist-influenced. Perhaps to avoid disturbing his non-radical audience, Ohmann never mentions Marx, though his analysis is implicitly Marxist in many respects. The result is a certain vagueness when it comes to positive recommendations.

There is plenty of room for a sequel in which Ohmann expands on his solution and worries less about upsetting his audience. In the meantime, his wise, witty and urbane book should be pondered by anyone concerned about the profession of English.

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