“Breaking new ground”

Wouldn’t it be nice if we could declare a moratorium on the use of certain grand sounding but effectively pernicious phrases and ideas? Near the top of our list would come “critical thinking.” In the context of discussions about education, the phrase is supposed to denote an important intellectual advance beyond the old-fashioned concern with “content.”

Perhaps you remember content? It is an important part of what, in the bad old days, one would go to school to obtain: a mastery of particular names, dates, facts, works, and ideas. Critical thinkers are beyond all that. They substitute sophistication for content, subordinating a concern with mastery of particulars to a superior intellectual attitude. Instead of laboring to understand the works of Dante or Milton, they step back and pontificate about the meaning of reading in general. They no longer worry about getting the details of Plato’s or Descartes’s or Kant’s philosophy right—indeed, they find it risible that anyone could believe that being “right” about such things was ever more than a matter of fashion. Instead, they ponder the philosophy of philosophy. For devotees of “critical thinking,” there is something indescribably naff about mastering any particular body of knowledge or affirming any traditional conclusions. That is what drudges do. The only interesting narrative is the metanarrative of thinking about the process of thinking, preferably from an adversarial vantage point. Thus it is that “critical thinking” is held to be so much more creative than the ordinary, unmodified sort of thinking, just as criticism unredeemed by an antinomian theory of criticism is regarded as a hopelessly pedestrian enterprise.

The origins of the vogue for “critical thinking” can be traced back at least to the progressive theories of education promulgated by John Dewey and his circle. “Routine action,” Dewey wrote in one typical observation, “may increase skill to do a particular thing.... But it does not lead to new perceptions of bearings and connections; it limits rather than widens the meaning-horizon.” What a splendid example of “critical thought” in action is the phrase “meaning-horizon”! Pregnant with the adumbration of significance, it avoids the inconvenience of issuing in any particular thought.

Like so many other bad ideas, however, “critical thinking” got a tremendous boost in the 1960s and 1970s, long after Dewey had departed from the scene. It was then that the progressive ideal was radicalized and went mainstream. The result has been the educational disaster of the last
several decades, when the theory that “ignorance is bliss” finally made it to prime time. We now know what should have been obvious: substitutes for knowledge are not knowledge. Despite its patina of depth (if we may so put it), “critical thinking” is a prescription for superficiality and sophomoric lucubration. It proffers the appearance of knowledge without the substance. Hence the necessity of scare quotes: “critical thinking” is neither genuinely critical nor genuinely thoughtful. It specializes in oppositional poses, not criticism, opaque verbal legerdemain, not thinking.

Nevertheless, the ideology of “critical thinking” continues to be enormously popular. It is the hardiest of hardy perennials. Nor is this surprising. Talk about a labor-saving device! How many hours of difficult study have been circumvented by a timely dose of “critical thinking”? The savings have been incalculable.

Unfortunately, the fatuousness has been incalculable, too. Anyone wanting a vivid illustration of what a devotion to “critical thinking” really means need look no further than “More Ado (Yawn) About Great Books,” an article by Emily Eakin in the April 8 issue of The New York Times’s section “Education Life.” Miss Eakin’s essay is partly an attack, partly a boast. The attack is against stodgy traditionalists who continue to believe that some books are more important than others and that a liberal arts education worthy of the name requires thoughtful acquaintance with the formative works of the Western tradition. Allan Bloom—the academic radical’s favorite villain—comes in for some dismissive words as do groups like the American Council of Trustees and Alumni and the National Association of Scholars for their efforts to combat academic frivolity.

Miss Eakin’s boast is more interesting. She explains that although she graduated as a literature major from a university “with world-renowned experts on Shakespeare, Milton, and the ancient Greeks,” she never attended any of their classes for the simple reason that she didn’t have to: “They weren’t required.”

While my roommates, English majors both, slogged their way through The Norton Anthology of English Literature—Beowulf to Virginia Woolf—I was breaking new ground. I read Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin. Not that I read only theory. These were literature courses, after all. I read lots of novels, too—Thomas Pynchon’s Crying of Lot 49, Günter Grass’s Tin Drum, and Les Guérillères, a lyrical fantasy about a society without men by the French radical lesbian Monique Wittig. I met my degree requirements by taking “Feminist Literary Criticisms” and “Women and the Avant-Garde,” as well as two courses devoted principally to film, and a seminar on Beckett and Nabokov. For my thesis, I wrote on novels by Marguerite Duras, Milan Kundera, and Toni Morrison, all of them published within the last 30 years. I graduated without having read for credit The Odyssey, Paradise Lost, a single play by Shakespeare, or a single novel by Jane Austen, George Eliot, or Henry James.

Miss Eakin can present what is really an indictment of her university as a boast because she believes that by devoting herself to Jacques Derrida and Monique Wittig instead of to Shakespeare and Henry James she was “breaking new ground.” What she was really doing, of course, was recycling a handful of academic clichés. The young men and women who are seduced by the nonsense of “theory” are
told that they are brave intellectual pioneers. Most of them actually believe it. “Literature majors,” Miss Eakin explains,

were the humanities’ Green Berets, an elite corps trained on a rarefied diet of semiotics and deconstruction—the latest French imports—to expose the contradictions, inconsistencies and general sloppiness that had infected not just literature and criticism but all of Western thought since, well, Aristotle at least.

But what about the supreme sloppiness of thinking that a college student battened on nothing but trendy French imports and recent academic pulp is in a position to pass judgment on “Western thought since… Aristotle at least”? Which is worse, the arrogance of this attitude, or the ignorance that makes it possible?

The real burden of Miss Eakin’s essay is to present her experience—a literature major with an ingrained contempt for literature—as normal. She may be right. But a deficiency that is normalized is still a deficiency. A watershed moment came in 1996, when (as we noted in this space at the time) Georgetown University decided that reading Chaucer, Milton, and Shakespeare would henceforth not be required of students majoring in English. Since then, many American universities have cheerfully embraced the bargain-basement intellectual radicalism that sanctions ignorance masquerading as enlightened skepticism.

Miss Eakin does not have to look very hard to find support for her position. She quotes John Guillory, for example, an English professor at New York University:

You can conceive of a curriculum producing the same cognitive skills that doesn’t use literature at all but opts for connecting with the media tastes of the day—film, video, TV, etc. It’s no longer clear why we need to teach literature at all.

We hope that Professor Guillory’s comments are reassuring to parents paying the $30-odd-thousand tuition bills for their children to attend NYU. Nor is Professor Guillory a freak exception. Miss Eakin also quotes Louis Menand, an English professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and a reliable dispenser of the party line for The New York Review of Books. Reflecting on the situation at Amherst College, where English majors have almost no required courses, Professor Menand notes that
at Amherst, they would probably say the purpose of this degree is to develop this faculty known as critical thinking. It doesn’t matter what you read as long as you’re thinking critically. To graduate with a degree in English means you can think critically about almost anything. Paul de Man is in a certain sense as good as Milton.

“...it doesn’t matter what you read as long as you’re thinking critically.” Do you, Dear Reader, believe that? Unless you have been corrupted by the educational establishment, of course you don’t. You know that the nihilistic theories of Paul de Man are in no sense “as good as” the works of Milton, any more than Monique Wittig’s lesbian fantasies are as good as the novels of Jane Austen. But this elementary truth is beyond the ken of Emily Eakin and her like-minded peers. Referring to Professor Menand’s reflections, she acknowledges that “Given how I spent my four years in college, I find this line of reasoning reassuring. I may not have read many Great Books, but I’d like to believe I acquired just as many critical thinking skills reading French theory and contemporary novels instead.”

It is sad as well as ironical that a compelling demonstration that her belief is groundless is that fact that she holds it. Real critical thinking does not operate in a void. It requires the background and nourishment of substantive intellectual and moral commitments, without which it degenerates into a sterile parody. This is why, pace Louis Menand, it matters profoundly what one reads, and why, until very recently, a liberal arts education acknowledged the indissoluble link between content and criticism. Emily Eakin quotes another literature professor who observes that “putting Great Books on the syllabus does not magically produce educated and thoughtful students.” Has anyone ever argued that it did? There are no magic formulae in education. The point is that by allowing students to bypass the intellectual and moral treasures represented by the Great Books for the sake of “critical thinking” is a reliable way of making sure that students will graduate being neither educated nor genuinely thoughtful.