

A Note to the Reader:

I wrote this essay in a pretty much unbroken ten-day stretch during my academic spring break of 1991. I'd been following the "culture wars" of the time with great interest and greater contempt, but what actually incited me to write the piece was my sudden realization, during an English Department curriculum meeting (described in *A Nation Gone Blind*), that if the wars had in fact come to my own college and department, then nobody could possibly be safe from them any more.

That was the meeting when one of my colleagues, with the concurrence of a few others, insisted dismissively that "all things are political" and that "there are no decisions, including literary ones, that aren't political decisions." This meant to me that aesthetic thinking specifically and a sound understanding of the humanities generally were under severe attack indeed, thanks both to zeal and ignorance, and that, if undefended, they would in all likelihood be destroyed.

I was right about the destruction part but wrong about the defending part, for the truth is that no defense of the humanities between 1991 and now has done much good—I don't even know whether *A Nation Gone Blind* itself will prove able to do much good. Anybody who has read that book, though, will recognize a great many of its seeds scattered here, throughout "Despair Notes."

"Despair Notes, though, proved unpublishable, even when, at one point, I cut it in half and simplified its arguments drastically. Part of the reason was that, very much like *A Nation Gone Blind* now, it was an "equal opportunity" essay, that is, offensive equally to right and to left. The truth was—and is—however, that neither right nor left had a good argument about the humanities or the arts. The right thought—and thinks—that the arts are like medicine, with worthy values in them, and that if you take the medicine like a good boy or girl you get the values too.

That's nonsense, of course, on any except the truly superficial plane where any work of art might accidentally prove instructive or helpful in some practical way or other. The more you read and study, and the better your teachers and instructors are, the better educated you'll be, but that's about it. It just happens that a lot of people on the right tend to have gone through more rigorous educations than those on the left. Or used to have done so.

The arguments coming from the left, meanwhile, were utterly at sea in their non-understanding of the arts and therefore in their necessarily and enormously destructive influence on them. Very quickly, literature and the arts had somehow—read *A Nation Gone Blind* to find out how—become little more than message and propaganda to them, though they themselves would seldom either admit or use those terms.

So, since neither right nor left was any help at all, I drew once again, as I always had, on my own education in literature and the arts. This education, having been a good one, allowed me to provide, as the title of section ten of the essay puts it, "A True Defense of Literary Art."

And it was, and is, in point of fact, a true, durable, honest, sound definition. It's true and it works. The only trouble is that no one believed it, or no one could "get" it, or, to put it another way, no one would or could tolerate it. Most Americans in the Age of Simplification, after all (as I quote John R. Searle suggesting in the essay) don't like to think in the first place, and, if they are occasionally willing to do so, they don't want to

have to think about anything too serious or too gloomy.

But that was no problem back when I was getting my literary education from instructors like Scott Elledge, Reed Whittemore, Wayne Carver, Owen Jenkins, Elvin Kintner, and Harriet Sheridan. No one back in those days, at least not in the English Department at Carleton College, shied away from deep thought (though that be a thing diminished now to little more than SNL schtick), no one *then* shied away from the study of opposites, of symbol, irony, paradox, tragedy. Life, after all *was* itself tragic, and, if it weren't, there would *be no arts*, literary or otherwise. Time destroys, art preserves. Life ends, to be replaced by nothingness. And so what do you *do*? Well, as Lily Briscoe keeps saying in *To the Lighthouse*, you make an "attempt at *something*."

No work rises to the level of art—gains art's durability, honesty, its ability to move people—unless it exists in some aspect or in some part as a *memento mori*, unless it arises to some degree or extent from a powerful consciousness of its opposite: that is, absence, death, nothingness. [note on Broch]

It's a tragedy of its own kind that Americans in the Age of Simplification have become and have been encouraged to become (vide *A Nation Gone Blind*) generally uninigorated, unimaginative, uninvestigative, and *deeply* unthinking about art and the arts, *certainly* so about the literary arts. I can almost expect titters of laughter at the Keats passage I'm about to quote, with its "adieu" and "nigh" (though, in this case, without "thee's" or "thy's"). I almost wonder, so gloomy have I grown, who even *reads* Keats any more, except for someone like my friend and colleague Ira Bloomgarden, or my friend and colleague Anya Taylor, the renowned and knowledgeable scholar of the Romantic period. It makes a person feel terribly alone.

For them, then, for me—and, in truth, for us all—here's a bit of what we *used* to read, *used* to be moved by, *used* to gain both sorrow and joy from, *both at once*. Just an example, one out of thousands upon thousands. It's "Ode on Melancholy," third and last stanza:

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
 And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
 Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
 Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips;
 Ay, in the very temple of delight
 Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
 Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
 Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
 His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
 And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

Still, a final note. If the melancholy implied by joy, or the death implied by life can be seen only by "him whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine"—well, then *everybody* ought to be like that person and *everybody* ought to be able to do what that person does. Without that ability—or without that intellectual-emotional training and very even the *habit*—a person can obviously still *see* art, or *view* it, or *read* it, perhaps even *like* it. But such a person can't *experience* it (once again, vide

A Nation Gone Blind) in the full way that it alone, *as art*, is capable of being experienced. For those frightened or alarmed at this prospect—this prospect of having to see darkness in light, sorrow in joy, absence in presence, ugliness in beauty—I suppose I should add that, well, a person doesn't have to do it *all* the time, that a person can do it *some* of the time and still be artistic or conceivably even *an* artist. The only thing is that I don't really believe it. What I believe, even though it may be I alone who does so, is that you've got to do it *all* the time—or else be done with art.

EL
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**DESPAIR NOTES:
HOW DECONSTRUCTIONISM HAPPENED, AND
WHAT IT REALLY MEANS FOR THE ACADEMY,
FOR THE ARTS, AND
FOR THE NATION
(1991)**

Now, for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lyeth. For, as I take it, to lye is to affirme that to be true which is false.

—Sir Philip Sydney, “An Apologie for Poetrie”
(1595)

1

In Search of a Life Already Lost

Fair warning. It's going to take me a minute to get started here, and I'm going to have to talk about myself while doing it. Insofar as apologies are due, I offer them.

For a long time, I knew I wanted to be a writer. When I finished high school in 1959, I was pretty certain of it, and when I left college four years later I was more so. I inclined by then toward the view that writing and study could strengthen one another, and so, for better or worse, I devoted the next eight years, on and off, to graduate school instead of, say, joining the navy or hitchhiking across Asia. Nineteen-seventy-one came around, by which time I was thirty years old and holder of a new degree. I found a teaching job at a college willing to take me, and there, after two uninterrupted decades, I still am.

Those twenty years weren't ideal, but they worked: during them, I taught, and I wrote. Certainly I could have wished the teaching to have been less than it was and the

writing to have been far more, since at bottom writing was what I wanted and teaching was a way to get it. Still, I did both, and the first point I want to make is this: it seemed possible during those years to lead a literary life inside the university, an imperfect and often difficult life but one nevertheless that was honest and productive and had intellectual integrity and was genuinely a literary life. My second point, though—the despairing one that accounts for my writing this essay—is that it now begins to seem that this may not be true for much longer, and that the whole brief and valuable if unexotic and certainly fragile semi-miracle of such a literary life may be about to collapse yawpishly and foolishly and disastrously about my ears. Or may already have done so.

Before getting to that, though, a few more words are necessary on the subject of my last forty semesters. If a huge cultural and literary crisis is in truth afoot inside the university, as I think it is, it must have discernible origins in the past, and I think that some of those can be found in certain unglamorous old questions about what's taught and what's not taught in college. From the start, my job involved me in endless debates about the "curriculum," and more specifically about what makes literature courses an indispensable and significant part of education and therefore—by extension—of culture. By the time the 1980's arrived and questions like these suddenly became newsworthy because of things like the "rising tide of mediocrity" report and the influence of figures like William Bennett and Allan Bloom—by then, I'd been dancing around that particular campfire for a number of years and felt that I knew it well—the "cultural values and the humanities" campfire. The fire leapt up high indeed, but largely because the conservative arguments about it were poor ones, its flames shed little light. Now it's 1991, however, and the campfire I danced around seems of minor consequence, for now it's the entire house, attic to cellar, that's ablaze.

In 1971, a proposal was made in my department to revitalize the required college literature courses by thematizing them, thus making them more "relevant" to the students. The courses in question consisted of works arranged chronologically from antiquity to the present, and admittedly there was more reading in them than the current crops of students could keep up with. The proposal, however, wasn't simply to lighten them but to teach them under the rubrics of such themes as "The Literature of Cities," "The Image of Woman in Literature," "Politics, Government, and Law in Literature," and "The Author as Philosopher."

I submit that I'm in no way opposed to cities, women, politics, government, law, or philosophers as such. That proposal, nonetheless, alerted every fiber of opposition in me, and I wrote an impassioned memo against it, the subject being "what the purposes and merits of literature really are."

My argument began with an assertion of what literature *isn't*. The idea that "literature," as an academic discipline, may in fact not really exist at all first occurred to me in college, later got me into a certain amount of trouble in graduate school, and by now, I know, has been written about widely. Whatever the merits or demerits of his book overall, the subject underlies Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987), and it's also deftly tucked into the corners of Reed Whittlemore's memoir-essay in *Delos* magazine (Spring 1989) on William Lyon Phelps of Yale. More entertainingly still, the parlous history of "English" is chronicled in Alvin Kernan's *The Death of Literature* (1990). Kernan manages to write with unflagging charm while arguing not that the house of

literature is ablaze from every window, but that it has now, today, already collapsed entirely.

My departmental memo, under the hoary date of December 13, 1971, went, in part, as follows:

Literature's only real claim to security in the academy is precisely that it cannot be defined. Literature is not history, it is not philosophy, it is not sociology, it is not psychology, it is not anthropology, it is not law, it is not ethics, it is not current affairs. Of course to some extent it is made up of all of these, but obviously it is none of them solely. It has some mysterious (or not so mysterious) ingredient or impulse that makes it unique—and also that makes it troublesome, interesting, compelling, exciting, rewarding and valuable. Literature can't be pigeon-holed.

That fact is its only defense.

The memo went on to argue that literature, if not “topical,” is in a larger sense “informational,” and that this natural and valuable quality in it can only be diminished and harmed by the thematizing of courses:

Literature is like a child: it will enchant you if you don't demand that it do so; but if you make the demand first, little will come of it. One can't help but discuss war in the *Iliad*, social breakdown in *Hamlet*, woman in *The Oresteia*, political blindness in *Antigone*—and we are all free, in fact beckoned, to do so. But the important thing is that we will be discussing these matters in the richest and most evocative of settings, in a milieu out of which they naturally and meaningfully arise, as a part of a literary, human, and far-reaching experience. This pattern, I think, is essential and inevitable, but to reverse it is enervating and paltry. Clytemnestra and Athena lead us to Gloria Steinem, but Gloria Steinem does not lead us to Aeschylus and *The Oresteia*. To announce ahead of time that one will approach Homer to discuss war, or Sophocles to discuss alienation, or Shakespeare to discuss politics or philosophy, or Defoe or Dickens to discuss cities is to make of literature something paltry and servile, something dead rather than alive, by sacrificing the whole for the small part, like a physician who lauds himself for saving the leg while the patient dies.

Literature teaches humility; we discover through it that we are not unique. We discover in it that our problems have been the problems of others as well, in other places and other times. This is a process of enlightenment, one that teaches us to recognize our own world more clearly; it opens us out, shows us options—a high service indeed, and far better than the subtle but grave and mean-spirited injustice of deciding for our students in *advance* what we think they *should* find in literature: for to do this latter is to narrow and limit meaning, and thus education, rather than to enrich and

broaden it. Modernize, narrow down, thin out, or in any case go ahead and change the reading lists. But don't *label* them, and, with a few quick and harmless words, cut out their living hearts.

2

An *Ethical* Collapse

An antique memo, then, from deep in my files. It has obviously dated superficially, but its central argument seems to me to have remained intact in its stance against a strain of thinking two decades ago that has helped bring on the crisis befalling us now. One of the unexpectedly revealing—and predictably dispiriting—things about the memo is the extent to which, when I wrote it, I could obviously still trust my colleagues to concur in certain basic assumptions about the donative nature of literature and the essential honesty of it, with the result that, in developing what amounted to a simple institutional defense of “English” courses, I was able to appeal *to* them through attitudes we held in common rather than being forced (as I know I'd be now) into a desperate attempt to find common premises and terms for debate. A memo of the same kind today, in short, would require much greater offensive stamina and ruggedness of assault—it would have to be an attack from outside, not a defense from within—if it were to hope for even a slim chance of success.

And, with these observations in mind, something even more notable about the memo is that it reveals no need to depart from its essentially pragmatic appeal to its audience and to develop, instead, the much stronger *ethical* argument that lies entirely unmentioned under the surface of the practical one.

Ethical? I said awhile back that I took a teaching job because through it I could find a literary life that was honest and productive and had what I called intellectual integrity. But consider. As I mentioned, by the time I took that job I was thirty years old, and therefore, assuming that I'd begun studying literature when I entered college at age seventeen, I had been learning about it for thirteen years. Other people had been studying other things, or had already studied them, for equal or longer periods of time. There were numerous things, of course, that one could have made the decision to study. I, however, like my colleagues, had devoted myself to the study of literature rather than, say, law, government, politics, philosophy, history, cities, or women, whether in psychology, biology, philosophy, or history. By what convincing reason, then, could any of us, not having studied those things, now claim ourselves suited or fit to teach them, or even to be seriously desirous of doing so? Or turn the tables for a moment. If I or my colleagues were in fact to make such claims, or act on them, then by what argument or right could any of us hope to deny others, who had studied other things, when they in turn chose to declare themselves suited and fit and eager to teach not the things *they* had studied, but to teach literature instead?

Quaint or dated, scholastic or old-fashioned as this argument may seem to many, I myself consider it (I'm reduced to the ungainliness of numbers) to be 1) an ethical argument, 2) a strong argument, 3) an argument having to do with intellectual integrity in general, and also with the intellectual integrity of the university, and 4) an argument the general sweeping under the rug of which has had a great deal, though not all, to do with speeding up the decline of humanities education in this country into what Fred Siegel called

recently in *The New Republic* “an intellectual backwater.”

In re-writing my old memo now, in other words, I wouldn't just disagree with my thematizing colleagues but I would accuse them of being unethical, or at least ethically inconsistent; of being bad teachers; of being hypocritical about education; and of advocating the abandonment of the intellectual integrity of life inside the university that, supposedly, they had also devoted themselves to in the years of their own study: a life that I, for one, had chosen to follow for the very reason that it *did* possess integrity while also being literary, it being one which I would not now happily see disassembled and abandoned for any except the most nearly absolute, imperative, and commanding of reasons.

What those reasons could justly or reasonably be, I don't know, although they *seem* to be everywhere around me today: reasons suddenly allowing literary people to teach anything at all, rather than what they have studied and therefore what they know; or reasons allowing literary people to discard the very idea that what they know *is* the result of what they have studied; or reasons, even worse, allowing them to abandon—for this is what's coming, as we'll see—the very bedrock idea itself that they *can* in fact qualify themselves to teach literature by means of the study of it, and causing them, instead, to embrace the idea that it's the unalterable fact of what they *are*, not the alterable fact, through study, of what they *know*, that becomes the determiner of what they are qualified to do.

Today, in 1991, and rightly enough, it is a commonplace thing to acknowledge and decry, throughout much of the society we live in, the tyranny of racism, social and political injustice, and various institutionalized oppressions or denials of individual rights, freedoms, and dignities. These, without question, at least to my mind, are sufficiently absolute, imperative, and commanding reasons for the taking of social or political action in the interest of bringing about justice or reform. Here and now, however, this isn't the issue before me. I am not at the moment engaged in the bringing about of such reform, but I am writing instead a literary essay, with literary concerns, asking literary questions. And at this point, the urgent, central, and demanding question becomes this: not why is it that people have taken action against social and political evils, but why has it come about that the existence of social and political evils—in 1971 as in 1991—has so clearly resulted now in an abandonment of intellectual and literary integrity inside the university of the kinds I'm speaking of: the abandonment of empiricism as a basis of literary knowledge; the loss of the previously understood relationship between study and what one thereby knows; the confusion between what one knows and what one is; and the jettisoning of the rock-bottom idea itself that the study of literature *can* result in the knowledge of literature, or, even if it can, that such knowledge can in itself have value?

Why, in other words, has literature inside the university been tossed, pummeled, traduced, maligned, abused, exploited, denied, misrepresented, put under suspicion, calumniated, twisted, tortured, cursed, trampled, lynched, and tossed out the window—and all this by those inside the university who are themselves literary people? Or *perhaps* are literary people. That they are said to be literary people but are not acting like it; that behavior of the kind I have just mentioned has been a long time in gestation; that I myself saw it starting in a much smaller way as far back as 1971; that it has been battening on itself quietly and steadily since then—these things don't suggest to me [*Note 1: As, in Tenured Radicals (1990), his book on these and additional aspects of the university crisis, they seem*

to suggest to Roger Kimball] that I'm witness to a long-dreaded coup brought about at last by a conspiracy of subversives and radicals from "outside." But they do, unarguably, suggest to me the following: that I now routinely spend my daily working life amidst people who seem to think they are literary people, and who are certified as such, but really are not; who seem to think they understand what literature is, and the authentic function it has inside the liberal arts, but who really do not; who believe themselves to have received literary educations, but really have not. These things being true, I can only conclude that literary education in general must have drastically failed at some point *before* I started teaching in 1971; and that, consequently, the possibility of finding a literary life inside the university that was both productive and intellectually honest had in fact *already* grown doomed somewhere around the time I took my own first job; so that, when I took that job, imagining that I had found those hopes realized in it, I was in truth living only illusorily in a last, small, borrowed, doomed, old-fashioned, left-over moment.

3

The Shambles

And so, by a long, wearying, two-decade path, I come to the here and now, an unpleasant time of widely publicized and apparently increasing crisis that has arisen at least in part because so few either on the political right or the political left seem to know what literature is, what it's for, why they "teach" it, or how to do so. Ours is a time when "English professors" have never been more newsworthy, when names like Stanley Fish or Frank Lentricchia are raised from the quiet obscurity of the departmental phone directory to appear, along with sensationally outrageous quotes, in national magazines for the clucking perusal of the many. It is a time when casual perusers can gaze to their hearts' content at shame-stained departmental bedsheets hung out in essays, columns, and articles in *New York Magazine*, *The New Republic*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Newsweek*. And it is a time when John R. Searle, near the end of a long essay in *The New York Review of Books*, under the heading "The Storm over the University," can mention, almost in passing, that "One of the most depressing things about educated people today is that so few of them, even among professional intellectuals, are able to follow the steps of a simple logical argument" (December 6, 1990).

National calamity? Collapse of the learned life? Generalized intellectual chaos and decay? Maybe so. I have my own hunches and fears, my own observations, my own small range of experiences, my own rather delicate structures of reasoning. Those who disagree with me, however, are opponents fierce with conviction and zeal, are coming rapidly to outnumber me, and—most awful of all—when I set out to argue with them, reject implacably not only my chosen terms of debate, but debate itself as being corrupt and tainted *a priori*. In hoping to argue against such as these, the question becomes not *what* I'm to think or say, but what I'm to base what I think or say *on*. Who, after all, in the eyes or esteem of such opposers, am I? And what, in the eyes of such enemies, do *I* know?

For the record, I am an "English professor" whose job, as I understand it through training, background, and instinct, is to contribute to and help preserve the vitality and

significance of the liberal arts through that aspect of them that is a literary aspect; and—debate or no debate, shared logic or no shared logic—I know that in what I see going on around me this aim is hardly being served and in fact is being ridiculously disserved.

Like a kind of media event—conscienceless, aggressive, content-empty, self-battering—what’s going on around me has the quality of being at once amorphous, greedy, and omnivorous, gathering into its great maw whatever “causes” or “issues” happen to drift within range, literary or not, germane to a baccalaureate curriculum or not. For some time now, as I know only too well, I have come to cringe with something between fear and revulsion at the various terms, phrases, shibboleths, code words, neologisms, absolutisms and labels that have become an inescapable and logic-replacing part of my daily working life: “multiculturalism,” “genderism,” “agism,” “racism,” “political correctness,” “deconstructionism,” “womanism,” “gay rights,” “the canon,” “homophobia,” “the curriculum of inclusion.” Only too intimately, also, I have become familiar with the insidious, devious, and ingenious psychology (and literary theory) that accompanies, reinforces, and underlies at least the more extreme manifestations and absolutisms of this “revolution” in attitude and behavior. I know, for example, in the weird new world of “us-versus-them-ism,” that white males (here’s *my* entrance) are categorical as world-class oppressors, prevaricators, and bigots, and that this includes *all* white males. I know too that all whites are racist, even if they don’t know it, and that denial of this is the strongest proof that they are. I know, that is, that what you *do* doesn’t count anymore, but what you *are* is what matters, and that there’s nothing whatsoever you can do about what you *are*. I know that the only hope you’ve got is to become one of *us*, but I also know not only that there’s no conceivable way for you to become one of *us*, but, even if there were, *us* wouldn’t have you. I know, also, about the yawning epistemological abyss of critical-theory nothingness left behind by the literary deconstructionists and others, showing that there’s no meaning in books, by extension that there’s no meaning in any thought-system, by extension again that there’s no meaning in anything. I know that therefore (don’t search for the logic; it isn’t there) *I* am free to insist upon and teach *my* meaning, *we* are free to insist upon and teach *our* meaning, *us* is free to insist upon and teach *us*’s meaning. And as well as I know the air I breathe or the underwear I pull on in the morning, I know that “everything is political” and that “all actions are political actions.” I know, as I have known now for some time, that to deny this is impossible, and that to claim to be non-political is itself in fact a political action revealing a vast, implicit, and (ipso facto) oppressive political agenda. In ways such as these, I know that half truths are cobbled into the absolutism of whole ones, and that discourse gives way to loggerheads and chaos. I know, for example, that to teach *Hamlet* is a political action, and I know also that because nothing has any meaning, *Dagwood and Blondie* is as meaningful and substantive as *Hamlet* and *Othello* and *Lear* and *The Iliad* combined, and I know, also and besides and once again, that Shakespeare and Homer, lest this be overlooked, were male, were white, and are dead. I know the following: that Western Civilization is a construct, that it is therefore a “text,” that it is therefore meaningless, that it is therefore oppressive and unfair and unjust, and that (all this clearly proven) it should thus be done away with entirely and replaced with a tenor saxophone, three bongo drums, and the lower left canine of the Wife of Bath. I know that as a result of the words I am writing, I will be labeled reactionary, racist, homophobic, oppressive,

deluded, elitist, hegemonic, misogynistic and even—words in their own way simple and refreshing—snob and pig. I know that I am dismayed and unnerved at this prospect, but also that I choose not to be intimidated by it into writing no more words or into striking out those I have written. Even though saying it will undoubtedly pass for poor currency, if at all, among those whom I have offended, I believe that I know fairly well what I am, and I can recite (for the record, I suppose, again) what that is: politically and intellectually a liberal in a long tradition of liberalism; a solidly trained (good teachers, family backing, luck in schools) professor of English; a pragmatic believer philosophically in the logical role of evidence as guide to subsequent thought or action; a literary person who writes novels and essays. Incomplete, certainly; but whatever I am, I know also that never in my literary life, ever, have I been witness to a greater or more disheartening outpouring of folly, half-logic, factionalism, self-interest, hypocrisy, anti-intellectualism, and text-book Orwellian indignities to the language than I have seen coming from those of my colleagues who, in the service of their frustrated, naive, and corrupted idealism, now abandon empiricism and its attendant logic, subvert and emasculate the very English Department that they depend upon for their existence, sacrifice the inconvenient principles of privacy, the self, and individual freedom, not to mention of liberal education, and fling themselves into a death-embrace with the very tyrannies of the repressive and unresponsive general culture that they still, with blind and self-deluded righteousness, believe themselves to be opposing.

4

Rudderless in the Aftermath

For such a grotesque situation—insofar as it's a literary situation—to have come about at all seems to me explicable only if one understands that those involved in its manifestation never were literary people in the first place, never did understand what literature was, and, to top things off, hated and resented literature to boot. Such, it seems, were the invisible hints hidden in my memo of twenty years ago.

Of the commentators I've read recently on the subject of the wreckage, one of the most consistently perceptive is Alvin Kernan, although I find it necessary to part ways even with him at a certain crucial point. Still, in providing a lay primer on deconstructionism, he is entertaining, useful [*Note 2. Although David Lehman's fascinating Signs of the Times: Deconstructionism and the Fall of Paul de Man, which I read only after writing this essay, does at book length what Kernan does only more briefly*], and unsurpassed in his fearlessness in naming things for what they are. "Ours is a strange time," he writes, "but it has in it. . . few things stranger than the violence and even hatred with which the old literature was deconstructed by those who earn their living teaching and writing about it." "What is remarkable and calls for explanation," he goes on, "is the speed and the thoroughness with which the deconstructive argument swept the literary world, [like] measles through a primitive tribe."

The causes of such a swift and contagious resentment? No one I know of, other than Kernan, has had the nerve to talk openly about one such probable cause, this having to do with the essentially taboo matter of social class in literature faculties. Getting a Ph.D.,

Kernan points out, for most who do it, is a swift way upward in social class, bringing with it the class insecurity that often accompanies risings of such a kind. In university literature, as in dentistry or embalming, doubts among the insecure as to the true respectability and prestige of what one does lead to a desire for the further “professionalizing” of it. In literary affairs, the greatest prestige, of course, has traditionally been accorded the creators of (and the created works of) literature themselves rather than their critics and explicators. But the nagging insecurity of the large and late crop of socially-risen new professors, Kernan suggests, determined them to wrest the security of that admiration and prestige away from other people or other things and keep it for themselves instead: which they did first through “[the] discrediting of the old masterpieces of literature” (this is where deconstructionism came in handy), and then, beginning as far back as the 1960’s, by exercising “criticism’s literary power grab,” a process that successfully elevated and metamorphosed criticism from a merely secondary and supporting genre into a “primary form,” in fact into *the* primary form, itself holding the happily unassailable status that works of literature—now magically deconstructed, emptied, and subservient—once held.

A socially immature but status-aspiring professoriate, then, one that through “[a] number of circumstances” had already been molded into or pulled toward the political left—this brought about what Kernan presents as the case study of a “revolution” inside literary academia: “The remaking of literature may have been in some large sense historically inevitable,” he writes, “but the immediate energy that drove it forward was classically Marxist, a class struggle within the literary institution for the means of intellectual production.”

Fair enough. But what Kernan’s otherwise convincing class-analysis of the revolt still doesn’t do is explain entirely why it’s the *literature* that gets revolted against, rather than, say, its power-holding old guard of previous interpreters and escorts: it still doesn’t satisfactorily explain, that is, the astonishing hatred and resentment of literature itself that’s revealed in this weird emasculating, debunking, and dethroning of it by its own erstwhile servants and guardians—now its vengeful and booted masters. Revolutions in criticism are necessary for criticism to stay alive, and even for literature to stay alive. The purpose of this revolution, though, seems to be simply to kill the latter altogether.

The logic of such an aim is patently crazed, akin not to fighting over the golden eggs, but to the purposeful killing of the goose instead. I grew up on a farm, and I know that a good goose-farmer would never do such a thing—would husband the goose, even amid strife—and that only someone ignorant of the difficult raising and true nature of geese—a fool as to geese—would do so. A homely analogy, but applicable. Deconstructionism is thought to be a literary phenomenon, yet it makes sense at all only if understood not to be a literary movement at all; to have nothing to do with literature whatsoever; to have been brought about by people who don’t understand literature, don’t know what it is, what it is for, or what it does, either inside the liberal arts or, from the look of things, outside of them either.

What Is a Revolution *For*?

Simply asked, how could a literary person set out to kill literature any more than a goose-understander could set out to kill the golden goose? And if such a person—or people—did in fact do so, how could their actions be called a literary revolution when so obviously they're an *anti*-literature revolution?

The long history of the arts has been, and rightly, a long history of uprisings, palace revolts, and wholesale revolutions, but this one distinguishes itself in being not a fight for the betterment of an art, not a fight for the energizing or liberating of an art, nor a fight against effete-ness or misdirection in an art, but a fight, instead, against the viable and tenable existence of an art itself. *Down with poetic diction*, said the Romantics as they produced—poetry; *down with the medieval drama*, said the Elizabethans as they produced—drama; *down with the rhetoric of loose-lined verse*, said the Imagists as they produced—poetry again. *Down with the whole of literature itself*, say the deconstructionists as they produce—criticism! criticism! criticism! Where, in this sad new world, will deconstructionist writers, poets, playwrights, novelists come from? Where will deconstructionist literature (a contradiction in terms) come from? In the most fierce art-battles of the past—in Dadaism, for example, or even in today's so-called Deconstructivist architecture—the critical battles have been fought in the end by art and through art, with art as statement, medium, and result, with art, finally, as the purpose itself. In the case of deconstructionism, however: not art, but, instead, a self-stifling dead end. Literary art, under deconstructionism's attack, is repudiated as meaningless and empty. How, then, could a deconstructionist ever become, say, a producing novelist or poet? Clearly, he or she could do so only in one of two ways: either as a fool, embarking upon an activity already shown to be meaningless; or as an Orwellian hypocrite, declaring there to be no meaning in any literary work *except* that of the deconstructionist, it alone, by some mystical flourish of exemptive magic, to be taken as cogent and suasive, all *others* being demonstrably arbitrary, vacant, and empty.

Every revolution takes place to gain power, and the merit of any revolution, therefore, can finally be judged only after determining what the revolution seeks power *for*. Deconstructionism, in its measles-epidemic form, is generally seen as having been embraced most eagerly and programmatically by the political left inside the university, the theory's "revolutionary" tenets creating both excuse and irresistible opportunity for the application of leftist ideology inside the liberal arts curriculum. The extent to which this adoption has been transparently hypocritical is not often remarked on, although it seems to me that this may in the end prove to have been its most fundamental characteristic. Put most innocuously, however, the fact is this: that the evolution of deconstructionism from a minor literary-linguistic theory to a widely embraced thought-model used to help destroy the very strength, meaning, prestige, and integrity of the liberal arts rests, at the least, upon a simple non-sequitur. To see this, simply construct an elementary syllogism in which, for the sake of argument, you grant the first premise: no text has meaning. Allow, also, the second premise to follow: since a text is a thought-system, then, by logical analogy, no thought-system has meaning. So far, so good; the argument is watertight and intact. But by

what conceivable logic does the conclusion then follow, no thought-system having meaning, that *I* am therefore free to insist upon the truth of *my* thought-system, presenting it not just as a truth but an absolute one? The logic is as hobbled as declaring that since Bruno is a dog, and since all dogs have four legs, I am free to jaywalk. All animals are equal, one remembers at this appropriate moment, but some are more equal than others.

Back a ways, I quoted John R. Searle as saying, “One of the most depressing things about educated people today is that so few of them, even among professional intellectuals, are able to follow the steps of a simple logical argument.” Perhaps so, lamentably enough. And maybe there lies the true and terrible key to the underlying causes of what we’re seeing: the new professoriate is poorly educated, the children of a late, failing, intellectually ruinous age. But even if so, other questions remain to be answered, in whatever atmosphere of gloom or despair. The revolution may have risen from a context of absent or chopped logic, but it exists nevertheless. And if it exists, it can’t be denied that it seeks power. So the question still remains—whether or not the revolutionaries *themselves* know the answer—of what the revolution, set in motion and possessing now its own internal if blind logic, really seeks power *for*.

The usual answer, as I’ve said, is power for the advocacy and implanting of leftist ideology and values—a fact that so appalls Roger Kimball as to cause him to build his otherwise often fascinating *Tenured Radicals* on a foundation of argumentative sand; that impels Dinesh D’Souza, in his *Illiberal Education* (1991), to create an impassioned description of the resultant perversion of education in the liberal arts; and that leads Alvin Kernan to synopsise deconstructionism by explaining that, in it, “texts. . . are used to demonstrate the absurdity of any absolute truth and the duplicity of any attempt to pretend that there is or can be one,” concluding (via the familiar non sequitur) that “Texts have become primarily political documents,” a change resulting in “the radical politicization of literature.”

Power for leftism, then, seems still to be the answer to our question, at least for the moment, with results that are predictably unsatisfactory. Such an answer suggests that the revolution will presumably be deemed a good thing in the eyes of those holding the values of the political left, and a bad thing in the eyes of those holding the values of the political right. Simple enough, as far as it goes, but what, one asks, about those who hold neither? Or those who hold some of each? Or those who now hold one but in time will hold another? Or what about the changes that are likely to occur—that will *necessarily* occur—in those “values” themselves? Just exactly what, by the way, *are* “values,” anyway? Are they what you *do*, or are they what you *believe*? Is the difference clear, or can it ever be made so? Can you have values without *proving* that you have them? And what obligation (make way here for “political correctness”) is there to do so? Can you *say* you have them and yet *not* have them? (Of course.) Can you be accused of not having them when in fact you do (ditto), or of having them when in fact you don’t (and again)? How, either way, could you hope ever to vindicate yourself? Could you, for example, be heir to an oil well or a chain of department stores and still hold “the” values (yes), and, in such a case, how would you prove that you did? Is any proof, for that matter, ever enough? And isn’t this a despairing, foolish, corrosive and even dangerous business, all this talk about *values*: this mixed up and egregious confusing of them, I mean, with the *curriculum*?

6

And What Is a Liberal *Education* For?

Horrible, horrible, oh, most horrible. There's nothing wrong with having a politicized faculty, and in fact much can be good about it—assuming that they *are* a faculty and know what it *means* to be one (and what it *doesn't* mean). A politicized curriculum, however—a politicized pedagogy—which is what we're in fact talking about here and have been talking about all along, is guaranteed by its very nature to produce factionalism, intolerance, coercion, woe, injustice, insignificance, decline, bigotry, deceit, and intellectual death.

It's true that the confirmation, acquisition, or altering of values may very well be a result of a liberal education. But the imposition, insistence upon, or “teaching” of them isn't and must never be the purpose or requirement of such an education.

The sole, the only, and the invaluable function of a liberal education among a free people is not to coerce or dictate or “teach” either thought or values; but its great purpose is, instead, to stimulate, enhance, and protect the *possibility* of a freedom, variety, depth, and responsiveness of thinking by means of which, in turn, values may—without any *guarantee* that it will happen—then be weighed and sifted, modified or rejected, embraced, created, confirmed, or eschewed.

An imposed value is no value. An indoctrinated thought is no thought. Both are backwardness and prison. I am reduced to the uttering of what I take to be commonplace, obvious, and fundamental principles like these because there are now so many around me—among them my own colleagues—who appear in fact not to understand them, to be unaware of them entirely or scornful of them: whose own educations must therefore have been so sufficiently corrupted or faithless that they now lack an understanding, as I said earlier about literature itself, of what the liberal arts *are*, of what they are *for*, or of what in fact gives them their value and strength.

Whatever the reasons, these people reveal themselves unable or unwilling to understand or preserve certain fundamental and vital distinctions, the most salient and crucial being the distinction itself between *ideas* and *values*. I creep inexorably closer at this point to a devoutly abhorred discussion of American popular culture, since the distinction between ideas and values is one which in that culture is routinely and purposely obfuscated and exploited in the interests of creating public apathy, ignorance, and pliability, and through these the heightening of sales. That, however, is anything but a reason why the same corruption of thought should be tolerated or lauded within the university or inside the liberal arts. The distinction is an easy one to see and a hard one to honor, but the maintaining of it is essential to intellectual survival. In a word, values are what you believe, ideas are what you know. What qualifies a professor, what accounts for the privileges, rights, and obligations that a professor holds or is given—the right to set course requirements, for example, to give passing or failing grades—is what that person *knows*, has studied, is expert in, can demonstrate, be accountable for and a judge of, can think about with completeness and facility, can in turn be tested and examined on. But *belief*? It plays no role, no more than it plays a role, say, in the work of a bricklayer, auto mechanic,

or thoracic surgeon.

I can hear the hisses, shouts of outrage, the sound of ripe tomatoes falling to the stage from which I imagine myself speaking. *Knowledge and belief?* my revolutionary auditors cry out. *Fool! They're inseparable!* All right, then; well enough. Finally, perhaps, they're inseparable. I am asking only, however, that knowledge come first and that belief—if it will at all—be allowed to come resultingly; I am asking only, in other words, insofar as possible, that belief be left outside the classroom, as the instructor be, too, in any way other than as an expert asker of questions should missteps in student logic occur, or as an expert rememberer should germane evidence be overlooked—that the instructor be left outside except as a sort of walking footnote or library, experienced guide, thesaurus, or perhaps reference encyclopedia. Nothing more. An imposed belief, after all, is a belief accepted out of ignorance, and the imposition of belief is tyranny. If belief—values—are to arise in a student, they can do so meaningfully only out of what the student knows. Values can't be taught. They can only be found.



Americans today, however, even educated ones, tend not to believe any of what I've just said, and their continued confusion of values with knowledge, their inability to see the distinction between the two, and their vague notions about which is the cause or foundation of which, are nurtured by a badly compromised, unprestigious, and often dishonest educational system as well as by an extraordinarily powerful mass culture that programmatically encourages and reinforces intellectual passivity, denigrates both knowledge and learning, routinely depraves “values” by putting them at the service of the shallowest banalities, and, above all, seeks unrelentingly to make thinking and feeling synonymous. It is the last of these, long ago sown in American history and now reaped in the poor harvest that passes for our intellectual or university culture today, that plays the most obvious role in the current crisis and that serves at last to bring me back to the earlier and unanswered question of what it is the present revolution seeks power *for*.

And the real answer isn't that the revolutionaries seek power for leftism, but that they seek it instead for *themselves*, and that they do this for one reason and one reason only, which is that they *believe* they are right. Whether in fact they *are* right—whether their values are actually good ones or bad ones—is a question of no relevance here (more in a minute about why not), but of crucial and immediate relevance is the inestimable destructiveness of what's happened, even though, demonstrably, it may have happened largely out of ignorance. In bringing closer the destruction of the liberal arts by removing power from the sources of knowledge and putting it into the hands of the guardians of knowledge; in showing themselves ignorant that the first purpose of education is the gaining of knowledge and not the gaining of values; in revealing that they don't know which of these comes from which, or what the difference between the two is: in doing these things, the revolutionaries demonstrate that they don't in fact know what liberal education is, that they themselves therefore mustn't have experienced it, and that as a result of course they don't know how it works. In a word, a little bit like Mrs. O'Leary's cow blithely kicking over the lantern because she didn't like the look of it, they don't have the faintest

idea of what it is they're doing.

7

Power: Its Vagaries and Vulgarities

Power is a fine thing when it's in a good cause; but causes come and go, are mutable, and change. Books, for all their faults, are less corruptible than people, which is one of the reasons why throughout history books—or their equivalent—have been referred to for the sake of certain kinds of reminders. What I have just uttered are incomplete truths, but truths nevertheless. What's happening in the university today is that power is being detached from that which is less mutable and is being welded to that which is more mutable; in the more specific case of deconstructionism and its varied constituents, it is being detached from books and being claimed by people. The result of this reversal of the current, of this standing of the more stable hierarchy of things on its head, is that the process of education is being replaced by a process, if it really can be called that—perhaps it should be called an “atmosphere”—of coercion, increasing suspicion and innuendo, and something tantamount to intellectual thuggery.

Others have chronicled and described this atmosphere more vividly and thoroughly than I would ever hope to, among them Fred Siegel, who, in a recent article in *The New Republic* (February 18, 1991, pp. 28, 30), captures a sense of the “reversal of the current” that I've spoken of:

Stanley Fish, chair of Duke's English department, professor of law, and self-described “academic leftist,” is giving a dazzling performance. The overflow audience sits rapt as Fish, who made his reputation as a critic of Renaissance poetry and a theorist of “self-consuming artifacts,” demonstrates the inability of words to represent reality. Time and again he shows that what is clearly X in a legal text can, by dint of imposed interpretations, become not X. For Fish, texts are merely pretexts—exercises in “nothing but manipulation and power.” Asked during the question period if the First Amendment isn't something more than an expression of power, Fish rasps, “Free speech? Yeah, tell me another one.” A graduate student, puzzled by the way Fish has folded the world into the alphabet, asks the professor where his kind of “academic leftism” is going. “I want them,” responds Fish, referring to students and faculty, “to do what I tell them to.” Later, he explains to a small group: “I want to be able to walk into any first-rate faculty anywhere and dominate it, shape it to my will. I'm fascinated by my own will.”

Here, then, is a good demonstration of “reversal of the current” and, due to it, of the metamorphosis of old notions of “truth” or “meaning” into something quite new. Siegel's description of the unpleasant-seeming Fish suggests what's taken place. Meaning has been removed, first (by means of ingenious deconstructionist methods), from the less mutable but now-impotent text; second, it has been transplanted into the now potent but more

mutable guardian (in this case, Fish); and finally, in an entirely predictable transformation, or perhaps merely through an equally predictable and banal deterioration, meaning or truth has come to be nothing more or less than synonymous with the guardian's *will*. The purpose of the guardian's literary activity? "I want them to do what I tell them to." Whatever Fish wants, then, is truth. Or, by the rule of permutation, truth is whatever Fish wants.

There has occurred, in other words, a degeneration of the idea of truth that is both dismaying and repulsive. The idea of truth, that is, underwent a degeneration first from that which is known to that which is *believed*, and now it has degenerated still more disastrously from that which is *believed* to that which is *wanted*. Even politics has disappeared, and nothing remains but will, which by definition acknowledges responsibility to no recognized authority other than the self. I said earlier that it was irrelevant whether the values of the current revolutionaries were good values or bad ones, and now, in light of Fish's paradigm of degeneration, it can be seen why that's the case. The revolution may have believed itself to be seizing power for leftism, but in truth its ostensibly anti-authoritarian pattern of half-thinking has already begun to reveal it as the ideological equivalent of a sieve, its incoherence resulting in the inevitable loss of any consistently governable power and opening the movement to the apolitical winds of pure unaccountability and bare will. The original confusion of knowledge with "values," and the corollary confusion of thinking with feeling; the resultant notion that belief is the same thing as truth, and that both are the same as "values"; the industrious uprooting of meaning (and therefore of power) from the less mutable and the handing of it to the obviously mutable guardians: these have all prepared the way for "thought" to degenerate into the purest of solipsism; for "meaning" to become thrall wholly to will; and for "truth" to become whatever the petulant, infantile-grandiose Stanley Fish happens to want.

As for the particular case of Stanley Fish: if the room he spoke in hadn't been crowded—if it had been harbor only to dust motes instead of filled to "overflow"—none of this would matter in the least; just as it wouldn't matter, except for the fact of its many followers, that deconstructionism came into existence as a tiny sprout, a small twig of passing interest but no more, on the ancient and great-bodied oak of literary history and theory. Everyone has a right to folly and depravity, any kind of failure or indulgence—alone. But these matters now are public ones, drawn on a scale that makes them of public—in fact world—importance, and it's necessary they be spoken of accordingly.

So there comes, accordingly, a despairing moment when it's necessary and inescapable to point out, if one follows things to their conclusion, that the deconstructionist revolution, with Fish as an example of it, is at its heart merely infantile, that in its essence, however learned or esoteric it may sound, it consists of babytalk. I've said as much already, in this essay, but without using these words. An "[inability] to follow the steps of a simple logical argument," often attributable to deficiency either of intellect or education, is a trait also (although excusable there) of the childish or infantile. Confusion between thought and feeling—an essential aspect of the revolution—is un-adult as well, thinking and feeling being universally understood as difficult or even impossible of distinction in the child but separable in the adult. Petulance itself, destructiveness, hyper-sensitivity to perceived injury, a sustained resentment that's unassuageable through reason or even subsequent

experience—these are traits of the child, as, perhaps most significant of all in a discussion of deconstructionism and its attendant revolution, is the absence of a firm, commanding, and paramount sense of responsibility for one's actions, a capable willingness to show precisely what it is one will put in the place of that which one chooses to demolish or abjure. I don't for a moment suggest that all deconstructionists possess all of these traits, and I won't deny that some may possess none of them, but I will argue indeed that the movement in general possesses them clearly, and that they are ineradicable aspects of it, in fact indispensable to its existence.

8

Infantilism and Its Consequences

That the revolution is seriously destructive both of the university and of education, I have little doubt; but whether it will disappear before only wreckage is left behind, I don't know. By rights, it should quickly die. Insofar as it is based on illogic, after all, it should founder under its own weight. Insofar as it is dedicated to the annihilation of its own primary and vital source of being, it should wither away. Insofar as it is a revolt against all systems of meaning that then makes an exception for its own, it should be laughed into impotence and shame. Insofar as it leads to solipsism, it should be ignored. Insofar as it advocates demolition but takes upon itself no responsibility for replacement of what it destroys, it should be scorned. Insofar as it drinks from the fountain of beauty but produces nothing beautiful, it should be despised.

Should. But I am far from certain that it will. And this terrible uncertainty arises from my inescapable perception that the revolution has learned its lessons all too eagerly and well—not those lessons that in normal times might be expected to engender and strengthen a coherent movement, but instead, the lessons of illogic, solipsism, petulance, righteousness, self-gratification, freedom from responsibility, and blindness to the self: the lessons, in other words, of childishness, so well learned that their possessors no longer know that what they have internalized is in fact a state of infantilism, the perfection of this retrograde achievement causing them to have lost all capacity for self-recognition by means of contrast from outside themselves, this loss having made them by now no more aware of their condition than the fish can be aware that it swims in water. I don't speak lightly in making these assertions, and, no, I have not lost my mind. America reaps what it sows, and the traits I've just listed are nothing more than the very traits that are nurtured, encouraged, rewarded, and, insofar as possible, ritually created in the population at large by the almost immeasurably powerful American general and popular culture that I've said I dislike having to speak about but that now for the second time I find it necessary to mention. A movement that prides itself on its own incoherence, that doesn't distinguish between feeling and thinking, that by closing its eyes to an outside world effectively removes itself from any susceptibility to the logic of that world—such a movement can fairly be called childish. The surprising thing, as I've said, is not the existence of deconstructionism but only the large following it has created. And the surprising thing, also, is not finding childishness in the manipulated and exploited American general public (what else can be expected?), but finding childishness in the educated, in fact in the very highly educated, part of that public.

From the beginning of its fullest bloom, of course, the revolution has seen itself as a revolution against the injustice and oppressiveness of Western cultural and (the two being seen as inseparable) political power. That it refused or was unable to distinguish between these two crucially distinct aspects of power (after all, “everything is political”) is one measure of its inherent proclivity toward simplification; but another and far more important index to the extent of its blindness is that it has never, even now, begun to understand that by its own inner nature it is itself a creature and a creation of an unseen and in this case genuinely rapacious aspect of that same putatively monolithic “Western” power: that unknowingly it is working in perfect unison with that oppressive force; that in its folly the revolution, believing itself to be fighting zealously for liberation from tyranny, is in point of fact delivering itself incrementally, inexorably, and steadily into the ever-so-patient arms of its most insidious and greatest enemy, which in this case happens also to be its own authentic parent.



Being poor at making distinctions, that is to say, in fact preferring as much as possible the absence of distinctions altogether, the revolutionaries from the very beginning were doomed by the same commercial and economic culture that so successfully bred them to be intellectually insensitive, self-concerned, and indiscriminating. Burning with resentment and hatred after witnessing the ruinously applied force—in Vietnam, for example—of what they believed to be the “West,” they made, again through failure of distinction, predictable error after predictable error, one compounding and feeding upon another and leading them gradually toward the trap set all along by their own worst enemy. Although it didn’t happen immediately, and although it was a result in part of understandable frustration in the face of a seemingly (and perhaps actually) monolithic and therefore morally unresponsive political-cultural power, the erroneous assumption steadily grew that American political leadership and political action *were* in themselves concretely applied manifestations of “Western values” or of the values of “Western civilization.” As this simplifying assumption—appealing to the revolutionaries *for* its simplicity—took hold, it eroded other and corollary distinctions that can in fact be made between “politics” and “culture,” and in the process a very real and empirically verifiable truth of genuinely crucial and overwhelming importance—that in point of actuality the powers now dominantly in control of the society we live in care nothing for or about Western civilization and would in fact prefer not to have its values stand in their way—grew toward the point of being lost entirely. Following these kinds of failed perceptions, there was needed only the collapse of a small number of remaining distinctions before a syllogism could be set up calling in absolutist moral terms for the emptying out and destroying of all Western civilization. The lost distinctions included those, for example, that differentiated in any meaningful way between “politics” and “art,” between “aesthetics” and “power,” between power of differing kinds or with differing motives, or even between power and its absence, it coming to be assumed that there is no such thing as the absence of power any more than there is an absence anywhere, even in the individual and private conscience, of politics. Distinctions thus having been eliminated through having become no longer perceptible to the

revolutionaries, and absolutes as a result having taken their place, the syllogism could be erected that took as its first premise that Western civilization consists solely of oppressive power; as its second, that Western civilization and its artifacts and values are one and the same, the three therefore consisting solely also of oppressive power; and as its conclusion that civilization, values, and artifacts must, being one and the same, be exposed for what they are and thus destroyed, all this for the sake of freedom from their tyranny.

9

Into the Waiting Arms of Satan

And so through this long and in some ways complex genesis it comes about that the deconstructionist revolution, unable to distinguish between baby and bathwater, serves in fact to bring about precisely the same ends as does that aspect of the oppressive culture that the revolution deludes itself into believing that it is struggling against. The true axiomatic values of the West are in plain fact extraordinarily simple, breathtakingly elegant in their purity, intrinsically antagonistic to oppression and innately corrosive of it, in no conceivable way inimical to the aims of the revolutionaries (if only they knew it), and, as it happens, emulated increasingly of late throughout other parts of the world. They are these:

- reverence for the individual;
- sanctity for the untrammelled freedom of thought and expression;
- and the rule of secular law.

That's all. From these three axiomatic values, on the condition that they and their corollaries remain duly protected and in their turn are also honored, all subsequent cultural and political blessings that we as a people are capable of causing to flow, will flow; and only from these as their basis can come any achievements that may distinctively or justly be called Western achievements. In this sense it's perfectly clear that while behavior deliberately exploiting or oppressing the individual, or behavior deliberately circumscribing or curtailing thought, may take place *in* the West, it should not be considered therefore a product *of* the West. Murder may occur in Athens; it should not therefore be named Athenian.



Perfectly clear, but not clear to the inadequately-distinguishing bathwater-and-baby revolutionaries; so that here one grows increasingly despondent in considering the real insidiousness of the terrible story that is inevitably unfolding. However obviously treasurable the true axiomatic values of the West are, it's also plainly demonstrable that the particular economic powers that for some time now have been predominantly in control of society in the West, or at least and with very great certainty predominantly in control of society in the United States, have no interest whatsoever in those values, to which their own aims are largely inimical, but that instead they have a sole, heightened, and intense interest in the following:

- in increasing and holding mass economic power;
- in enhancing or valuing only those qualities of the individual that are readily exploitable and manipulable for the strengthening of that power;
- in the protecting and encouraging only such expression or action—or thought—as will support and further that same end.

The pervasiveness of these economically consolidating efforts is enormous, and in point of terrible fact the deconstructionist revolutionaries are themselves to a very great extent the creation and the intellectually simplified children of this same widely controlling power, whose educational policies—very few of which have to do with school—have crippled the revolutionaries sufficiently to make them pliantly if not robotically serviceable to its own ends; and for this reason, that dominant power—the government-military-corporate state—can well be expected to stand by supportively, willingly, and patiently as it watches these operatives industriously destroy the long record of *individual* achievement—the literature and art, and much of the philosophy, of the West—that has been historically a thorn in its side, a prick to its near-moribund Western conscience, and, until now, with the remaining help of the yet-functioning liberal arts university, an antagonistic check to the last perfection of its conquering Orwellian ambitions: every citizen dispossessed of an independently active and inquiring mind, every citizen a perfect and pliant consumer.



The “plan” thus to co-opt the intelligentsia is very nearly without flaw, and, if it does indeed work, it will lead to something with every appearance of the perfect crime, one in which the real perpetrator—again, the government-military-corporate state—will not only remain free of any perceived guilt or blame but will at story’s end bask in the role of savior and re-establisher, à la Big Brother, of what will then be taken as the just and moral order.

In short, once the erstwhile guardians of the liberal arts have completed their work of destroying not only the university’s contents but also of having destroyed the frail process—that of allowing the affirming or discovering of values through knowledge—that the university still barely manages to harbor: once this has been done, the greater power, the one that cares nothing for the real values of the West, will be summoned by the now wholly factionalized and powerless guardians as being the only remaining authority to impose order on the chaos those very guardians themselves have created, a task which the greater power will be only too happy to perform, having wanted to do so all along but until now having been frustrated in its ambition. The university, in other words, will be taken over by the state, or, if you prefer, by government as handmaiden to dominant economic and commercial interests.



Impossible? Hyperbolic and alarmist? I only wish. Dinesh D’Souza, however, writing (again) about the recently famous and influential Stanley Fish, raises the same questions that I’m raising here, and—from the horse’s mouth, as it were—is provided with an answer that bespeaks the full extent of possible and perhaps even probable loss. “Besides youthful literary iconoclasts,” writes D’Souza [*Note 3. The Atlantic, March 1991, pp. 72-73*], “another group has been drawn to Fish’s thinking. Although Fish does not consider himself a political partisan, ‘many people on the political left found my work psychologically liberating,’ he explained. ‘They began to say: once you realize that standards emerge historically, then you can see through and discard all the norms to which we have been falsely enslaved.’” In Fish’s synopsis here of “left” thinking, the deconstructionist syllogism that I discussed earlier is well in place, and one can see also some of the missing or collapsed distinctions that have made that syllogism’s absolutist erection possible. “History” and “enslavement,” “standards” and “norms” (that is, “values”) are all made synonymous with and inextricable from one another, thus simplifying and making absolute not only these concepts themselves but also their inter-relationships; and the significantly unexamined ambiguity follows as to whether “all the norms” that are to be “seen through” and discarded in fact means “*all* norms, since *all* norms come from history,” or whether it means “only those norms that have been falsely enslaving.” The ambiguity left aside, D’Souza clarifies what Fish has said: “In other words, relativism paves the way for a toppling of the old rules, and the establishment of new ones based on political strength.”

Everything, as we’ve heard before, is politics. But let that go (in a minute, Fish himself will say it again anyway). The crucial questions, in any case, are these:

- are *all* rules or only *some* rules to be toppled, and, if the latter, on what basis of selection? and
- *what* “political strength” will the replacement rules be based *on*?

To find out the answers here, let’s look for an example. “Fish’s feelings about subverting the old rules in criticism,” remarks D’Souza, “parallel his feelings about the old rules in campus governance,” and there follows a discussion of minority hiring policies in academia, the troubled question—familiar to everyone—being whether or not identical standards should be held to in the hiring of everybody. Here, as elsewhere, Fish offers no intellectual response, for the very good reason that he has nothing to base such a response *on* or make it in reference *to*: except *power*, of course, and, in drawing upon the only remaining thing available to him, he at last, and quite unwittingly, brings the long and dismal story of the deconstructionist revolution to a close. D’Souza again:

Fish went on to criticize those who had spoken up for basic qualifications [in hiring practices]. “They want a definition of quality that excludes considerations of race, sex, and so on,” he said. “But once you have subtracted the accidents of class, race, gender, and political circumstance, what is it you have left?” Merit is “a political viewpoint claiming for itself the mantle of objectivity,” Fish said. “All educational

decisions are political by their very nature.”

If this is so, then why should even private universities be allowed to enjoy independence or academic freedom? Why not turn over the schools to the rough-and-tumble of politics, and let legislators make decisions about admissions, faculty, and curriculum? Fish grinned. “Sure, I might be in favor of that. *It depends*. That’s what I’m always going to say. If universities do things that are horrible, then I can envision situations where I’d like to see government intervention.”

And there it is at last, quiet and unnoticed, the end of the story, the hapless terms of surrender, the admission of defeat: the *government* will be called in to take care of things and re-establish meaning, order, and just purpose, with Fish apparently oblivious to the towering irony. Aid, in other words, will in the last resort be brought by the great Satan himself, the hated and unaccountable wielder of enslaving Western values, the despised oppressor that was responsible a mere twenty-five years earlier for the very genesis and upheaval itself of the moral and opposing deconstructionist and putatively leftist revolution.

D’Souza concludes rather wanly that “In Fish’s view, not even university autonomy is sacrosanct; it is one more arbitrary value, with no claim to special reverence. Far more important, he believes, are political exigencies, including the agenda of the minority activists on campus.” But what D’Souza might have remarked upon instead, and more crucially, is that the very phrase “far more important” *can’t* apply to Fish’s thinking: for in his thinking, “value” has been bled away entirely, “value” and “power” having become one and the same, and it is of course the sheerest cant, in the absence of value, to say that one power is “more important” than another, the only possible truth being that one power, at any given time, is either stronger or weaker than another. Conscience, responsibility, moral or evaluative judgment have—*can* have—no place in such a scheme.

Fish is thus so good as to show us how the liberal arts—with their old, poor, frail, and invaluable capacity for breathing some kind of continued life into existence based upon the only three Western values that really matter—will be handed over lock, stock, and barrel, perhaps out of high arrogance and certainly out of very great ignorance, after long and persistent folly and in the most pathetic of closing scenes, to what is arguably the greatest lobby force for corporate profits, individual exploitation, and advertisements for automobiles, deodorants, analgesics, and hemorrhoid medicines ever known to have existed in the entire history of mankind or on the face of the earth.

Some revolution, indeed.

It remains only for me to touch upon a certain universal truth about literature—and thereby to defend it in the only way it can be defended against its present attackers—and I’ll be done. The deconstructionists are indeed right in their central judgment of literature—that it, like all art, is meaningless—but they are right for the wrong reasons, and, because they are poor readers and have no understanding of the significance of beauty, they don’t

understand the true and vital irony of literature's meaninglessness, nor do they understand the universal value and importance of it or of any art.

These devastating failures among putatively literary people have to do in large part, as I've said, with the corrosive and subtle curse of "values" in American education. Because they are afraid of "intellectuality," or at the least skeptical of it; and because they're skeptical in the same way also of knowledge, it being believed generally to be sterile and uninteresting, Americans tend in education to rearrange the cart and the horse: they make the teaching of "values" into the horse of education, while reducing knowledge to the cart that, depending upon how firmly it happens to be attached, may or may not follow after. College curriculums have shown examples of this sort of rearrangement for a very long time in ways that are now no longer even considered worth noticing—in the offering of courses (or majors) in "creative writing," for example, instead of literature, in "American Studies" instead of American history, or—a fiercely contested issue thirty years ago at my own undergraduate college—"religion" instead of philosophy. In the twenty years since my 1971 memo at the beginning of this essay, and certainly since my own undergraduate years, such horse and cart rearrangements have occurred more and more routinely, with courses, programs, and majors like Black Studies, Urban Studies, Latin American Studies, Hispanic Studies, Asian Studies, Women's Studies, even, now, Gay Studies having become commonplace among college offerings.

A detailed history of how and why such changes have come about, of how much they have resulted from political pressures rather than intellectual assumptions, of the degree of energizing good they may have done, or in turn how much they may have, as I happen to think, helped bring about the politicizing of the curriculum that now threatens to destroy the liberal arts themselves—these aren't for me to take up or continue with here. About literature, though, a word.

Especially in a time of doubt and moral uncertainty like the one we happen to be living through, it is commonplace to hear that college education helps preserve social order because it teaches and instills values. That that's not true, as such, I've tried to show. But that the value-theory of education is fallacious hasn't in the least prevented it from being clung to—with increasing passion, in fact—as people feel more threatened and alarmed by what they perceive to be breakdowns of substantial or meaningful social order. I mentioned earlier that Roger Kimball built his arguments in *Tenured Radicals* on a foundation of sand—as other "conservative" critics (perhaps most famously Allan Bloom) have done as well. Now it can be seen why. Being alarmed at much of what they see happening in society around them (as I am), and being especially alarmed at much of what they see happening in the university (as I am), such conservative critics assume there to be a crisis in values, which indeed there is, one that they are often able to describe and indict powerfully. But because they also fail to understand what education is or how it works, their arguments from that point on are doomed to a futility of wheel-spinning that only draws them deeper into argumentative holes the longer they keep at it. What happens is clear. Assuming wrongly that education teaches values, they call out for the re-intensified teaching of values—what they see as the *good* ones, of course—thereby through the best of intentions reducing themselves (since the teaching of values is in fact the imposing of values) to a brand of coercion perhaps much more familiar and more conventionally tailored but no

different in kind from the bullying tactics of Stanley Fish in imposing *his* values, aka his will. And of course it hardly needs saying how much damage these critics do in trying to lay low the deconstructionist revolution through such an approach: Every repeated insistence upon the instilling of “classic Western values” that falls from their lips becomes to the leftist revolutionaries yet another “proof” of the conservatives’ very guilt as imperialists and oppressors, another flourish of the cape to the bull, can of gas on the fire.

On, however, to my final remark about the real origin of the revolutionaries, and to my final remark about literature. Themselves also products of a values-saturated system of education, the deconstructionists, as I’ve suggested, fail to understand, or fail ever to have been allowed to know, what literature really is; and as a result of this ignorance they have been so badly tricked that it’s quite possible, as Alvin Kernan suggests it already has, that the house of literature inside the university (and the house of the arts) may indeed burn and fall entirely.

What happened is this: it was declared to the revolutionaries-to-be throughout their formative years that literature was vital and important *because* it contained and expressed high Western values that could be instilled only in those who read it, and that thus only through those who did so could the truth of those high values be preserved and handed on: *literature’s own value, in other words, lay in its being a repository of values*. But this is at the very best a half-truth, has never been anything more than at very best a half-truth, and every literary person knows it to be nothing more than a half-truth. Values may very well reside in literature, or be reflected from within it, just as they will in any historical record of human achievement. This, however, is not what makes it literature; this is not what distinguishes it from any other record of achievement, and this is not what gives it the particular life and meaning and durability—I’ll go ahead and use these next two words—of art.

What I have said so far, I will maintain as a self-appointed representative of those for whom literature is extraordinarily dear to the heart, is indisputably the case. The deconstructionists, however, were from the beginning unaware of the necessity for making such a distinction, nor were they ever introduced to it or encouraged to discover either it or its rewards for themselves. Instead, like all good students in a system of education that assumes truth to reside in its teachers instead of in what’s studied, they did as they were told. Following the example of the teacher, who, as always, stood before them first and drank deeply, they in turn took their own deep and obedient draughts of this same particular and falsely prepared medicine. Like good students, that is, that swallowed literature *believing* it to be a repository of high Western values. And, a little while later, it made them sick.

Or they thought it made them sick, and this is where, in their ignorance, they were so disastrously misled and so egregiously tricked. They did indeed get sick, for the very good reason that, as they grew older, they saw their teacher behaving so badly, both at home and on world travels to places like Viet Nam, that it revolted them to the core of their moral beings. For those in a state of ignorance, cause and effect are of course easily confused, and important distinctions go commonly unmade. And the ignorant students, naturally believing it to have been the *medicine* that had made their teacher behave so badly, and panicked and nauseated to think that the same medicine still lay in their own

stomachs, retched. Here is where the story grows really despairing. The truth was, of course, that the swallowed dose had consisted of nothing in itself sickness-causing at all and of only one thing durable: it had been mainly mutability-water, hot air, and hypocrisy-bubbles (all, by this time, vanished), with only one tiny and hapless little seed of “literature” floating around in it, which, during its time in the students’ stomachs, had managed to grow into a small goose, half starved for some corn or mash, but ready enough to get on with the slow and laborious business of laying golden eggs. But these students had never studied geese (they had studied “values”) and so, not knowing a goose from a hypocrisy-bubble, they had no means of distinguishing between the present goose and the past medicine they’d swallowed, which they *still* thought was what had made their teacher behave badly, whereas in fact their teacher had behaved badly for the two simple and in this case inseparable and interchangeable reasons that he *was* bad and that he lacked knowledge. Nevertheless, because they didn’t know what a goose was; because they still thought it was the goose that had made their teacher behave badly; and because they hated and resented their teacher not only for having been bad but for having tried to make *them* bad—of course, they attacked the goose, believing it, simply put, to be the true source of all their ills. In their frustration and rage at the injustices both done and done to them, and, of course, in their hapless ignorance, they plucked the goose, wrung its neck, tore off its feet and wings, disembowelled it, did all they could to render it harmless and impotent and empty and meaningless and dead so that it would never do anything bad to them or to anyone else again, ever. In short, missing the point completely, they deconstructed the goose.

Such a waste, such a desecration, such a long chain of abominations and errors, such a pathetic history of ignorance and deceit, misdirections and frenzy and lies. If faint hope remains, I implore any who are still capable of listening: Distinguish, if nothing else, in the way I have mentioned, between literature and history, and recognize that insofar as literature does indeed contain hypocrisies and mutabilities and injustices and oppressions and falsehoods, these are what make it a part of the latter, history, and not part of the former, literature. By all means, for its own life and for ours, reduce literature—and all art—to its essentials, since only in that way can be seen what does remain of its crucial essence: but do so honestly, and with sensitivity, and with knowledge. And the final, irreducible truth will be revealed that, refined to its uttermost, literature in fact says nothing, means nothing, teaches nothing, *is* nothing—whatever its other and attendant complexities—but small reminders and exquisitely living whispers of meaninglessness, nothingness, and death, and if the case were otherwise, there would *be* no literature, since those who struggled to create it would have been content, instead, with life, and afterward with silence. Its being nothing else than this is in truth the real and wholly unassailable source of its true and great strength, of its significance beyond any ideology, and of its universal value: its being the forged whisperings of meaninglessness and death that, by making invisible the terrible struggle for their own birth, create, in the face of the universal and unremitting and implacable and absolute nothingness that confronts each and every one of us, something of permanent endurance and perhaps of beauty. And to destroy endurance or beauty of that kind, as those know only too well who remain still capable of knowing, is to destroy immeasurably more than only that, but it is to destroy pleasure, dignity, joy, and

one more pitiful and harmless measure of the all too meager lasting achievement that can be born out of the uncertain mind and heart—that frail brotherhood—of humanity.