

REVIEWS

Recalling Education, by Hugh Mercer Curtler. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2001, 224 pp., \$24.95 hardbound.

Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe: Toward the Revival of Higher Education, by Jeffrey Hart. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001, 272 pp., \$26.95 hardbound.

Jeffrey J. Poelvoorde

It is hardly news that many academics hold that the university is in eclipse, if not collapse. They see around them beautiful edifices maintained by fund-raising bureaucrats that house alienated and mercenary students harangued by a professoriate offering a mixture of career preparation and ideologies of social transformation. The flawed but defensible liberal education once offered in American schools, they argue, has been either lost in confusion or destroyed by its enemies. It is dusk, and the owl of Minerva has been shot down.

If one finds oneself in this camp, there are really only two strategies, one “negative” and one “positive,” for addressing the present, aside from abandoning the contemporary academic world altogether or withdrawing into non-engagement with one’s colleagues: One can attempt to refute the arguments of the opponents of liberal education directly, demonstrating that their premises are factually incorrect or intellectually derivative and false. Or, one can attempt to demonstrate that the liberal education that has been lost possesses a depth and complexity beyond the caricatures of its enemies. Both Professors Hugh Mercer Curtler and Jeffrey Hart fall into this beleaguered camp and their

books partake of both strategies, leaning to the latter. And, bad as it is (How bad is it? Obviously, Hart’s title suggests *pretty* bad, and even though Curtler’s title is more neutral, toward the end of the book even he insists that “the situation has never been as bad as it is at present.”), both authors are nevertheless optimists.

Their defense of liberal education consists of advocating the “canon” of great works that forms the backbone of that education. The canon they present is an open and flexible one, responsive to suggestions for new inclusions, but one with an identifiable core. The works in the core are “great” because they have stood the test of time as humanity has scrutinized them and found them eternally relevant to the human condition. Moreover, in Curtler’s words, through these works “the young person lives vicariously and grows in imagination and sensitivity.” Regardless of how much the canonical works reflect the biases or social and political conditions of their authors, they possess a nuanced view of reality that lifts them out of ideology or propaganda, enabling their readers to employ them as instruments for probing their own identity.

Recalling Education devotes more attention to dismantling the arguments against liberal education. Beginning with a very satisfying definition of the kind of liberty that “liberal” education aims at (a positive freedom resting upon the autonomy that comes from “possessing one’s own mind”), Curtler turns a skeptical eye to the current substitutes for liberal education and debunks their major, and by now, quite familiar, premises. The best part of this section of the book is an extended discussion of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, comparing a sympathetic reading with Chinua Achebe’s critical (and cramped) reading. Even though he maintains that the gravest disease of contem-

porary academics is not a difference of opinion, but the evaporation of civil discourse itself, he ends with a program for moderate reform centered on a curriculum refounded on a rigorous exposure to the liberal disciplines and the "Great Books."

Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe concentrates more on a "positive" presentation of the great ideas and works of the West, essentially an extended discussion derived from Hart's decades of teaching his interdisciplinary course at Columbia University. The attempt to point to a positive reality beyond the distorted views of the canon consists of two elements: a "high anthropology" of Western civilization and an interpretive tour through the great works that constitute the West's "canon." The latter in turn possesses two dimensions and is where the book succeeds best.

The "high anthropology" of the West focuses on the ongoing tension between "Jerusalem" and "Athens," revelation and reason. The West, according to Hart, begins in an "epic" stage embodied in both Homer's heroic individualism and Moses's legal sanctity, elements respectively internalized in Socrates and Jesus—in the former as philosophic cognition and in the latter as radicalized holiness. First Paul, then Augustine, then subsequent artists, poets, and thinkers have attempted to position these two elements in relationship to each other, sometimes in synthesis, sometimes in opposition, but always in tension. Hart employs this framework not only to explain what has generated the various great authors and works of the West, but also to defend the West's greatness overall and its suitability as the foundation for a liberal education. (Hart nevertheless argues that a complete education also includes the great works of other civilizations.)

Although this schema has a surface plausibility, its mild historicism ultimately vitiates the argument for taking seriously each of the great works of the canon as independent reworkings of the human condition. One may also question its usefulness for revealing the meaning and importance of any of the works that Hart discusses. While Socratic philosophy could perhaps only have originated in ancient Greece, it may have been the relative freedom and diversity of Athenian society as the *condition* of Socrates' activity that explains the emergence of philosophic *eros*, rather than a larger cultural dynamic playing out in the form of "cognitive heroism" with Socrates as the "Achilles of the mind."

It is in Hart's rich and thoughtful readings of the individual great authors and works that the book's value lies. Aside from the profound and provocative insights that they bring to the respective authors, these readings, derived from a lifetime of teaching and reflection, succeed in responding to the critics of liberal education in two ways: First, Hart demonstrates easily that a fair consideration (but the kind likely to emerge in an undergraduate's first encounter with them under the guidance of a loving and conscientious instructor) of Paul, Augustine, Dante, Moliere, or Dostoyevsky saves them from the simplistic caricatures of the ideologues. Second, Hart's serial presentation of these works succeeds as a *cumulative* argument about what the aim and content of an education should be. Any individual seriously grappling with any, but certainly with some or all, of these works can hardly help being converted into a citizen of the universe of reflection. That conversion, of course, constitutes the true liberation which is the reward of a liberal education.

Given the gloom that hovers over these books' portrayal of the present, for whom

did their authors intend them? For themselves, as a defiant statement of principle and a hopeful testament to a future that might exist? For their sympathetic colleagues, to bolster their morale in an unkind professional universe? For their opponents (hardly given to persuasion, as Curtler points out, or to serious pursuit of a “truth” the possibility of which they deny), in the hope that they might see a more complex reality that they had previously overlooked? Or for the students?

Perhaps all of these, but mostly for the last. Today’s students, after all—jaded, indifferent, or ideological as they are—are ultimately like students of all times and places, only more so. For anyone who loves teaching, that ineradicable openness in at least *one* student that comes from being a young mind in a terrifying and beautiful world always provides some opening to the gift of illumination.

Both of these books are worthy additions to the traditionalist camp in the ongoing polemics over the nature of the university. Both authors believe that something like liberal education is salvageable in the bizarre combination of glittering shopping-mall-of-the-mind and treacherous minefield-of-ideologies presented by contemporary academics. The well-worn but never irrelevant image of the Cave from Plato’s *Republic* may serve to highlight these works’ contributions and differences: If Curtler more thoroughly characterizes the distortions that constitute the walls of the present cave, Hart more clearly points to the light that lies beyond its orifice.

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Postmodern Pooh, by Frederick Crews. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, 191 pp., \$22.00 hardbound.

Paul A. Cantor

For years, friends of Frederick Crews have been urging him to write a sequel to his 1963 classic, *The Pooh Perplex*. In the form of a Freshman English casebook, this volume wittily satirized the literary academy of its day, serving up brilliant parodies of a variety of critical approaches, including Marxism and Freudianism. Crews’s joke was to take something as simple as A. A. Milne’s *Winnie-the-Pooh* stories and manufacture complex readings of them, for example, a theological interpretation with the portentous title: “O *Felix Culpa!* The Sacramental Meaning of *Winnie-the-Pooh*.” One might have thought that the success of Crews’s satire would have reined in the excesses of literary criticism, but in the 1960s and 1970s just the opposite happened, as professors of literature became wilder and wilder in their approaches, quickly making the original targets of Crews’s critique seem tame by comparison. The many fans of *The Pooh Perplex* could not help hoping that Crews would rise to the occasion and do for Deconstruction and the New Historicism what he had once done for the New Criticism and the old Historicism.

We must all be grateful, then, for *Postmodern Pooh*—a worthy successor to the original. But it is not the *same* book. Crews is a smart man, and his delay in producing this sequel might be traced to his recognition that he could not simply follow his earlier formula and write a *Pooh Perplex II*. One of Crews’s original sources of humor was completely denied him in present day circumstances. Back in 1963, people found it amusing right from the

start to see *Winnie-the-Pooh* treated seriously in an academic manner. But now that the Modern Language Association has a well-established division devoted to Children's Literature, no shock value remains in the spectacle of professors talking about A. A. Milne the way they do about Shakespeare or Dickens. Indeed, by comparison with the sort of work routinely featured on MLA panels today, *Winnie-the-Pooh* begins to look like a venerable classic.

Moreover, it has become increasingly difficult to parody contemporary criticism when so much of it reads like self-parody. The leading ideas of critics are so absurd, and their readings so out of touch with anything resembling common sense, that it is hard to take their interpretations at face value and not wonder if they themselves are having fun at our expense. Comparing *The Pooh Perplex* with *Postmodern Pooh* also highlights how badly written much contemporary criticism has become. Crews himself is such a felicitous stylist that I suspect that, try as he might, he could not bring himself to write prose sufficiently unreadable to capture what many of the dominant critics sound like today. Perhaps in acknowledgment of this dilemma, Crews in *Postmodern Pooh* often just falls back on quoting contemporary critics, allowing them to do a job on themselves. In *The Pooh Perplex*, Crews almost never quoted or cited real critics (the exception is the chapter on the Chicago School). For example, although the invented critic Simon Lacerous is obviously based on F. R. Leavis, Crews never mentions Leavis by name in the earlier book. My favorite name of a critic in *Postmodern Pooh* is Das Nuffa Dat, the representative of the postcolonialist school of analysis. This critic is clearly based on Homi Bhabha, but this time Crews quotes liberally from Bhabha's own writings in the

chapter. At some point, Crews must have thrown up his arms in defeat and admitted to himself: "The only person who can write as badly as Homi Bhabha is Homi Bhabha himself." Some of the quotations from critics in *Postmodern Pooh* are so ridiculous in content or so bad in style that I had to go to the books and verify that Crews had not maliciously made them up (for the record, from my spot checks, I can say that Crews quotes his sources accurately—even the unbelievable passage from Fredric Jameson where he confesses "some sneaking admiration" for Heidegger's support for Hitler).

Crews should be commended for realizing that in 2001 he could not simply reproduce the strategies that worked back in 1963; instead, he figured out how to adapt his satire to the changed situation in contemporary criticism. In the earlier volume, Crews frequently made fun of the amateurishness of the criticism of the day, including what purports to be the transcript of a Yale lecture dumbed down for undergraduates along these lines: "Let's not overlook the Great Chain of Being, either. I told you about that one, with God at the top and all these little vegetables and rocks down at the bottom." By contrast, in *Postmodern Pooh* Crews skewers the hyperprofessionalism of the literary academy today: the narrow specialization, the retreat behind hermetic jargon, the relentless careerism. He seizes upon the irony in the fact that people who profess radical leftwing ideas in theory have in practice jumped eagerly aboard the capitalist gravy train. Just look at the names of the endowed chairs occupied by Crews's distinguished set of tenured radicals—each neatly adapted to local interests: Sea & Ski Professor of English at the University of California at Irvine, Exxon Valdez Chair in the Humanities at Rice, Joe Camel Professor of Child Development at

Duke, and—my personal favorite—Classic Coke Professor of Subaltern Studies at Emory.

Crews reserves some of his sharpest satire for the High Priest of Academic Professionalism, Stanley Fish, who appears in *Postmodern Pooh* under the name of N. Mack Hobbs. Crews speaks volumes about Fish simply by listing the fictional Hobbs's publications, which include: "*The Last Theory Book You Will Ever Need to Read*, announcing the death of literary theory; two later volumes in the same vein; and his exhortation to college teachers to look out for their own interest, *Still Driving That Old Corolla?*" (the latter is a takeoff on the wonderful title of one of Fish's own essays: "The Unbearable Ugliness of Volvos"). Unlike a critic such as Bhabha, Fish is a master of style and has one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary criticism, thus offering Crews a chance for some real parody. And he delivers, as he captures perfectly Fish's brashness and tough-guy bravado:

Were you impressed by that tour de force of meta-analysis? I thought it was pretty good myself. In fact, I'm afraid it was a cut above anything my colleagues in this forum, including the lifelong *Pooh* "experts," have managed to put forward. I'm grateful for their contributions, of course, but since I subscribe to the Al Davis philosophy of criticism—"Just win, baby!"—I'm even happier to observe that there's still an intelligence gap between N. Mack Hobbs and the rest of the herd.

Another critic who writes well, Stephen Greenblatt, brings out the best in Crews, who recreates the Renaissance scholar as the aptly named Victor S. Fassell. Making fun of the random connections typically drawn in Greenblatt's New Historicist work, Crews has Fassell inaugurate a movement known as "The New—*All-New!*—

Negotiationism" with an essay relating the Renaissance explorer, Vasco de Gama, to the Renaissance musical instrument, the viola da gamba. As for Greenblatt's manner of proceeding as a critic, Crews is right on target when he has Fassell write: "Conclusions beckon flickeringly from the middle distance, even if they disdain to be roughly seized and pocketed in the crass style of traditionalist criticism." Translation: Don't ever expect a straight answer from Greenblatt to any question.

Thus *Postmodern Pooh* is just as funny as *The Pooh Perplex*, and in some ways even funnier. But it is a different kind of humor: darker, more bitter, nastier. And the reason for this change in tone is that Crews sees that more is at stake in literary criticism today. *The Pooh Perplex* is by comparison a lighthearted book. There Crews treated literary criticism largely as a game, and he was mainly making fun of the differences in the way people play it. There is of course an edge to the humor in *The Pooh Perplex*, but basically Crews was bemused by the foibles of his colleagues and not really at war with them. He seemed more concerned with the preciousness of literary criticism at the time than with its perniciousness. In retrospect, it seems particularly odd that back in 1963 he presented the one socially conscious and radical essay, the Marxist analysis of *Pooh*, with a sense of nostalgia. The fictional editor says that he includes this essay "because it represents a particular style of criticism that was once in fashion," as if Marxism were a thing of the past.

In that respect, in *The Pooh Perplex* Crews proved to be a bad prophet of the future of literary criticism—an error he makes up for in *Postmodern Pooh*, where he shows how various forms of Marxism and Exploitation Studies in general dominate the field today. Almost all the critics Crews satirizes in *Postmodern Pooh* are socially

conscious, and, in particular, feel confident that their brand of criticism will actually change the world for the better. That is why Crews's new book is more bitter in tone. He no doubt feels that contemporary criticism threatens to corrupt the world in general and not just a corner of the academy. In the new book, he makes fun of the way literary critics remain attached to Marxism, long after the rest of the world has recognized its bankruptcy in theory and practice. Crews ridicules Jameson's pontifications on postmodernism and Late Capitalism in the mouth of his fictional Duke disciple, Carla Gulag: "My own guess is that Late Capitalism is 'late'—quite a bit behind schedule—for an appointment with its own demise. Thus, to the known sins of this despicable regime must be added still another, procrastination." Indeed, with capitalism having failed to collapse on schedule according to Marx's predictions, contemporary Marxists have had to do a bit of scrambling to redefine the terms of their critique of the free market, often now resorting to the claim that capitalism delivers *too many* goods, rather than the *too few* charged in orthodox Marxism.

In sum, although *Postmodern Pooh* is at least as funny as *The Pooh Perplex*, it is not as much fun to read. But that is not Crews's fault—his new book merely mirrors how literary criticism has changed since 1963. If there was something amateurish and dilettantish about literary criticism back in those days, that meant that a broader public could still be interested in

what literary critics had to say and could play along with the jokes of *The Pooh Perplex*. By comparison, *Postmodern Pooh* will of necessity be more of a chore for general readers today. The professionalized literary criticism that now dominates the field has become largely a closed book to general readers. They could not understand it even if they wanted to, and they see little reason to try. One of the paradoxes of contemporary criticism is that in its obsession with making itself socially relevant, it has in fact made itself irrelevant to the broader reading public. Evidently general readers would like literary critics to talk about literature and not about neocolonial hegemony and its globalizing aftermath. Such readers may initially find *Postmodern Pooh* tough going. But it is worth their effort, and literary academics—perpetually sentenced to sit through the nightmare of MLA sessions and condemned to read endless pages of graduate student prose that apes seriously the critics Crews mocks—will find reading this book a positively cathartic experience. And in the end, it is difficult to reject the judgment Crews passes, so eloquently and elegantly, on literary criticism today: "just as *Pooh* is suffused with humanism, our humanism itself, by this late date, has become full of *Pooh*."

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