

Reconstruction and Deconstruction

Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education, by Roger Kimball, *New York: Harper & Row, 1990. xviii + 204 pp. \$18.95.*

THE CLAIM MADE in the blurb of Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals*, that this is "the first book to expose the biggest scandal in contemporary higher education: the politicalization of the humanities," is not accurate. There have been others who have expressed unhappiness with the current state of higher education: Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (1987); Lynne V. Cheney's *Humanities in America: A Report to the President, The Congress, and the American People* (1988); William J. Bennett's *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education* (1984), as well as articles through the years in such magazines as *Commentary*, *Modern Age*, *The New Criterion*, and *Academic Questions*. They all have assailed the rise of the deconstructionists, structuralists, post-structuralists, semiologists, the neo-Marxists (those who, as Professor Frederick Crews claims, belong to the "Left Eclecticism"), the neo-Freudians, the feminists (who have provided what Kimball calls "the biggest challenge to the canon as traditionally conceived: radical feminism"), and other special interest groups among the "tenured radicals." All these factions have not only sought to destroy the walls of the Western cultural tradition, but also have destabilized the value system that has nourished higher education for centuries. In short, they have "deconstructed" Matthew Arnold's famous dictum that teachers and critics in the humanities should propagate "the best that has been thought and said in the world."

For the disinterested search for truth and the objective standards of excellence, these pressure groups have substituted new criteria: gender, race, and (economic and social) class. Their aim has been to lessen the influence of, if not to eliminate, those cultural heroes (Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, *et al.*)—those they call by the acronym of DWEM (“Dead, White, European Males”). Instead, they would incorporate writings from non-Europeans (especially, non-Whites), homoerotic groups, and the poor and disenfranchised. Aesthetic consideration would yield to politicized goals: the traditionally accepted meaning of a book (they prefer the term “text”) would vanish in the welter of subjective indeterminacy of language, couched in unintelligible jargon; and the study of theory would replace the study of literature. But, above all, what they really want is not changes in higher education, but a revolution in society.

To buttress his multi-faceted attack on these “tenured radicals,” Kimball (who is managing editor of the *New Criterion*, art critic for *The Wall Street Journal*, and a former teacher at Yale University and Connecticut College) analyzes several academic events and symposia, some curricular changes in several of “our most prestigious” universities and colleges, and the writings and speeches of those who have led the assault on the bastions of Western civilization.

One such event that Kimball considers is the public symposium titled “The Humanities and the Public Interest,” which took place in 1986 at Yale University’s Whitney Humanities Center. According to a university press release, its purpose was “to re-examine the traditional association between the study of the humanities and the guardianship of humanistic values in the context of contemporary American society.” Another symposium took place at the same Center in 1987 and its goal was “to examine

the subject of literary theory and the curriculum.”

In his survey of the humanities, Kimball moves from literature to painting to architecture. In the chapter “Deconstruction Comes to Architecture,” he analyzes a daylong symposium sponsored by the Princeton School of Architecture in 1988 with the title “Architecture and Education: The Past Twenty-Five Years and Assumptions for the Future”; a debate sponsored by the graduate programs in architecture and design criticism at the Parsons School of Design in New York City in 1988; and the Museum of Modern Art exhibition in 1988, titled “Deconstructionist Architecture.”

In his examination of these areas, Kimball finds a common thread (and threat): the attack on the traditional values of Western civilization and on the criteria for determining what is to be taught in the humanities.

Typical of this assault on the traditional works studied in the humanities is an essay by Professor Robert Scholes of Brown University titled “On Cultural Literacy: Canon, Class Curriculum,” included in *Salmagundi*, “an influential quarterly of the humanities published by Skidmore College.” Taking Bennett’s *To Reclaim a Legacy* as the basis for his comments, Scholes wrote: “I am opposed to the establishment of a canon in humanistic studies because I believe such a move to be fundamentally undemocratic: a usurpation of curricular power by the federal government.” This belief that “democracy” must replace “meritocracy” has resulted in the destabilization of the traditional curriculum (Homer, the Bible, the ancient Greek playwrights, Latin masterpieces, Dante, the Elizabethans, etc.) and the emergence of works by writers whose chief merit was their reflection of diversity of class, gender, and race — the ersatz trinity.

This new criterion for inclusion in the humanities represents “the dominant

current of opinion in our most prestigious institutions of higher education" —Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Johns Hopkins, Columbia, Brown, Duke — and, most notoriously, Stanford University, where the Faculty Senate voted to introduce a group of courses called "Culture, Ideas, Values," all of which had to incorporate "'works by women, minorities and persons of color' and at least one work each quarter must address issues of race, sex, or class." And since universities like Stanford, Harvard, and Yale have tremendous influence, their changes in the curriculum were bound to be followed by less renowned colleges.

The leaders of this pervasive attack on higher education are entrenched in important positions in places like Duke University, Yale, Harvard, Stanford, Brown, and reputable institutions like the Modern Language Association and the American Council of Learned Societies. They include the followers of the deconstructionist founders (Jacques Derrida and Paul De Man), "radical feminists," neo-Freudians, and neo-Marxists; they find support among departmental chairpersons and occasionally, even among deans and college presidents. They all, in varying degrees of stridency, question the wisdom of continuing "the canon," and they advocate a curriculum which would reflect the pluralism and the diversity of the world and thus facilitate the political agenda for transforming the world. The radical students of the 1960s and 1970s, according to Kimball, are now determining what is to be included and what is to be excluded in the teaching of the humanities.

Perhaps it would be helpful in gaining some historical perspective on the current controversy on the collegiate scene if we were to take another look at Jonathan Swift's "*The Battle of the Books*" (1704). Swift's tract, a contribution to the quarrel that had engaged many intellectuals in seventeenth-century France and En-

gland, dealt with the question of who was superior between the Ancients and the Moderns. Supporting his friend and patron, Sir William Temple, Swift sided with the Ancients. Swift uses the spider to symbolize the Moderns and the Bee to symbolize the Ancients. The spider maintains that, unlike the bee, whose "livelihood is an universal plunder upon nature; a freebooter over fields and gardens," it itself is "furnished with a native stock within myself. This large castle . . . is all built with my own hands and the materials extracted altogether out of my person."

The bee, in turn, maintains that it does "visit indeed all the flowers and blossoms of the field and the garden," and concludes:

. . . the question comes all to this — which is the nobler being of the two, that which by a lazy contemplation of four inches round, by an overweening pride, feeding and engendering on itself, turns all into excrement and venom, produces nothing at last, but flybane and a cobweb; or that which, by an universal range, with long search, much study, true judgment, and distinction of things, brings home honey and wax.

Put into a confrontational framework, Kimball's presentation does seem like a reconstruction (deconstruction?) of the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. If I must choose between the two opponents, I, like Swift, would favor the Ancients; that is, I would favor maintaining the traditional core of the humanities. And certainly Kimball, like those who entered the struggle before him, has much to say that is valid. Surely any disinterested viewer who has attended the radical feminist sessions at any of Modern Language Association annual conventions, must have felt that he was present at a meeting of the Mesdames Defarge of the twentieth century, ready to behead (or to castrate) *post mortem* the Dead White Male European Writers. And anyone with some ironic apprecia-

tion of clarity of thinking and writing will bewail the humorlessness and virulence of the feminists and other “tenured radicals”; and even when virulence is absent, one is lost in the obfuscation of their thinking and writing. It is also evident that their agenda is political rather than humanistic, that their goal is driven by special interests rather than by a spirit of disinterestedness. They fail to realize that the sound and the fury of the moment last only for the moment, that the gods of the sixties are false gods. In other words, they lack a sense of transcendence, an aspiration towards those values that go beyond class, gender, and race.

Still, Kimball’s book is not the definitive answer. He shouts so loudly that one can’t sometimes hear him for the noise; and rather than “sweetness and light,” his book transmits acridness and thunder. The book seems to be a loose collection of reprints rather than a cohesive articulation of what is wrong with higher education. Indeed, the “higher education” in the subtitle is misleading, since he deals only with the humanities (if, in fact, a professional discipline like architecture can be included in this designation). He gives only passing notice to the social sciences and none to the sciences. Furthermore, he assumes but does not prove that the changes in the humanities effected by Stanford, Yale, Harvard and the other universities are being emulated by the hundreds of four-year undergraduate colleges. Again, he assumes that there can be no argument concerning the meaning of such concepts as “truth,” “justice,” and “excellence.” He does not realize, for example, that such writers as John Milton, considered by Swift as one of the Moderns, is today labeled as one of the Ancients and is one of the “canon.” Kimball thinks that the certitude of ascertaining scientific truths can also apply to the ambiguities of making moral and aesthetic judgments.

Like Mark Anthony, Kimball condemns

with a spot; *i.e.*, by calling somebody a name — be it a “tenured radical,” “radical feminist,” “deconstructionist,” thus seeking to demolish their argument by a pejorative designation. He also fails to consider that the deterioration that has taken place in higher education may be caused by other factors, including poor pre-college education and the decadence that has blighted so much of our culture and society. He also seems oblivious of the reasons why radical feminists, minority pressure groups, etc. have arisen in the first place. Clearly they have arisen because all has not been perfect within the traditional system of education. No doubt the valuable works of women, minorities, and other non-Western cultures have been largely neglected, and those with vested interests in maintaining the system have wanted to perpetuate their holdings. What is needed, then, is not the spilling of more “Rivulets of Ink” and the augmentation of “the Virulence of both Parties,” but the replanting of the seeds of reasonable dialogue. If only Kimball had heeded the advice found at the end of his book: “One measure of the severity of that [educational] crisis is the extent to which a genuinely moderate center has collapsed in the face of ideological pressure from the Left.” Excessive pressure from the Right is not going to restore “the genuinely moderate center” so desperately needed today.

— *Reviewed by Milton Birnbaum*

The Humane Critic: A Dying Breed

An Appetite for Poetry, by Frank Kermode, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989. 242 pp. \$22.50.

THE CRISIS in literary criticism which has emerged in the last twenty years is now