

REVIEW ARTICLE

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After the Canon Wars

Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities. By John M. Ellis. New Haven: Yale UP, 1997. viii, 264 pages. \$25.00 US.

Reclaiming the Canon: Essays on Philosophy, Poetry, and History. By Herman L. Sinaiko. New Haven: Yale UP, 1998. xiv, 338 pages. \$35.00 US.

The Rise and Fall of English: Reconstructing English as a Discipline. By Robert Scholes. New Haven: Yale UP, 1998. xvi, 206 pages. \$20.00 US.

The Employment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future of Literary Studies. By Michael Bérubé. New York: New York UP, 1998. x, 262 pages. \$17.95 US, paper.

THE CANON WARS that have rocked departments of literature for the past decade have abated, at least for the time being. Both sides can claim a measure of success. Syllabi have been revised, anthologies updated, and new research directed at all manner of texts from places and eras near and far. At the same time, the value of the literary tradition has been reaffirmed, with students being required to take an increasing array of core courses, and with the public eagerly embarking on package tours of the classics, cour-

tesy of such bestsellers as Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1994) and David Denby's *Great Books* (1996).¹

Despite these gains, the heatedness of the canon debates, it appears, detracted attention from more fundamental issues. For one, serious discussion of what made literature valuable was woefully lacking, with arguments often lapsing into rote accusations of authoritarian essentialism or benighted relativism. What few of the contestants were willing to concede was that claims for either essentialism or relativism are impossible to assess in real terms. It was thus all too easy for contestants on either side to speak in the language of their opponents: those celebrating multiculturalism blithely assumed its universal desirability, while those defending "common humanity" blithely pointed out to their opponents that there already existed great diversity within the established canon. A return to more sophisticated accounts of value is now thankfully underway, though, as Michael Bérubé wryly observes, we are also being treated to the spectacle of prominent members of the cultural Left publicly professing "their love of literature (all of it, presumably) as if they were saying something meaningful" (vii–viii).² The cultural Right, as we shall see, has so far been unwilling to derive comfort or even rueful pleasure from this turn of events.

Quarrelling over dead white males was also easier, as John Guillory has remarked, than having to confront the more immediate problem of how the "market value" of literary study was fast declining in a society increasingly beholden to the boardroom idols

¹As Bérubé notes, the number of American universities offering core courses increased "in the past decade and a half" (36), during the very period, that is, when defenders of the canon routinely blamed revisionists for the "decline" of higher education.

²Bérubé cites recent defences of aesthetic beauty put forward by major theorists like Edward Said and Frank Lentricchia, and in such collections as *Aesthetics and Ideology*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1994). One might add to this list Richard Rorty's rallying cry for pragmatic aesthetes, "The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature" (*Raritan* 16.1 [Summer 1996]: 8–17), where he appeals to his fellow "romantic utopians" to spurn the grim attitude of "knowingness" evinced by cultural critics like Fredric Jameson—an appeal that (deliberately?) overlooks how Jameson has himself been criticized for his utopian idealism.

of efficiency and productivity.³ Not that we were too preoccupied with curricula to take note of the new realities of bulging classes, a depressed job market, the downsizing of faculty ranks, and the downloading of teaching duties upon grossly underpaid sessional instructors and assistants whose numbers now exceed the traditional professoriate's. It is rather that we were, and remain, unable to come up with a plausible justification for the liberal arts in the face of changing social and economic priorities. Although diagnoses of the problem, notably Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins* (1996), now regularly appear, we are uncertain, even confused as to how best to defend and publicize what we do. This confusion accounts perhaps for the recent Left defences of the aesthetic, and for the mutating of the canon debates into interdisciplinary "science wars" over the value of "postmodernist" interpretive work. And this confusion is most keenly felt within departments of English, where demands for both productivity and critical thought have resulted in professors being expected to perform a dizzying assortment of functions: providing service instruction in writing, lecturing undergraduates on the history of national literatures, training graduates in what has become a muddy soup of theories, and churning out research in cultural studies that can be said to erase the boundaries between fields and between the academy and the great beyond.

The four books under review all represent attempts to address this confusion and, by their marked disagreements with one another, all seem to reflect it. Their authors write with enviable lucidity and a strong commitment to reaching out to a larger audience beyond the disciplines. Three of them are distinguished senior professors who survey the current state of affairs from the perspective of having known what life was like in literature departments before the 'fall.' The fourth, Bérubé, is a young leftist critic who has already established himself as one of the most astute commentators on American cultural politics. It should be noted that I am of the same age as Bérubé and that I am in sympathy with some of his political beliefs and concerns. However, it is not, I think, for these reasons that I believe his book to be by far the best

³John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993) 45–46.

of the lot. It is because, in addition to being the wittiest, it is also the most sceptical, not least about current accounts of the fall.

John Ellis has made a career out of writing belated assessments of moribund critical movements. In 1974, when the various strands of Anglo-American New Criticism were being eclipsed by new imported theories, Ellis offered a searching examination of formalist assumptions, while still endorsing many of them, in *The Theory of Literary Criticism*. In 1988, when these imported theories were themselves being pushed aside by a burgeoning New Historicism and cultural studies, Ellis published *Against Deconstruction*, which exposed the weakness of many of that school's intellectual foundations. While one could question Ellis's own premises, as well as his sense of timing, one could always admire the rigour of his analyses.

Ellis's new book, *Literature Lost*, is rigorous only in the negative sense of the word. In his fury to denounce his latest target, the "race-gender-class critics," Ellis has written the kind of alarmist screed where the author ends up committing the same rhetorical violence that he criticizes his opponents for. Ellis attacks neo-historicists for engaging in "flagrant anachronism" by applying their "twentieth-century morality" to the works of the past (102), yet he is himself not above indulging in sweeping condemnations of entire cultures: "our knowledge" of precolonial peoples in Africa and the Americas, Ellis writes, "establishes that all the Western vices that race-gender-class scholars complain of were there, and more: human sacrifice, cannibalism, slavery, ethnic hatreds, rigidly hierarchical societies, and even a taste for cruelty and torture that would have put medieval Europe to shame" (29). Critics distort evidence, we are told, by ignoring shadings of opinion, yet Ellis himself wields a brutal hand, ripping quotations from their contexts in support of appalling guilt-by-association tauntings: citing a passage from *Mein Kampf* on the need to subordinate "the interests of the ego to the conservation of the community," Ellis claims that "most race-gender-class critics would readily assent to it" (118)—as, I presume, would most supporters of traffic laws! And, despite his repeated insistence that any form of moral or political advocacy in the academy constitutes a perversion of "intellectual freedom" (141), Ellis ends his book with a call to arms against the policies of affirmative action.

I would not spend much time on this loathsome tract were it not for three considerations. First, what Ellis says in defence of literature demonstrates how impoverished arguments for aesthetic value remain in some quarters, even as the canon wars have subsided. To judge from his chapter on evaluation in *The Theory of Literary Criticism*, Ellis is well aware of the complexity of the subject. It is surprising, then, that he has now been reduced to sputtering bald assertions about how “Western literature can claim universality ... precisely because the diversity of attitudes contained within it is so great” (47). Critics have been making such pronouncements for centuries, ever since the rise of empirical thinking led to a redefinition of literature’s function, which became less a matter of sweetening the eternal verities than of furnishing imaginative experiences by which readers could see life from the point of view of others. The idea of diversity or difference, in other words, has been a central assumption in talk about literary value for a long time. Yet the idea, and its inevitable counterpart “universality,” remain abstractions that can conceivably be used in support of any claim of value. The arbitrariness of these terms, and the fact that critics like Ellis refuse even to consider the truly vexing question of how exactly diversity can be accorded with universality, has made for a level of discourse during the canon wars that has seldom risen above the mere attestation of faith.

Secondly, Ellis’s claim that affirmative action has brought about the “intellectual catastrophe” (216) of political correctness needs to be addressed. Ellis’s timing is, again, a little off: the anti-PC campaigns in the media and the US Congress were at their fiercest at the beginning of the decade, during the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill imbroglio, while affirmative action was the hot issue of 1996, when voters in Ellis’s home state of California voted to abolish existing legislation. However, affirmative action and political correctness have had an impact upon university life, and not all of it has been to the good. There have been errors, inanities, and occasional injustices. We have all heard the stories. Yet Ellis ignores the economic realities. Had there been more available positions, there would have been far less grumbling about affirmative action in university hirings. As for political correctness, it has always seemed to me symptomatic of the current confusion within the academy, in that its proponents have clearly been motivated by

a desire to maintain a social role for critical thought, on matters of language and identity, precisely in response to a sense of its increasing irrelevance within society. That PC has become equated in the culture at large more with solemn moralism than with critical thinking suggests that it has proven to be another “too easy” way of dealing with the problem.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that there are many who share Ellis’s views. As we are told on the book-jacket blurb, Ellis is secretary/treasurer of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, a group pledged to combating what it sees as the ongoing takeover of literature departments by culture-hating ideologists. What is unclear about groups like Ellis’s is just how far they are willing to go in order to achieve their ends. Ellis hints darkly at what he thinks should be done when, at the close of his book, he enjoins faculty deans to find the courage to do what’s necessary: “they must emerge from their intimidated state and begin once again to act as the quality control of the academy” (230). The corporate jargon of “quality control” should alert us to what deans have actually been doing in recent years, “intimidated” as they have been less by cultural politics than by shrinking budgets. Elsewhere, Ellis describes a conflict within his own department between “literary radicals” and “real radicals,” as he calls them, over whether to teach the standard canon in order to criticize it, or to teach only “the literature of the downtrodden” (254n8). Ellis neglects to mention, however, both his own involvement in the conflict and the steps taken by his faculty dean to put an end to it. A recent issue of *Lingua Franca* reports that it was in fact Ellis who spearheaded a campaign against all “radicals,” and that the ensuing fracas was so bad that some faculty even refused to talk to a management consultant brought in by the dean to resolve the conflict. Once that effort at mediation proved futile, the dean, faced with budget cuts, took the opportunity to stop the madness by decimating the department’s complement, with Ellis himself being lured into early retirement in 1994.⁴ Better dead than rad, it seems.

A far different response from the Right has been to discount the significance of attacks on the canon, and to insist that the *dulce*

⁴Charlotte Allen, “As Bad As It Gets,” *Lingua Franca* 8.2 (March 1998): 52–59.

et utile of literary study remain as self-evident as ever. Despite its polemical title, *Reclaiming the Canon*, Herman Sinaiko's book scarcely addresses recent disputes, and refers only obliquely to "the learned experts who would monopolize access" to the great books (xi). The title may nonetheless suggest why a book like this has come to be published by a major university press, for I can see no reason for its existence other than to capitalize on current publicity about the canon and, in particular, on the popular success of contentious guides like Bloom's and Denby's. A prize-winning teacher, Sinaiko speaks grandly about "energizing the classroom" (241) through Socratic dialogue. Yet there is no evidence of dialogic energy in this book. It is little more than a collection of introductory lectures, some of them forty years old, in which Sinaiko sings the praises of his favourite authors, pontificates about "the human condition" (37ff.), and offers a series of commentaries of such crushing banality that I would be loath to accept them in a first-year paper (*Heart of Darkness*, Sinaiko typically offers, is "an interior journey, a voyage into the depths of the human soul" [134]). The only remarkable thing about this book is Sinaiko's monumental indifference to what's been happening during the past forty years, both within the academy and without. Even when the opportunity arises for him to defend the canon from outward challenge, Sinaiko looks the other way. *Heart of Darkness* has been the subject of intense debate ever since Chinua Achebe levelled the charge of racism at the novella over twenty years ago, yet Sinaiko never mentions race. The only woman writer he considers, Mary Shelley, is summarily put in her place: "we must never forget that *Frankenstein* is a first novel by a teenage girl" (150). And, as far as Sinaiko is concerned, it was David Hume who, in his 1757 essay on the topic, "once and for all accurately stated and resolved the problem of aesthetic taste" (213). One does not have to be a learned expert to recognize a dinosaur.

The most difficult position in American cultural politics to defend, at least rhetorically, is the centre. The challenge for centrists is that not only must they speak more measuredly than their opponents on either side, but they must also avoid making their position seem a reflection of the muddle that, invariably from their perspective, characterizes the contemporary intellectual scene. Robert Scholes has attempted to meet the challenge in his latest

book, *The Rise and Fall of English*, by means of the riskiest of rhetorical gambits, which has been to produce, Shandy-like, a book that only appears muddled. In his preface, Scholes presents himself as occupying “a militant middle position,” from which vantage he hopes to “sort out” the current “muddle” in English studies (ix). The extended essay that follows does not sort out the muddle, however, so much as heighten it in order to make its proposals for “radical” (ix) reform seem compelling. It is a wonderfully engaging performance, replete with anecdotes and personal recollections, self-conscious asides about how material has been recycled and “re-re-reframed” (88) for inclusion in the book, practical advice on teaching composition (use bad examples of your own devising), a lengthy proposal for an alternative English course for high school seniors, and digressions on subjects ranging from the need for accuracy in citations to the knowledge required to interpret bumper stickers. Yet the skill of the performance does not quite succeed in disguising the book’s central flaw, which is that, like most rhetorical performances, it has to do more with inspiring faith than with confronting the problems at hand.

The difficulty for Scholes is that he seeks a faith that is without theological or metaphysical foundation. Scholes begins by rehearsing the familiar story of the ‘rise’ of English departments at the end of the last century, when the study of literature gradually displaced instruction in rhetoric. He describes how the change was often celebrated by literature professors in nostalgic accounts of how they underwent “conversion” to the glories of poetry—one of these conversion narratives is reproduced in triplicate on the book’s cover. Scholes then tells of his own conversion experience (*Death of a Salesman*, he says, “changed my life”), yet insists that this kind of conversion is no longer desirable because it promotes “a terrifying divergence” between the sacred joys of humane learning and the profane demands of “business and public life” (18). The kind of conversion he now seeks is of a decidedly more worldly nature. As a model, he cites, of all people, Louis Althusser, whose success in promoting his forbiddingly outerworldly version of Marxism was, by his own admission, owing to an early conversion to professionalism. Althusser tells of how he had been initially drawn to philosophy out of admiration for his charismatic teachers, but failed to make much progress in his studies until he became proficient at

deploying the “artifices” of academic discourse (63), or what Scholes calls “the tricks of the trade” (62).

Now it is at this point that there appears what in Althusserian theory used to be called a “gap” in Scholes’ ideological edifice. Althusser’s narrative is not, strictly speaking, one of conversion. He speaks instead of discovering his own “fraudulence” in being able (in Scholes’ phrase) “to manipulate the entire French university system” with Machiavellian dexterity (64). Althusser’s story is, in other words, a “fraud” confession of the kind now exchanged among academics almost as routinely as tales of conversion once were. His true conversion, to the “ground” (64) of Marxism, would come later. But Scholes is not interested in theologies like Marxism, nor is he bothered by Althusser’s dismissal of his own youthful careerism. For Scholes, the artifices that Althusser employed were in fact “good rhetorical habits” (65), precisely the type of skills that Scholes believes ought to be taught to students in order to enable them to cope, get ahead, and/or change the world. And so it is that, within a few pages, Scholes has made the leap from fraudulence to faith by telling literature professors that “the only way to recover faith in ourselves and our project” (81) is to stage a bold return to rhetoric.

There is no denying the utility of much of what Scholes is recommending. Students ought to be introduced to the culture and discourse of the discipline of English, much like what has long been done in undergraduate training in other academic fields. And innovative programs like Applied Language Studies or Scholes’ own in Media Studies will certainly grow in proportion as they are able to provide students with the means to participate in a world of increasingly diverse “textuality.” (I am reluctant, though, to endorse Scholes’ final call “to replace the canon of texts with a canon of methods” [145], if only because I think we should not canonize our methods but seek to refine and update them even more readily than we revise our literary canons.) However, Scholes’ plea on behalf of pragmatic utilitarianism is not easy to reconcile with his hope that skills training will not only “empower” (149) students to think critically about the world but help us “find our way to truthfulness” (151). The gap in Scholes’ project is thus a very old one since he is asking us to believe, much as the classical rhetoricians did, that the best orators are also morally responsible people—*bonus orator bonus vir*, in the ancient formula. But there remain no

reasonable grounds for supporting this belief. Or, to put it in terms more directly applicable to Scholes' project, pragmatic instruction in the tricks of the trade recognizes no role or warrant for intellectual doubt.⁵ It is not necessary, perhaps, to have a theology or other ideological foundation in order to think critically about theologies and ideologies. Yet being able to do without one has become of late the most prevalent of easy hopes.

The first entry in the index to Michael Bérubé's book reads "Academe: cynicism in" (253). I presume this is a joke though, like most of Bérubé's mordant riffs, a serious one. Bérubé well understands why cynicism is inevitable in a situation where most new PhDs in literature, after devoting years of study to mastering such things as "the counterhegemonic post-excremental sublime" (86), will likely end up doing years of shitwork teaching composition. Yet Bérubé hopes to answer such cynicism not by trying to restore our faith but by providing a clear-eyed diagnosis of what currently ails the profession of English as distinct from what perennially ails it. He does, it is true, espouse a populist ethos of voluntarism, as in his conclusion, where he encourages professors to get involved in debates on socio-economic policy and to counter the threat of economic globalization with "an alternative conception of national identity" (238). And, as is common among the cultural Left, he at times assumes, uncritically, that progressive thought is the same thing as critical thought. When he quotes with approval Andrew Ross's summons to progressive educators "to seed all kinds of institutions" with "progressive intellectuals" (168), I question whether the emphasis in his stated desire to have the university serve "as a democratic corrective to the inequalities of capitalism" (166) falls more upon "corrective" than "democratic."

That said, Bérubé's idealism is tempered by an awareness that the "increasingly dehumanizing" (89) conditions for many in the English profession cannot be remedied simply by announcing one's devotion to literature, country, or critical creed. If narratives

⁵Both Ellis and Scholes criticize Stanley Fish's pragmatic professionalism as being in fact an unacknowledged theology, but it is Bérubé who offers the most cogent analysis of how Fish's persistent dismissal of "critical thinking" is rooted in an unreflective "metaphysics of stasis" (157).

of the 'fall' are now as common as reports of 'crisis' once were, it is because humanists have confused long-standing disputes over the value or utility of what they do, with economic anxieties that currently afflict not just arts faculties but nearly every human being on the planet. Of course, these problems are related in some way. Governments and trustees may have cause to wonder how it is that humanists, who cannot even seem to agree on reading lists for their courses, can nonetheless earnestly plead for cash so as to maintain their profession's 'health.' But it is an inability to disentangle these problems, to see precisely how they are and are not related, that has resulted in academics believing that these problems can be solved by mere attestations of faith and yet, in doing so, enslaving themselves to the "moral numbness of compartmentalization."⁶

Thus, while Bérubé sees the "need to find a rhetoric of justification for literary study" (34), he also recounts in detail some of the consequences of arrogantly assuming that one's professional behaviour and self-image are not influenced by fiscal imperatives. His tales are many, and dispiriting: of the shoddy behaviour of left-wing faculty at Yale who supported their university's strong-arm tactics in quashing the attempts of its graduate TAs to unionize, even though these professors "*had no direct stake in the prospect of unionization*" (48); of senior professors who call for a return to "real standards" in research yet conveniently overlook how the glut in publishing has been caused by search committees so spoiled by the oversupply of PhDs that they now expect candidates to possess credentials that would put many senior professors to shame; of defenders of the humanities who claim that the fungibility of a liberal arts degree prepares students for the multiple career changes they will inevitably face, yet fail to see how this claim merely proposes the liberal arts "as the best college training regime for a new workforce that will have to jump from task to task and from layoff to layoff" (164–65); and of self-professed radicals who want to instruct as many graduate students as possible on how to read through the distortions of "capitalist culture," yet who are blind to

⁶The phrase is Barbara Ehrenreich's, from her foreword to *Will Teach for Food: Academic Labour in Crisis*, ed. Cary Nelson (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1997) xi.

what is actually being asked of these students: “programs of study in which they will devote seven to ten years of their lives, during which they will teach introductory undergraduate courses at about \$2,500 per course (without benefits), so that, after a decade, they can have about an 80 percent chance of teaching piece-work courses at local colleges for about \$1,250 per course (without benefits). And the reason we should continue, and even expand, this organization of pedagogical labor [these radicals argue] is that *it will teach graduate students about capitalism*” (81–82).

Bérubé admits to ambivalence over how to deal with the current woes in literature departments. He rightly says that a dismal job market “will do more to damage the profession” (67) than attacks from the Right on the alleged corruption of the humanities. We have a professional obligation, he insists, to do what we can to help PhDs find rewarding employment, and to that end he provides a few concrete suggestions, including an already controversial recommendation that departmental “deadwood” be offered early retirement.⁷ Yet he knows that this obligation cannot be met simply by trying to affirm the value of literary study. Coming up with public rationales for what we do is a somewhat different obligation, though one that is no less incumbent upon us to meet. Bérubé’s suggestions on this score are, he concedes, open to serious challenge. He proposes, for example, that literary and cultural studies be merged in the form of courses on “World writing in English” (34), a change that might appeal to the multicultural interests of global capitalism. I have my traditionalist’s doubts about this suggestion. In my experience, students find Dryden or Pope *far* more culturally “different” than Rushdie or Achebe; more importantly, I remain unconvinced that reading widely for difference, as distinct from depth or difficulty, necessarily leads to either finer or more synoptic readings. Yet, whatever the merits of Bérubé’s specific

⁷Bérubé proposed this in an earlier collaboration with Cary Nelson, *Higher Education under Fire: Politics, Economics, and the Crisis of the Humanities* (New York: Routledge, 1995). The suggestion, he now reports, elicited angry responses from graduate students, who charged that he and Nelson were either encouraging administrators to reduce faculty complements or attempting to “weed out the field of job seekers and job holders so as to pave the way for more ‘superstar’ faculty” (73–74).

proposals, his book makes the strongest and most eloquent case I know for the need both to justify literary study in the face of new economic realities, and to recognize just how deep the confusion has been in response to those realities.

The irony of the situation, as he points out, is that the public is now more interested than ever in forms of culture, from Hollywood product to on-line bookstores to Renoir exhibits. And, as the range and quantity of these forms increase, people seem to be becoming savvier consumers of culture—first-year students already demonstrate a healthy “hermeneutics of suspicion” toward advertising. Cognitive scientists have even begun to examine how our minds may be biologically hardwired to make sense of experience first and foremost through narrative and metaphor.⁸ One would think it would be easy to defend the value of making sense of this most fundamental way of making sense, but it isn’t.

⁸For a superb rendition of this claim, see Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996).