

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets.* By Helen Vendler. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997. x, 672 pages. \$35.00 US.

The academic consensus, which on this issue at least includes some very tough-minded types, is that Helen Vendler is our best reader of poetry. This encounter between Best Reader and Best Writer does not disappoint, though it will irritate some and bemuse others: irritate because it offers apt objections to some recent commentary on the sonnets, and validates those objections by wickedly relevant citation, and because of the 'line in the sand' it draws: "I do not regard as literary criticism any set of remarks about a poem which would be equally true of its paraphrasable propositional content." It will bemuse some because of its density, the difficulty of its ideas, and the changing modes of attack necessary to avoid redundancy in the discussion of all 154 sonnets, but it will bemuse especially because of what Vendler acknowledges as an off-putting use of diagrams in an effort to be succinct. (Characteristically, Vendler suggests that those put off by diagrams simply ignore them.)

For all this *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* will disappoint very few. First, it is three books in one: a reprint of the 1609 Quarto; Vendler's own new edition, a diplomatic text of the sonnets; and a collection of essays on each. In addition there's a bonus, a compact disk with Vendler's 'performance' of some of the best known pieces. Offering these readings is insightful and daring rather than self-indulgent. Shakespeare writes for the ear; the expressiveness of his phrasing and verbal texture is often grasped more quickly through a 'performance' of the text than through poring over the page. So few of us seem to be good at reading poetry aloud that in *Practical Criticism* I. A. Richards sternly warned prospective teachers not to try it in the classroom. But Vendler's readings are effective, and parallel her analyses as well as confirming her love of the sonnets. The Harvard Press is to be commended in keeping the price of this plenty comparatively low; evidently they expect, and the book deserves, large sales.

*The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Vendler acknowledges, is not for reading through, but for dipping into. The essays on individual sonnets are for the most part brief, but reflect the intensity and the rewards of her nine years' labour. The two pages on Sonnet 44, to take an example at random (one of the easy ones, it turns out), relates the thought of the sonnet to that of Sonnets 27 and 45 and to "the usual Platonic/Christian dualism," shows how the sonnet plays the "fiction of spatial instantaneity" against the "fact of time" and moves from noting a paradox centring on "thought" to demonstrating the

course of the sonnet from self-reminder to ridicule and then to deflation and tears. As if to underline the lucidity of her account, Vendler leaves it to most readers to discover elsewhere that a clepsydra (mentioned in passing) is a water-clock. Vendler's delicious sonnet-pastiche in the Introduction (4–5) may prompt us to wonder if the needlessly exotic clepsydra is not also a bit of mischief.

The short essays are workday reading, but the Introduction is a delight, a well-argued and demonstrated entrée to poetry, to the sonnet, to Shakespeare as a sonnet-writer, and to some wrong turns and main roads of criticism. The Introduction leaves us with what Vendler hopes for the readers of her individual commentaries—"the elation of seeing what Shakespeare is up to."

Vendler is sturdily direct about her formalist position: the *Sonnets* are poems, that is, "a writer's projects invented to amuse and challenge his own capacity for inventing artworks ... beautiful, too, exhibiting the double beauty that Stevens called 'the poetry of the idea' and 'the poetry of words'." This is no rejection of the idea that poems are also "formal mimeses of the mind and heart in action" and hence "representations-of human reality," but only an insistence that the question of mimesis is, for Vendler, not a primary concern. Formal analysis belongs to Firstness; referential and contextual analyses to Secondness or to categories more remote.

Among the fruits of her own formal analyses are a conviction of the aesthetic necessity rather than the (frequently argued) superfluity of Shakespeare's couplets, an understanding of the subversive quality of his thought and language, and a teasing out of the complex links and mutual undoings among the quatrains.

I don't want to damn the book with too loud praise. The commentaries seem in a few instances unnecessarily difficult; the treatment of sound repetition sometimes arbitrary. One wants to raise the issue of circumstances of composition that must be understood *prior* to formal analysis. And there is always the issue that dogs minutely close reading: at the extreme (as with the numerological revelations of Fowler and Hieatt), whether lexical and other patterns laboriously discovered can actually affect reader response. To inquire thus, Shakespeare's contemporaries might have said of the discovery of such patterns, is to inquire too curiously. According to Frost, "the poem is entitled to everything in it." But perhaps Aristotle defined the issue when he proposed as a standard that works be "of a certain size and magnitude," that is, that their structures be perceptible under the conditions of reception implicit in the genre. None of these considerations is intended to detract from Vendler's achievement. *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* is a book that anyone serious about poetry will want to have close by.

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*Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings*. Edited by Frederick Wegener. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996. xvii, 331 pages. \$29.95 US.

The most immediate value of *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings* is that it makes accessible in one volume Wharton's critical essays, reviews and tributes, along with her prefaces and introductions (both to her own work and that of others) that have remained scattered among various magazines and sequestered in American archival collections. For this alone, Wharton scholars should be indebted to the industry and sturdy scholarship of editor Frederick Wegener. His accompanying notes are illustrative and complete, while his capacious introduction situates Wharton's critical body of prose in relation to her fiction, assesses both internal problems and those relating to its reception by Wharton scholars, and speculates on Wharton's ambivalence toward her role as critic—an insecurity based at least partly on the traditional allocation of criticism to the masculine sphere.

Seeing Wharton's criticism holistically is rather different from looking at the various essays in isolation, for not only is their organicism and consistency more apparent, but the essays enrich one another, often in surprising ways; for example, "A Reconsideration of Proust" not only solidifies many of the comments in "Marcel Proust," the final essay in what has remained until now the only book of Wharton's criticism, *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), but can be considered as a response to the unanswered question in "Visibility in Fiction"—how the novelist of character or manners achieves "the aliveness of the characters" that Wharton sees as the hallmark of the greatest novels (163). Although "A Reconsideration of Proust" fails to answer this ultimately insoluble question, it does provide numerous and direct illustrations of this faculty at work in a man of "creative genius" (180).

Perhaps most significant is the opportunity this collection affords Wharton scholars to assess for themselves not only the nature and scope of Wharton's criticism, but also its strengths and weaknesses. Previously, those whose work was concerned only marginally with Wharton the critic either laboriously sought out what was available or relied on those few existing analyses of Wharton's criticism. In the most complete study to emerge, Penelope Vita-Finzi's *Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction* (1990), the author characterizes Wharton's theory of fiction as "confused and repetitious" (46) while appearing frustrated by Wharton's lack of specificity in defining the esoteric nature of inspiration and the imaginative process; for these reasons, Vita-Finzi chooses to circumvent the criticism in her search for Wharton's "art of fiction," a rejection that underscores the neglect of recent scholarship. Wegener hardly exaggerates when he claims that "it would be difficult to name an equally substantial body of critical work by another writer of [Wharton's] stature that has gone conspicuously unnoticed for so long" (43).

Leaving aside the largely ancillary literary reviews (often of drama, poetry, or non-fiction books, such as travel or architecture), the tributes, eulogies, and early letters to the editor, one can divide Wharton's critical essays into those that discuss the role of criticism and the critic and those that address some aspect of fiction critically. Although in most essays Wharton's principal aim is to put forward or reiterate a critical or theoretical construct—the importance of form or design, the “visibility” of character, and the like—others seem intended essentially to contest a prevalent aesthetic doctrine or belief. For example, “The Great American Novel” is largely polemical, scornfully attacking what Wharton sees as the over-democratization of American fiction, the substitution, in Wharton's rather notorious dismissal, of “the man with the dinner-pail” for “the social and educated being” (155). (In “A Cycle of Reviewing,” she is much more liberal, perhaps because it is Wharton herself under attack for writing “only about the rich” [161]; here she repudiates the idea that “certain categories of human beings are of less intrinsic interest than others” [162].)

Typically, an almost purely polemical essay like “The Great American Novel,” along with her late, linked essays, “Tendencies in Modern Fiction” and “Permanent Values in Fiction,” fail to offer alternatives to the condition Wharton finds intolerable; yet, it is not so much this as her repeated complaints about the preponderance of “theory” and purposeless technique in the fiction of her contemporaries that has led scholars to dismiss her views as reactionary. A basis for her often harsh rhetoric can be found in “A Reconsideration of Proust.” Though Wharton professed *admiration* for a handful of her younger contemporaries, such as Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, she strongly *identified* with Proust in this essay, no doubt seeing herself too at the end of “the long and magnificent line of nineteenth century novelists” (182), like Austen, Tolstoy, Balzac, and Thackeray. Wharton's implicit positioning of herself at the end rather than the beginning of a tradition could at least help account for her categorical resistance to “new ‘forms’” (176) and the belligerent tone one often discerns in her critiques of modernism—especially the self-defensiveness of her posturing.

Other weaknesses emerge in Wharton's criticism: inconsistencies and occasional contradictions, repetitiveness, and, at times, her frustrating tendency toward vagueness and generalization; yet, these faults are compensated for, though not entirely redeemed, by the strengths collectively exhibited here. For the most part, Wharton was a disinterested critic whether she was assessing an individual work or a writer's career, using her own criteria of the good critic as one who judges “the depth of the author's nature, the richness of his imagination, and the extent to which he is able to realize his intention” (162). Her objectivity also extended to writers with whom she shared common aesthetic goals, such as Henry James and Proust. Wegener's inclusion in an appendix of “The Art of Henry James,” by Morton Fullerton (in which Wharton acted—to what degree is uncertain—as editor and possi-

ble collaborator), seems puzzling; yet, if nothing else, this essay, marked by flamboyant statements and flagrant partisanship, contrasts startlingly with Wharton's restrained, though highly allusive, prose and balanced impartiality. (Another misplaced essay in this collection of critical writings is the reminiscence "A Little Girl's New York," originally planned as part of a sequel to *A Backward Glance*.)

Wharton approached fiction, as Wegener puts it, with "an inveterate, highly developed formal awareness still relatively rare among American and English critics" in the early twentieth century (23), while her sense of the validity of critical discourse marked a seriousness of approach exceeded at the time, perhaps, only by James. "The Criticism of Fiction," Wharton's 1914 response to James's recent remarks about the lack of an English critical tradition, argues for the importance of a critical school or formal discipline of the kind that had long existed in France. Here, as in "A Cycle of Reviewing," where Wharton responds to the vagaries of critics toward her own work over a twenty-five-year period, she defines what is required but absent in the English critic as a "range of reference" and a "sense of form" (123). Pervading her essays on the art of criticism is her insistence that the reviewer has a significant role to play in conveying the author's "inward vision" (162). Notably in "The Criticism of Fiction" but implicitly throughout her critical prose, Wharton makes large, almost apostolic, claims for a native-bred discipline of criticism. While one may not always agree with her specific judgements, few critics today will dispute Wharton's solicitations on behalf of an informed criticism that engages fully and honestly with the creative process on the basis of an equal partnership. Ultimately, Wharton's judgement on the integral value of the critical faculty may be her legacy as a critic.

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*Apparatus*. By Don McKay. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997. 80 pages. \$12.99 paper.

It's got straps and screws and nuts and bolts, leather and wood and steel, a baton topped off with a shiny red ball like a bloody fist, like a pumping heart, "that single stroke kachunker with its grab, give, / grab." The drum pedal cut into the cover of Don McKay's latest book of poetry (a pedal belonging, incidentally, to Halifax indie drummer Andy Miller) is the heart as rhythmic instrument, flesh made tool.

"ap•pa•ra•tus—things provided as means to some end; a set of implements for performing a particular purpose"—but McKay's phenomenological sleight-of-hand strips the drum pedal (or cat, cow, spoon) of its utility to look at the thing in itself, to "bring it to the music / and get back to the heart." So we get spoon "whose eloquence / is tongueless, witless, fingerless, / an ab-

sent egg” and “rubber boots that squirm in their skins so / horny they say only foot foot puddle puddle.” Keep in mind this is a guy who’ll tell you, over beer, the difference between a ‘gizmo’ and a ‘thingy.’

Editor for Brick Books, birder, hockey and cop-show aficionado, McKay was editor of *The Fiddlehead* and professor of English at the University of New Brunswick and the University of Western Ontario (respectively) before attempting post-academic life in BC. Author of seven previous collections, his books—including this one—have thrice been nominated for the Governor General’s Award for Poetry, which he received for 1991’s *Night Field*. Compared to his earlier stuff, *Apparatus* feels darker and lighter—darker as the century’s suicidal tilt continues, lighter due to his deft, attentive touch. While it takes several readings to feel the pull and sway of the book as a whole, McKay spent six years fine-tuning this collection and it shows in the nifty elegance of a turned line, a word skimmed like a grace-note.

In each piece, without exception, the poet’s eye and ear and mind is a single quivering antenna that catches subtle changes and responds in kind. You don’t read this for the cheap thrill or instant hit; these are poems like the “intimate scritch” of blades on ice described in “50/50 Draw,” “the noise of an old phonograph needle that sits, humbly, this side of the melody it unlocks, a fierce delicate carving ... an etching of feathers.” Like jazz or good, slow sex, these poems require and reward attentive listening; McKay, master of line-breaks and the apt, dropped phrase, offers timing and spatial arrangements as precise as any score. For example, in “Ode To My Car”:

the clutch

performs the sigh with which the lovers shift into  
more comfortable  
 positions:  
 there.

As one thing shifts to another, each metamorphosis, each key change, is caught and laid on the page—ancient Greece to apocalypse, eloquence to slang (“Such is the loss, such / the wrath of swiftfooted godlike / Achilles, the dumb fucker ...”). In “Early Instruments” sound bleeds into itself like a single-shot camera sweep: “The saw tooth tasting / maple. The cradle, the cup, the muscle” of mother and lover as he sweeps from the sublime to your backyard, this poet who had a garage sale complete with ball cap and barter lingo, then wrote a philosophical essay on the experience; “a guy who once wrote love poems, if you can believe it, using hockey metaphors.”

McKay is the guest at the party who nurses his drink in a corner, coming up with the quips, the apt phrase, the wise crack; humour here isn’t the requisite dead weight of irony but something quirkiest and infinitely dark: “To feel our heavy heads,” in “Songs for Beef Cattle,” “becoming knock-knock jokes / who’s there / kabonk, Big Mac”—or the family at home after

the death of a child with “the great great / grandmother staring bleakly from her portrait. / It is just what she might have suspected.”

The book falls into five parts (trademark ornithological passion evident in each), opening with a series of brief, distinct poems like small songs. The second part, “Snowlight,” moves through death and its aftermath, pain’s white space which closes on a note of desire, of possibility. After all, there are “Fates Worse Than Death,” and this section—the book’s bitter centre—makes mortality look suddenly desirable (better to “be red, then dead, / than anything in between”) since its opposite isn’t immortality, as we had hoped, but *ummortality*, which we have made:

Unmortality Incorporated

No shadow. All day  
it is noon it is no one. All day  
it utters one true sentence jammed  
into its period. Nothing is to be allowed  
to die but everything gets killed  
and then reclassified: the death of its death  
makes it an art form. Hang it.  
Prohibit the ravens. Prohibit the coyotes.  
Prohibit the women with their oils and cloths and  
weep weep weeping. Tattoo this extra letter  
on the air:

*This is what we can do.*

The lament quickens to its feverish climax at the close of “Stretto” where the poet finally snaps—“yup, here I am with the hook old chum. Hardly Fair, what? Now gnash this:”—going over and over the top, a guitarist out on a manic solo that leaves us stunned, leaves us gaping until he snaps it shut with such ferocity that there is no doubt who is in control.

Small wonder that the fourth section walks us, paddles us out of that despair by turning to wilderness: what is left. For McKay, wilderness isn’t (just) the Greenpeaced rainforest but the song of something other than our colonized selves. “Think of that shade behind the beat,” he says, “that jazz lag which, / by being barely place, is most so: / ... where the voice / keeps its desire to eat dirt.” Wilderness is death, desire, “the one you dwell toward and mustn’t catch,” a hole which complements the heart, a pause, wildflowers blooming between rail ties, longing allowed to be, a breathing space where he waits, “parked in neutral.”

If the space between the notes brings music from noise, it’s contact with this wilderness which allows for human being, allows us to move from manic despair “To Danceland,” the book’s last section, which shows us what we can also make. The dubbed glove speaks, the cylinders sing, though the real equipment which sings is our own, clumsy with possibilities, lungs and tongue and heart.

The heart, in fact, is the book's dominant image, stripped of romance and pretence, stripped even of what we've come to think of as love. McKay's hearts don't sigh, they honk and stutter and two-step, too large, "an umbrella / in a closet." Above all the heart is itself, muscle pumping blood, "pumping iambs," bleeding language into being. By simply pointing to this beating and pausing, he offers an alternative to the book's central darkness, to the colonized incest of late-twentieth-century will-power. McKay offers love as a look at what is, with desire tipped perpetually towards home. For "there is no home and there is no arrival," says Saskatchewan writer Tim Lilburn in an essay contributing to this ongoing conversation. "To imagine there are is to still colonize what is with fantasy and, thus, to abandon the genius of desire."

*Apparatus* feels urgent and sad and infused with a necessary, pessimistic hope. The poet has taken his mind for a walk on a long leash, letting it nose around in the bushes, where it finds that what makes us human *is* this nosing around, this contact with wilderness, the desire for something other. "This is the reason," says poet Robert Bringhurst, "for musicians," for McKay who sets up the drums and waits to feel the beat. "To speak it / and keep it"—and let go.

The real treat here is that this, like most poetry, is useless. He isn't even holding the ol' mirror up to nature saying 'This is what we are,' just saying *this is*; the book is itself an offering, a gesture, the song for the sake of the singing. And it's this utter uselessness of poetry which is, paradoxically, its function. McKay's poems are themselves apparatus, tools for being: the songs, the singing, the wilderness fringe place "where language frays back into air," the shining things-in-themselves. The heart beat.

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*Resistance of the Heart: Intermarriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany.* By Nathan Stoltzfus. New York: Norton, 1996. xxix, 386 pages. \$40.00.

The central event analyzed by Nathan Stoltzfus has been known since the end of the war, but scarcely written about. In February–March 1943, several hundred 'aryan' spouses (predominantly women) publicly protested in Berlin against the arrest and pending deportation of their Jewish husbands or wives and 'half-breed' (*Mischling*) children to Auschwitz. This protest led to the release of over 1,700 of them. As early as 1948, English-speaking readers had been made aware of the street demonstrations by the translated wartime diaries of Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels and especially those of anti-Nazi newspaperwoman Ruth Andreas-Friedrich. Nevertheless, when the author began to investigate the subject in 1985, "not a single scholarly article" and no more than "a couple of dozen," mostly cursory German sources on it existed (289–90). Having decided to set the story within the context of Ger-



man-Jewish intermarriage during the Third Reich, Stoltzfus pursued documentary research in West Germany and in the former German Democratic Republic, particularly among the massive testimony from the uncompleted postwar trial of Berlin Gestapo chief Otto Bovensiepen. He also conducted dozens of interviews in Israel, the US and elsewhere with protesters and their persecutors alike. These revealing and often moving oral histories are interwoven throughout the book with evidence derived from archival records to produce an extremely persuasive interpretation of the protest and its significance.

The author maintains that what the Nazis considered as interracial marriages—both partners were, in fact, Germans—constituted a fundamental contradiction of and challenge to their racial ideology. And indeed, some of these unions were consciously entered into prior to the enactment of the Nuremberg racial laws on 15 September 1935 in anticipation that this legislation would ban them, as it did. Logically, therefore, such marriages ought to have been the most immediate objects of Nazi attack, amounting as they did in the eyes of the regime to ongoing 'race pollution.' Notwithstanding constant attempts by government and party officials, interfering members of the public, and even their own families to intimidate or persuade intermarried couples to divorce, for the most part the partners seem to have defied these threats and blandishments. Hitler and Goebbels were no less determined to break up such households, but they feared the political repercussions of separating thousands of families who had countless 'aryan' relatives. The upshot was that those in intermarriages tried to lead 'normal' lives amid a maze of anti-Jewish regulations aiming to impoverish them through loss of employment and divide them by bizarre gradations in status. Thus, hitherto childless German-Jewish couples found themselves straining to start families: though their offspring would be subject to severe discrimination as *Mischlinge* they also could help to protect so-called 'privileged' mixed marriages from even worse mistreatment (eventually 'resettlement' to the east), just as their 'aryan' partners usually saved Jews from the ultimate fate of most of their co-religionists.

This is one broad aspect of the background to the Rosenstrasse protest: the years of silent but unyielding struggle by racially mixed couples and their children against the Nazi norm of married life. The other involves the role of women generally in wartime Germany, since they after all made up the bulk of the protesters. By the beginning of 1943 women comprised the single most important group of Germans with respect to maintaining domestic morale. Yet, their response to the call by Goebbels for 'total war' following the Wehrmacht's defeat at Stalingrad (31 January/18 February 1943) was notably tepid. If not resisters, German women were certainly displaying the same sort of detachment from the war effort as they had shown towards the end of the previous world conflict, and which Hitler and other leading Nazis firmly believed had significantly influenced its outcome. Therefore the most

far-seeing, or the least secure Nazi officials, were psychologically prepared to appease the relatively few German women married to Jews who wanted 'only' to save their husbands and preserve their families, just as these same officials declined to force females to enrol in the armament industries of the Reich.

If Stoltzfus's argumentation in this regard is necessarily somewhat speculative, it is nevertheless plausible. Beyond any doubt whatsoever, though, is the stubborn humanity which shines through the reminiscences of his interviewees from the Rosenstrasse. Their individual taped autobiographies, despite some repetition and trivialities, very judiciously illustrate the private impact of the chillingly brutal decrees, orders and actions emanating from their tormentors. The author's wise decision by and large to "stay out of the way" and let these accounts speak for themselves (297) enables the reader to become intimately involved in the lives of the most voluble of them. We share their travails—the neighbourly feces spread on their doorstep, being spat upon from head to foot by elderly women, the SS threatening to open fire to disperse the crowd in the Rosenstrasse—but also their rarer moments of triumph and happiness: for example, enraging a Gestapo officer by subtly calling into question his humanity (240) and especially the warm familial relations some Gentile women enjoyed with their new-found Jewish friends and in-laws after being disowned by their parents and siblings, until most of the former disappeared eastwards. The book's technique of regularly referring to persons by their first name once introduced has the effect of leaving one personally saddened to learn in the epilogue that Charlotte and Julius Israel as well as other pairs divorced shortly after the war in spite, or possibly because, of the sacrifices and devotion both had earlier displayed. Perhaps the 'half-Jewish' son of one intermarriage was right after all when he said of the Rosenstrasse protesters that "there were no heroes, just dirt in underwear. People were driven in despair to defend what they saw as essential to themselves, and their acts only now appear to be acts of great courage" (349n22).

This is among the perspectives on the essential value of the Rosenstrasse protest that Stoltzfus carefully considers in his final chapter assessing the resistance quality of the behaviour displayed there. He concludes that the self-defence of intermarried Germans who remained loyal to their Jewish family members "was the defense of Jews—a noble selfishness" (268). This characteristic, to be sure, was hardly commonplace, and like Daniel Jonah Goldhagen—though invariably in much more measured language—the author repeatedly insists that 'ordinary Germans' contributed fundamentally to genocide by first and willingly isolating Jews socially. Stoltzfus clearly acknowledges the uniquely murderous nature of the anti-Semitism pursued by the Nazi leadership, but he also calls for "an increased focus on the civilian role in Nazi power and crimes" which "will begin to bring under scrutiny the millions of bystanders who by doing nothing defined that as the acceptable social norm" (277).

That is an agenda which all students of the Holocaust who read this book will endorse. Unfortunately, they will likely also be disappointed with its numerous misspellings (particularly of German words), mistranslations (the "Weapon-" for the *Waffen*-SS and "Reich Chancellor" Hans Lammers for his title *Chef der Reichskanzlei* are the most egregious), colloquialisms ("gopher work"), and in places (above all in the introduction) some extremely awkward phrasing such as "... Jew for Nazism" (xxv). One wonders how at least ten readers, including (in its dissertation form) two distinguished Harvard professors, could have overlooked these blemishes. Historians ought again to pay more attention to matters of literary *style* than of literary *agents*.

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*What's Happened to the Humanities?* Edited by Alvin Kernan. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997. viii, 267 pages. \$29.95 US.

According to many of the contributors to this intermittently impressive collection of eleven specially commissioned essays, the humanities are in a state of confusion. For Margery Sabin, the reasons for "our current predicament" are recent historical trends: "radical social protest in the late 1960s; deconstruction in the 1970s; ethnic, feminist, and Marxist cultural studies in the 1980s; postmodern sexuality in the 1990s; and rampant careerism from beginning to end."

*What's Happened to the Humanities?* begins most promisingly. In "Democratization and Decline? The Consequences of Demographic Change in the Humanities," Lynn Hunt assembles historical and demographic statistics that demand further examination and understanding. After the Second World War, for example, there were two million post-secondary students in the United States; in 1994 there were fifteen million. In 1983 32.5% of high school graduates went to college; within a decade the number had risen to 41.9%. This student explosion does not translate into increased interest in the humanities. In 1973, for example, 14.8% of all doctorates awarded were in the humanities; in 1992 the number had fallen to 9.2%.

Hunt's compelling statistics go on to illuminate the make-up of the humanities professoriate. The significant presence of women in contemporary academic life, for example, looms large in any consideration of the volume's title. In 1959, Hunt notes, Daniel J. Boorstin told the American Historical Association Committee on Graduate Education that he had not "had a single really keen woman student" and as a result was "not in favour of encouraging women students any more than they have been encouraged in the past." Boorstin himself had been the victim of anti-Semitism in the academic world, and had once been described as "a Jew, though not the kind to which one takes exception."

Hunt's challenging essay is immediately complemented by John H. D'Arms's analysis of humanities funding. Major American funding agencies have decreased grants to humanities projects by 40% in the last fifteen years, and colleges and universities have been able to offset this decrease only to a small degree. The prognosis for the future is not hopeful.

Although Francis Oakley's authoritative essay, "Ignorant Armies and Nighttime Clashes: Changes in the Humanities Classroom, 1970–1995," shows that there have not been major changes in literary studies in classroom syllabi, Sabin sees an academic world that has become "just another fiercely competitive business of profits and promotion," where material values seem the *raison d'être* and "critical thinking itself becomes a version of activist confrontation." And Gertrude Himmelfarb offers a passionate and provocative critique of postmodernism's dire consequences on humanistic studies: "The effect of postmodernism has been to create a genuinely interdisciplinary academic culture—or not so much interdisciplinary in the old sense, in which one discipline inspires and vivifies another, as transdisciplinary, in which each discipline loses its distinctive character and all become indistinguishable."

On the whole, however, this volume fails to confront clearly the question of its title. Relentlessly and exclusively focused on the United States, the essayists—with one exception—are distinguished academics from major—some might even say elitist—American colleges and universities. Their sense of a crisis in the humanities might not ring true to the humanists labouring in institutions where literacy itself, a subject not even mentioned in the collection, is central to the present and the future of humanities courses. Moreover, some essayists seem trapped in the late 1960s, specifically the Modern Language Association annual meeting of 1969 and its indictment of so-called capitalist scholarship; these essays, existing in a kind of time-warp, are needlessly defensive. And some essays, most notably Christopher Ricks's "The Pursuit of Metaphor," are so self-indulgent that they prove that a crisis in the humanities might be warranted.

"As postmodernism makes its way through the disciplines, with some scholars finding ever newer and bolder ways to apply it," Himmelfarb observes, "others are being drawn to the idea of a 'middle ground,' to the reassertion of some kind of truth, reality, even objectivity." Similar but more expansive is Sabin's conclusion: "In the current configuration of dominant and oppositional forces in academe, argument on behalf of literary studies has become the subversive position, especially for young aspirants to a career, requiring of them independence and risk. Those in a position to influence academic currency now have the obligation to reconsider the distinctiveness of humanistic reading and writing that can no longer be taken for granted."

Some of the essays in this volume do contribute modestly to the ongoing discussion of this "distinctiveness."

*Corrupting Youth: Political Education, Democratic Culture, and Political Theory.* By J. Peter Euben. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997. xvi, 265 pages. \$55.00 US.

Euben develops a view of democratic political education informed by classical Athenian democracy and Socratic philosophy, one which he hopes may ameliorate the “culture wars” within the educational debate in North America. He claims that both sides of the “multiculturalists vs. canonists” debate could gain from a re-examination of Socratic philosophy and related classical texts, particularly in terms of clarifying the aims and methods of political education in the United States. He does not provide a systematic examination of what the classical texts say about political education, but rather begins with the claim that the current arguments in the debate over political education are reflected in the ancient texts in ways which may be informative, and extracts fragments of classical texts which he considers to be illustrations of this.

Euben’s main argument for this claim centres around his interpretation of Socratic philosophical method, presented as a reflection of and means to achieving Socrates’ supposed democratic intentions. These intentions turn out to be remarkably similar to Euben’s. The argument takes as its central evidence Socrates’ advocacy of rational discussion, which, Euben states, is somehow common to both philosophy (dialectic) and politics (democratic decision making).

Euben’s work suffers from two major flaws, one philosophical and one scholarly. First, the premise underlying Euben’s discussion, and shared by multiculturalists and canonists alike, is that education is, and therefore must or should be, political. This is unestablished. Euben conforms to the dominant belief in contemporary American academic opinion, namely, that education is primarily about producing a “better” society by producing “better” citizens as defined by political doctrine. However, again like most of his contemporaries, Euben does not argue why this should or must be so, and does not take into account the counter arguments made by, well, Socrates, for example, that education is philosophical and not in any sense political (even though philosophy—as a consequence but not as an aim—can benefit the political regime which fosters it). Unless this logically prior *philosophical* question has been argued, all derivative arguments concerning the particular type of approach to political education, be it canonist, multicultural, or Euben’s blend of these two variants, are at most tentative and conditional.

The second, scholarly, flaw follows from the first assumption. Euben assumes that education is political, and with little evidence and less argument he assumes that Socrates held the same belief. Having attributed to Socrates the same view, he then proceeds to analyze certain Platonic texts on this basis. Compare, for example, Euben’s discussion of the *Apology*, in which he describes Socrates as “the political educator of democratic citizens” (54), and Socrates’ own words in the dialogue where he describes what he does (37a–

38a). Socrates describes his educational intentions and procedures in purely philosophical terms—making speeches about virtue, conversing and examining both himself and others—and for this he is opposed by those who act on political intentions and purposes (37d).

In sum, Socratic educational thought, which can be used as a window through which we may look at the world anew, is reduced by Euben to a mirror in which is reflected the contemporary American academic. Euben serves as a useful illustration that perhaps *this* is the real flaw in contemporary educational thought, despite the critical attention which debates such as the “culture wars” inevitably receive, and one which merits serious attention if we are truly seeking to deepen our understanding of fundamental rather than ephemeral educational questions.

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