

CRITICS OF COLLEGE TEACHING

by *Walter P. Metzger*

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Criticisms of college course offerings and methods of instruction have been a staple of American academic discourse since the decline of the classical curriculum in the mid-19th century and the rise of progressive pedagogy in the early twentieth.

Most criticisms of American undergraduate education have been voiced by academics in dialogue with other academics. For the most part, these internal expressions of dissatisfaction have either been inaudible to nonacademics or have been dismissed by the broader public as part of the hum of self-uncertainty that emanates from every teaching enterprise and is no more deserving of their attention than, say, the whirl of machines in a manufacturing plant or the clitter-clatter of a busy city street.

But criticisms of college teaching have not always had a restricted provenance and have not always been shrugged off by outsiders as the classroom's natural background noise. Throughout the last 150 years—and with much greater frequency and intensity during the most recent 30—objections to how college teachers teach and what college students learn have periodically risen from the murmurous to the clamorous not only in academic settings but also in public forums, and not only among faculty members and administrators but also among law-makers and public office-holders, foundation presidents and business leaders, contributors to popular journals and writers of best-selling books. Time and again, a group of fault-finders, seizing on some detected academic fault, would work in unorganized unison to “cleave the general ear with horrid speech”; time and again, this critical bombardment, sustained at high sound levels for a while, would gradually subside, only to overlap with and be followed by another barrage, directed at a different alleged academic failing by a largely different corps of cannoneers.

SOUND CYCLES

Going back no further than to the early 1960s, I count six such massive assaults, two aimed squarely at the contents and procedures of undergraduate instruction, the others striking at professorial deficiencies and delinquencies not uniquely exhibited in the classroom but thought capable of exerting a pernicious influence on college teaching all the same.

Starting with the critical hue and cry that

now rends the air, I list below six such episodes in reverse chronological order. Others might compose a longer or shorter list: the following spasms of complaint are the ones that, to my ears at least, have reached the highest decibel ratings in more than three decades of recorded grousing.

1. At the moment, the loudness prize indisputably belongs to the legion of academic critics who bristle at “political correctness,” a protean epithet that accuses academic teachers, students, and administrators of demanding conformity to a policy or an attitude that favors individuals on the basis of their race, ethnic background, or sex.

2. A few years before the academy felt the force of this critical broadside, it had been the target of worried commentary about the flagging health of the liberal arts curriculum. During the middle years of the 1980s, these unglad tidings were publicized in field reports on the parlous state of the humanities, in alarmist medical bulletins on the survival chances of history, philosophy, and classical languages, and by statistical indications, derived from cross-national surveys, that America was the most prolific credentializer of student ignoramus in the developed world.

3. In the mid-1980s, one could still hear loud echoes of a criticism that had been thunderously sounded several decades earlier and that had had a number of sonorous revivals since. The essence of this criticism was that, while American academic science and scholarship had raised its standing on the world exchange, American academic pedagogy had fallen from a once high perch into its current condition of wrack and ruin. According to this squad of critics, college teaching was a failure, first, because it was carried on *in camera*, unsupervised, unexamined, in a classroom as closed off as a confessional; second, because it was carried on *in absentia*, with senior professors, like absconding parents, leaving the care of the young to callow surrogates; and third, because it was carried on in ignorance—ignorance of the knowledge of teaching and learning that are the proud but underutilized possessions of academic schools of education, postgraduate programs in psychotherapy, and departments of developmental and clinical psychology.

4. Next in retrogressive order is the frontal attack on the principle of academic tenure that gathered force in the early 1970s for the first

time since the American Association of University Professors and its administrative counterpart, the Association of American Colleges, negotiated a pact in 1940 that gave these rules an imprimatur that bridged class lines. The principal charge in the eruption of this head-on criticism—that a long vista of occupational security causes professors to malingering and go slack—was proclaimed from the roof-tops for several years, and then became an obligato to the less provocative, but in the long run more lethal, charge that, whatever benefits tenure may confer in good times, it becomes a recipe for institutional financial ruin in bad times, and that, according to charts showing rising trends in the institutional cost of living and predicting future drops in the applicant pool of students and in governmental support of higher education, the times are almost always bad.

6. and 5. The last two items on the list, rearranged in the actual order of their occurrence, reveal what a strict front-to-back sequencing may obscure—that a wave of criticism may be precipitated in part by the urge to refute its predecessor. During the early and middle parts of the 1960s, the most vocal critics of American higher education accused it of being in cahoots with the “military-industrial complex” at home and with dictatorships serving American imperial designs abroad, and of working with the purveyors of mass culture to turn out consumers and to narcotize dissent. Proof of this gigantic *trahison des clercs* was said to reside in a wide range of professorial behaviors—in the commitment of academic social scientists to functional sociology, consensus history, market economics and other systematic apologias for the status quo; in the readiness of academic scientists to accept research grants from the warring state, a Faustian bargain that they agreed to keep secret in the supposed interest of national security; in the acquiescence of the professoriate to all sorts of Cold War hugger-muggeries, including the dismissal of colleagues who were or had been members of the Communist Party, and colleagues who were summoned to the witness stand to snitch on themselves or others but who, after citing their constitutional right to reticence, held their tongues.

Depicting professors as collaborationists with evil would remain a popular critical pastime thereafter. But the stigmatizing con-

tent of that depiction would soon turn 180 degrees. Even before the turbulent sixties ran out, fortissimo voices began to accuse professors of helping students dodge the draft, of fomenting student demonstrations and fecklessly succumbing to student violence, of taking a counter-cultural line that led students to close out the trust accounts they had maintained with persons in authority. For some years into the next decade, the notion that the adult world of the faculty had failed to provide intellectual or moral guidance to a youth that was badly in need of both was nourished by daily reports of campus turmoils; only after the country abandoned the war in Vietnam and the campuses returned to their more ordinary state of restlessness did the charge of faculty complicity in the misbehaviors of their students cease to be sounded at fever pitch.

Concerning the latter, three points bear underlining. First, the charge that academic teachers made unconscionable use of their Svengali powers did not come out of the blue, adventitiously; it was prompted by the desire to rebut the previous charge that academics had been coopted by the power elite. Nor was this to be the only criticism of a prior criticism: other attacks show up on the historical screen as counterattacks once the forward, rather than the backspace, key is pressed.

Second, neither party to the above dispute had anything good to say about professors: the bone of contention was the angle of attack, not the identity of the target. This, too, was not a unique occurrence: whenever two sets of critics wrangled, academics were sure to wind up twice denounced.

Finally, it should be noted that these first surges of criticism, like all the rest, came with loudly touted recommended remedies, so that, at the peak of any one of them, the din of proposals for reform was added to the hullabaloo of recrimination.

CONSERVATIVE IDEOLOGY?

Why have these sound cycles occurred? What, if anything, do these critics in their megaphone moments have in common? How accurately does what they have to say, when their turn comes, reflect the true state of academic affairs?

I confess that my rummagings through the history of American higher education and American social thought have yielded no quick

and easy answers to these questions. But they have left me convinced that one widely circulated explanation of why these criticisms have been made and what they signify, though it can claim some factual support, does not in the end suffice.

The explanation I am referring to can be capsulized as follows: (1) although the manifest content of each surge of criticism is educational, the latent content and dominant concern of every one of them is ideological; (2) although the critics are not all of one ideological persuasion, those who are on the right far outnumber those who are on the left, and far surpass them in articulateness and visibility; (3) although conservative critics differ among themselves in the reforms they advocate, their hammerings at academic teaching serve a common aim—to extend the *kulturkampf* they are waging against Marxism and liberalism in the world at large to the nation's academic institutions where those noxious doctrines are presumed to nest. In a word, this way of explaining presupposes that there would have been no critical outcry, except perhaps during the flush part of the 1960s, if *conservative* ideologues had been silenced by a prolonged and incapacitating bout of laryngitis.

No burst of criticism gives this explanation more chapter-and-verse support than the one that is now going at full blast. The most prominent critics of “political correctness”—one thinks of such celebrity authors as Allan Bloom, Dinesh d’Sousa, Charles Sykes, William Bennett, and Roger Kimball, but there are scores of others—are unreserved conservatives, albeit more of the traditional than of the free-market kind.¹ Some of the argumentative ammunition expended against this presumed evil—for example, the characterization of affirmative action on behalf of minority groups and women as a form of reverse discrimination against whites and men—is conventionally used by conservatives in nonacademic settings; much of the verbal powder and shot that was originally site-specific—for example, the description of multicultural curriculums as vehicles for anti-Western sentiment and Third World posturing, the dismissal of black and gender studies as low in quality and high in prejudices, and the mustering of anti-relativist and anti-historicist arguments against attempts by feminists and deconstructionists to debunk classic literary texts—winds up as conserva-

tive munitions for battles fought on political as well as scholarly grounds. Indeed, the very phrase, “political correctness,” coined by self-critical Marxists to deride mindless hewings to the Communist Party line, was appropriated by conservative sloganists for a subtly different usage: to discredit as fickle and coercive the changing modes of radical chic. Not surprisingly, when anti-“p.c.” conservatives look for critics to pick a quarrel with, they reach back to the new left protesters of the 1960s and skip the cavillers in between, arguing that the Millian and Marcusean spirit of 30 years ago was kept alive in a radical student body that produced, when it came of age, a radicalized tenured professoriate.

The trouble with this explanation is that it paints its ideological markings with too broad a brush. A census of all the critics would reveal that they have by no means been politically or culturally homogeneous. In the 1960s surge of criticism, the left was obviously in full voice: Among the leading vocalizers were Noam Chomsky, Alexander Cockburn, Edgar Z. Friedenberg, Paul Goodman, Irving Horowitz, Kenneth Kenniston, Christopher Lasch, Robert Paul Wolff, Theodore Roszak, Immanuel Wallerstein—to name only those writers who remained consequential even after the fading of their cause.² But the left made itself heard in other critical rounds as well. The direct attack on tenure was launched by neo-conservative intellectuals like Robert Nisbet and Irving Kristol, management experts like James O’Toole and Peter Drucker, and ideological opposites like the right-wing Boston University president, John Silber, and the left-wing *Village Voice* commentator, Nat Hentoff, who were oddly converted into bedfellows by their boisterous dislike for the same thing.³ Critics who could be classified as left of center were also particularly prominent in the attack on academic pedagogy. If that kind of criticism had one root in the resistance of traditionalists like Arthur Bestor, Richard Hofstadter, and Jacques Barzun to the anti-intellectualism of progressive education,⁴ it had a second and deeper root in the partiality of progressive educators to nonauthoritarian teaching and experiential learning. The latter had inspired the founding of (John) Dewey-eyed college utopias—Bard, Black Mountain, Marlboro—in the 1920s⁵ and had gained scriptural affirmation in 1962 with the publication of *The Ameri-*

can College: A Psychological and Social Interpretation of the Higher Learning, a massive dose of pragmatism and psychoanalysis applied to the ailments of college teaching, edited by Nevitt Sanford and featuring the contributions of Howard Becker, Joseph Katz and a dashing new combo, Christopher Jencks and David Riesman (the latter before he veered significantly, though not totally, to the right).⁶

Even the attack on “political correctness” contains greater ideological complexity than might at first appear.⁷ A number of distinguished scholars (notably, the Yale historian, C. Vann Woodward), joined the anti-“p.c.” crusade not out of sheer animosity toward affirmative action and ethnic studies, but out of a desire to defend academic freedom from what they thought were mortal threats.⁸ To them, this cherished norm of the academic profession was particularly threatened by the enactment of vague and open-ended campus speech codes proscribing “hate speech,” and by the passage of rules concerning sexual harassment that threatened with institutional sanctions anyone whose expression of opinion was found to create a “hostile or offensive learning environment for women,” a concept that, when brought from the workplace to the academy, seemed to make the level of audience discomfort the test of the permissibility of classroom speech. When the eminent Marxist-Gramscian historian, Eugene D. Genovese, disquieted by his students’ preference for pressure tactics over reasoned discourse in discussions of slavery and race relations, joined with free speech liberals to protest the intolerances of the academy,⁹ it should have been clear that the “p.c.” tent was large enough to accommodate a broad range of world views and sensibilities.¹⁰

To abandon political ideology as the touchstone to these criticisms is not to conclude that the critics have been telling the unvarnished truth. Without suggesting that their censures have been wholly without substance (for that would foolishly imply that American institutions of higher learning have been wholly without fault), I think it would be naive and undiscerning to accept them at face value. For one thing, many academic conditions drew critical fire only after they had enjoyed a long and relatively undisturbed existence: The longstanding rules and even more venerable informal practices of tenure would be a case in

point. For another thing, most academic conditions that came under fire moved out of the guns-sights of the critics before they had been significantly altered. No one could claim that the critics of the liberal arts curriculum eventually lowered their voices because the Philistines were utterly vanquished by the humanists, or that the criticism of academic teaching methods went from crescendo to diminuendo because incompetent teachers woke up one morning superbly skilled. The rise and fall of these criticisms appear to have a life of their own, and this means they do not hold up a perfectly faithful mirror to the life they so vehemently reproach.

More than the acoustical dynamics of these criticisms throw their truthfulness into question. All the critical clamorings of the last three decades, *irrespective of their ideological ambitions*, display a number of shared characteristics—a thematic content, a methodological bent, a rhetorical style—that affect the reliability of their diagnoses and the therapeutic value of their proposed reforms. To judge the extent to which a particular criticism is accurate, it is necessary to ascertain, as a first step, the extent to which it is merely formulaic, that is, the extent to which it follows the directions of a distinctive genre.

GENRE CHARACTERISTICS

Criticisms of the liberal arts curriculum (the second set on my list) afford a particularly revealing glimpse of the characteristics common to a corpus of writing that, on the surface, seems riddled with disagreements.

This critical attack was launched in 1984 with the publication of *To Reclaim a Legacy*, a government report written by William J. Bennett, then chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, soon to be appointed Secretary of the Department of Education in the Reagan Administration, and reached its climax with the publication three years later of *College: the Undergraduate Experience*, a report of the Carnegie Foundation written by its president, Ernest J. Boyer, who had earlier expressed anxiety about the curriculum of the nation's high schools, and apparently thought it a natural progression to view with alarm from one flight up. Between these two signposts, no fewer than 10 reports critical of how academics did their business made their appearance, and, of these, as many as six dwelled

directly on the shortcomings of undergraduate teaching.¹¹ During these years, snarling critics gnawed at the college course of study like carnivores battenning on bloody flesh.

Among the works involved in this feeding frenzy, two in particular—the Bennett report and a report sponsored by the Association of American Colleges—will repay close scrutiny. Both were honored, if not quite immortalized, by being copied word for word in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Both were more widely reviewed when they appeared and enjoyed a longer half-life of radiance than the others, some of which were born stone dead. It is, however, less for their notoriety than for their typicality that I find them especially suited to the task of uncovering the attributes of a distinctive genre.

At the heart of Bennett's attack on undergraduate education was his claim that "few" American college students now "receive an adequate education in the culture of which they are members." This is so, he believed, because the humanities have been dislodged from their central place in the hierarchy of college subjects, and because fundamental questions about the human condition, once addressed in a required and integrated core curriculum, have been elbowed out by vocational preoccupations and by the inroads of studies in narrow fields. The results were reflected in lamentable statistics: A student could obtain a bachelor's degree from 75 percent of all American colleges and universities without having studied American literature or history, and from 86 percent of them without having studied the civilizations of classical Greece and Rome.

After describing what was wrong (or rather, what went wrong, for he believed that there had once been a better day—indeed, that there had once been a golden age), Bennett undertook to tell readers *why* matters had taken such a dreadful turn. Primarily, he blamed "those whose business it is to educate (college) students" for the failure of American higher education to "transmit the culture to its rightful heirs." It was the faculty's "collective loss of nerve" that had led to the widespread abandonment of course requirements—and required courses were for Bennett the *sine qua non* of a sound curriculum. It was no less the fault of the faculty that voluntary enrollments in courses on languages and literature, ethics,

and religion have been declining. These vital courses became unpopular because professors saw fit to teach them in a “dispassionate” and “lifeless” manner, as well as in an “ideological” and “tendentious” manner (a paradoxical accusation that damns them equally for soporific objectivity and radical commitment). The last item on his long *J'Accuse* touched on the infatuation of American college teachers with the corrosive philosophy of relativism. Because secular professors in America deny the existence of fixed truths and absolute values they are unable to uphold “the primacy of one fact or one book over another” and thus, in that standardless condition, let facts of great importance and books of high merit go. On this inflammatory subject, Bennett did not mince words.

What was to be done? Ordinarily, the gravity of a stated problem predicts the range and depth of the proposed solution. Of the gravity of the problem he was addressing—the cultural disinheritance of a generation by those entrusted with its formal education—Bennett hardly needed convincing. Indeed he thought the negative effects of dispossession would inescapably spread far beyond college walls. “As a result of the way questions (about a humanistic education) have been answered,” he wrote, “civilizations have emerged, nations have developed, wars have been fought, and people have lived contentedly or miserably.” In this case, however, an apocalyptic diagnosis did not elicit a commensurately heroic remedy. Bennett did not propose to raze old institutions or build new ones. However compromised as teaching institutions they may be, the free-standing liberal arts colleges, the undergraduate divisions of large multiversities, the community colleges in all their mushroom vitality have earned, as far as he was concerned, the right to a permanent lease on life. Nor did he suggest that the culprits he had identified should be turned out of office, punished with a reduction in pay, or even be forced to attend that campus correctional facility known as a faculty development program. In fact, he did not even ask that the faculties that had made such a botch of things be enlarged to include talents more appropriate for the corrective task he had in mind. Instead, to accomplish so vast a thing as “reclaim a legacy” that had been nearly lost, he deemed it sufficient to augment the existing curriculum

with a array of reconstituted general education courses taught, if need be, by the existing staffs. So striking is the contrast between his portrait of the present (unrelievedly bleak) and his prospectus for the future (unreservedly bright) that it requires an oxymoron to do it justice. “*Sanguine jeremiad*” is one expression that comes to mind; “*A Domesday Book* with readily available happy endings” is another.

No one would deny that teaching, being an unperfected art, is always capable of improvement. But Bennett was not making the unexceptionable point that collegiate education suffered from imperfections; he was contending that collegiate education was in a state of crisis—a crisis of such dimensions that it affected the quality of American life, indeed the very future of western civilization. All the more, then, does his desire not to rock the boat even as he demonizes the crew stand in need of explanation. I think the explanation lies in his understanding that a colossal default leading to a cosmic funk would be daunting even to the most valiant trouble-shooters, not least because remedial action on such a scale would be prohibitively expensive. Lest his overwrought words not only rouse but dishearten readers, the apocalyptic messenger in the end delivered a soothing message. Without endangering entrenched institutional interests or tapping any fresh resource save that of a resolute will, everything that has been going wrong could be set aright.

Bennett’s plan for setting things aright was to establish a sequence of required general education courses that would be distributed over the entire four years of college study, rather than just in the first two years when raw collegians and novice teaching assistants are most likely to intersect, and that would be staffed by the “best” instructors, as each institution chose to define that term. These courses would differ from the general run of liberal arts offerings in that they would engage the students minds directly with Great Books, i.e., with the highest literary and artistic expressions of “human” (he meant “western”) experience. While he would not carve any particular reading list in stone, his own preferences ran to the Bible, the writings of classical antiquity, the outstanding works of medieval theologians and philosophers, the masterworks of the scientific enlightenment, the *Federalist Papers*, the towering novels of the romantic era,

and the great works of music and art from the renaissance to the end of the nineteenth century. His hope was that, if justice were done to these works, there would be little time left over for the creations of the twentieth century, which was definitely not the period he loved best.

In my view, there is much to be said for a Great Books program. The notion that everyone with a college degree should have read Plato, know Shakespeare, and love Mozart strikes me as a noble aspiration, even if, in this *omnium-gatherum* we are pleased to call a system of higher education, it is not always a realistic hope. As an academic who has spent his professional life at Columbia University where a selective college admissions policy made that hope not unrealistic, I can attest to the success of a two-year program in which all undergraduates are required to confront many centuries' worth of literary, philosophical, and artistic masterpieces in small discussion groups under the rubrics of "western civilization" and "the humanities."

But my pleasure in agreeing with a critic's end-position does not lessen my dismay at the stratagems he used to get there. Consider, first, the quality of his data. Bennett's findings on the declining popularity of the humanities rested not on carefully gathered and sifted evidence of the sort academe collects in great abundance, but on a smattering of ambiguous national statistics buttressed by quotations from anonymous sources in the field. It takes no master methodologist to perceive that a percentage drop in enrollments in humanities courses would be compatible with large numerical increases in enrollments in those courses if the total student population grew rapidly at the same time (as it surely did in the indicated period); that the courses students are not compelled to take for a degree are not necessarily the courses they turn their backs on, just as the deserts we don't *have to* eat are not necessarily left untouched; and that a unanimous vote among informants on a matter as subtle as student taste is less likely to represent a scientific sampling of the views of the targeted population than the net results of the author's schmoozing with like-minded friends.

Also noteworthy is Bennett's failure to acknowledge his antecedents. The Great Books idea was not a new one. It had been installed

in broad outline by Columbia College in 1919, as a working syllabus by the University of Chicago in the 1930s, as an all-encompassing plan of undergraduate education by St. John's College in Annapolis and Santa Fe in the 1950s, and, with dilutions and contractions, by a host of imitators throughout the years. Yet, beyond giving an appreciative nod to Matthew Arnold and praising a few ongoing experiments he had heard about, Bennett had nothing to say about forerunners. I surmise that he ignored them not because he hoped to steal their credit (no witting reader could have been persuaded that he or his panel of advisers invented this well-known wheel) and not because a 10,000-word report left no space for genealogical discussions (since his publisher was the agency he headed, it would surely have stretched the page limit at his request), but because, despite its fragrance of nostalgia, this report, written by a polemicist who lives so strongly in the present, was from top to bottom resolutely ahistorical.

More than Bennett the casual fact-finder and Bennett the traditionalist who concedes no ancestry, Bennett the one-dimensional explainer displays a key characteristic of this genre. In this role, he associated himself with a famous dictum that is the bane of all sociologists convinced of the causal efficacy of social facts: "The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars but in ourselves." So eager was Bennett to fault the self—the individual maker of curricular decisions—that he completely disregarded the destiny-shaping stars—the power of nonpersonal factors like market conditions and demographic trends to undermine the fixed curriculum and topple the humanities from its throne. Yet it is obvious enough that a multitude of private colleges and universities, each competing for a finite number of students who could afford to attend them, would have strong organizational incentives to meet the practical wants, rather than the intellectual and cultural needs, of their courted paying guests. It is just as obvious that a multitude of state-supported colleges and universities, kept alive by tax appropriations scaled to the size of their student bodies, would long have been under heavy pressure to place the vocational demands of their client-voters over the preservationist demands of the politically weaker votaries of high culture. Furthermore, unless the extraordinary openness of the American sys-

tem of higher education is taken into account, the extraordinary diversification (“degradation” is a stronger but not necessarily truer word) of the American professoriate’s stock-in-trade cannot be adequately explained. Of all school systems in the developed world, ours has long been the easiest to navigate from end to end. Unlike others with which it may appropriately be compared, it does not fix the educational destiny of students at an early age through irreversible sorting systems, does not assign them to secondary schools that are either conduits to a university or *cul-de-sacs*, and does not deny any high school graduate desiring to go to college a freshman berth in some accredited institution, if not in the institution of first choice. Yet on Bennett’s pages, structure and economy, far from being rounded up as usual suspects in a whodunit story, are treated as though they did not exist.

It is hard to believe that this lacuna was born of ignorance. Cassius was not unaware of the existence of external forces when he counselled Brutus to look within; he simply calculated that a Brutus engaged in an inner scrutiny and impelled thereby to confront his conscience was more likely to become his ally than a Brutus who would passively let the heavens decide his fate. I think it can be said of Bennett, too, that he was more opportunistic than unknowing. After all, he could hardly have charged sinfulness to an unusually competitive academic market or an unusually accessible academic system. His method was the instrument of his intention: if he wanted to hold professors blameworthy, he had to personalize blame; if he wanted a chance to render moral judgments, “within” was the best place to look.

In his class action suit against professors, Bennett sometimes alluded to the defendants as “we.” The first person plural probably signifies his awareness that a stonecaster is more effective when he seems not to spare himself. But there is no reason to suppose that his implicit *mea culpa* should be taken seriously. This is not a confessional piece: The author reports no period spent in darkness before he came to see the light. A protege of John Silber and a former member of an administration notorious for its belligerent hostility to faculty unionism, a polemicist in the public sphere whose teaching career was short and spotty and whose scholarly accomplishments

were slight, Bennett had more on his resume to suggest estrangement from than identification with the vocation of academics. Pogo’s immortal message—“we have met the enemy and it is us”—will not serve as the epigram for his way of thinking. That statement invited self-examination; Bennett’s unforgiving dictum—“educators have only themselves to blame”—was something else, an expression of animosity toward one occupational group.¹²

For all his flair, Bennett was not an idiosyncratic critic. The inclination to issue breathless warnings of disaster unless the sinning don repents, to shout that the academic sky is falling and then prop it up with the sticks at hand, to deal sketchily or not at all with the systemic and economic determinants of academic actions, to present old-hat thoughts with “ahha!” flourishes—all these proclivities are displayed, less vividly perhaps but unmistakably, in the writings of other critics of college teaching, regardless of their partisan commitments. This is not to say, however, that for the full comprehension of this genre Bennett’s report is all we need. A number of other important genre traits, present but not glaring in Bennett, are spotlighted in the work of another critic, and we have to extract the traits of both works in order to compile an adequate master list.

The AAC report, entitled *Integrity in the College Curriculum*, was written by Frederick Rudolph, emeritus professor of history at Williams College, who was given the difficult task of producing a text that would satisfy a divided study panel. Although Rudolph had been a member of the Bennett group, he apparently had rejected the philosophic underpinnings of the latter’s Great Books program, for his own report, written a year later, showed no trace of the natural law theology or cultural absolutism that Bennett derived from his Catholic upbringing and from the teachings of Leo Strauss via Allan Bloom. More on the wavelength of John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, than of any contemporary conservative treatise, Rudolph urged the widespread adoption of a new curriculum that would induct students into various “modes of inquiry”—the logical, the literary, the quantitative, the historical, the scientific, the aesthetic, the ethical—rather than into the contents of great books or into the substance of great themes. His emphasis on the “how” rather than the “what,” his

pluralist faith that different roads may lead to the Rome of effective learning, his desire to raise the level of critical analysis rather than just the level of cultural knowledge, led some reviewers to believe that these two closely timed reports were worlds apart. In my view, while hardly identical twins, these two works should be regarded as siblings close in age who bear very strong family resemblances.

Like Bennett, Rudolph asserted that the surest sign college teaching was in a state of crisis was the “devaluation” of the B.A. degree. A stranger to this literature might be puzzled by the repeated use of that word in connection with a commodity that had been in increasing demand since the turn of the century and that still set sales records every year at prices that rise faster than the purchasers’ average disposable income. But neither author believed that parchment testimonials to a college education had become less coveted; they meant that it had become less and less worth the coveting. To both, “devalued” meant “debased.”

Rudolph went to special pains to show that earning a B.A. was a hollow accomplishment. “We have reached a point,” he wrote, “at which we are more confident about the length of a college education than its content or purpose.” Citing the widely attested inability of American college graduates to master a foreign language and the judgment of unnamed “businessmen” that college graduates were “illiterate” even in their own tongue, pointing to the drop in SAT scores (as though that were a failing of the college) and the rise in average college grades (as though that signified the overthrow of all standards), Rudolph conjured up the image of a student multitude passing like so many stones through the intestinal tracts of the nation’s colleges, emerging practically as unenlightened as they were when they first went in. A profitless peristalsis that had to lead, at graduation time, to a meaningless evacuation.

As the author of a highly regarded history of American higher education and another on the academic curriculum, Rudolph had previously given no indication that he leaned toward sweeping and unnuanced judgments in his area of expertise. But he seemed to think that this genre licensed such activities. If anything, Rudolph the scholar turned out to be even more of a scaremonger and rabble rouser

in his report than Bennett the propagandist was in his.

Not content to take aim at the deficiencies of general education, Rudolph fired away at every aspect of the undergraduate curriculum—the hodge-podge effect of distribution requirements, the lack of a persuasive rationale for a “major,” the “anything goes” outlook that fostered the metastasis of worthless new courses, the “do your own thing” attitude that tolerated the mishandling of valuable old ones. The net result, he believed, was the onset of the worst affliction that can befall a course of study—“incoherence.” To him, curricular incoherence is a monstrous mutation, a sport of nature. It defies the norm of intellectual order that is embodied in the very concept of a college; it deviates from the rational relationship between educational ends and instructional means that had been the trademark of the American college during the first 250 years of its existence. On the importance of restoring coherence to the curriculum, Rudolph and Bennett plainly saw eye to eye. That there might be a downside to renewed curricular coherence—that it might unduly strengthen centralized authority, inhibit pedagogical experiments, and subject academic teachers to vexing and perhaps dangerous supervision—neither perceived or at least admitted.

What brought the college curriculum to its sorry state? True to his discipline, Rudolph was readier than Bennett to seek the roots of present evils in past events. But he was no more inclined than Bennett to acknowledge the influence of impersonal forces. He had nothing to say about what was undoubtedly the single most important cause of the breakdown of the coherent curriculum: the exponential growth of the fund of knowledge. He simply ignored the competitive market pressures that drove the colleges to diversify their curriculums long before the end of the antebellum period, despite their reputed desire to march under stand-pat flags. He made only passing reference to one structural change that had a major fragmentizing effect on the course of study: the surrender of the colleges to the elective system, a regimen that gave students permission, broad if not unlimited, to order courses from a crowded menu à la carte. To be sure, he was not inattentive to every possible cause of incoherence. At the beginning of his report, he promised that he would deal with

“the role of *college faculties* in creating and nourishing the decay . . . of the college curriculum.” Here, he would be as good as his word.

Why was the paradise of coherence lost? This happened because of the transformation of the professors from teachers concerned with the characters and minds of their students into professionals, scholars with Ph.D. degrees, whose allegiance to academic disciplines was stronger than their commitment to teaching or to the life of the institution where they were employed.

Attributing the downfall of college teaching to the advent of professionalism in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, Rudolph demonstrated that a historical approach to this subject could be as critical of professors as was Bennett’s timeless references to free will.

Did the college curriculum really fall into disrepair because the American professoriate became professionalized? This is not the same as asking, was the trend toward curricular diversity accelerated by the specialized post-graduate training of would-be academics, by the organization of working academics into campus departments of instruction, and by the institutionalization of academic research—the key manifestations of academic professionalism in its *fin de siècle* form. To the latter question, the answer is surely “yes.” A faculty molded by the new American graduate school or new professional school was far less likely to gravitate to the limited subjects of the traditional curriculum than was a faculty composed of clergymen and of laymen schooled to a large degree as clergymen. A faculty divided into departments by discipline was quicker to plead the case for an addition to staffs and offerings than a faculty organized as a committee of the whole. And a faculty charged with producing knowledge was more likely to recycle its own findings into the course of study, and regard old textbooks as outmoded ones, than a faculty that had not been inducted into the research role.

But Rudolph was not merely noting that professionalization set loose forces that undermined the integrated curriculum; he was contending that these forces, once unleashed, had a devastating effect on the quality of college teaching. By invoking the rise of academic professionalism, he sought to call attention to nothing less than the American professoriate’s

fall from grace. In this regard, he was not alone; the same power to turn dwellers in the paradisaic old-time college into so many of-fending Adams has been observed by persons of the anti-professional persuasion in every critical set.

Does professionalization deserve its reputation for malevolence? No fair-minded and thorough-going appraiser of its historical impact would say that it does. Specialization, one of its prime effects, was in most ways a boon, not a detriment, to good teaching. Even in the antebellum period, when academic leaders were paying homage to Renaissance man and Emerson’s all-seeing scholar, academic institutions kept narrowing the intellectual coverage of professorships, thus acknowledging that breadth was the antithesis of mastery and that the know-it-all seldom knew enough. Can it be plausibly argued that the cause of good teaching would have been advanced if, in the postbellum era of rapidly increasing knowledge, academics kept laying claim to omniscience no matter how far that claim had to be stretched?

It may be that specialization, by fostering departmentalization, has failed to promote the kind of all-for-one, one-for-all team spirit for which central administrations are known to pine. But departments are more than sites for budgetary plottings and campus turf wars; they are, *inter alia*, local communities of the competent linked to others of their kind in diverse academic institutions over great distances; they are centers in which academics learn to act as resident agents for a discipline and counselors to society on call; they are vital building blocks of administration, allowing the authority to identify and recruit qualified candidates for academic appointments, which had earlier shifted from the governing board to the president, to shift once again from the president to the staff. That the latter proved to be a fortunate delegation few would dispute. While it was true that Charles William Eliot, president of the Harvard that rose to greatness after the Civil War, or William Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago that was breathed into life by Rockefeller wealth at the turn of the century, were exceedingly effective talent-hunters, anyone who would propose in these days to entrust the function of hunting talents to the necessarily limited knowledge of the usually short-term occupant of the

all-too-exposed presidential office would not be doing professors, students, or presidents a good turn. Specialization, one would have to agree, does have drawbacks, but to put it, as Rudolph does, exclusively in the loss-column of the teaching ledger is to come close to doctoring the books.

Is Rudolph at least on target when he accuses the professionalized academic of trading the true religion of devoted teaching for the false god of devoted research? This tired assertion can always count on a fair amount of observational support. It is clear to the unaided eye that scholarly knowledge in academia is treated more solicitously and passed on to novices more systematically than is usually the case with teaching knowledge. It takes no more than passing familiarity with the American graduate school to be aware that its training program for would-be academics consists of a major, a minor, and a vacuum—the last referring to the time expended on didactic theory and technique. And it is a notorious fact that the reward-system of this occupation favors research prowess over teaching prowess, especially in the higher reaches of the hierarchy of institutions of higher learning.

Still, those who make it their special business to tell the quantitative truth about American professors do not support the view that the latter's commitment to their research specialties is stronger than their commitment to teaching. In 1969, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education conducted a massive survey of the nation's faculty members that, among other things, tapped their attitudes toward teaching and research, and that would remain a fount of information on this subject for decades. Its findings made it clear that the values of the disciplines had been internalized by faculty members in institutions from the top to the lower middle of the pecking order. Interestingly enough, however, when the respondents were asked whether they were more *interested* in teaching or research, three out of four replied that their primary interest lay in teaching. This preference was more pronounced in the teaching-oriented colleges than in the research-oriented universities, but even in the latter places fully half of the faculty gave teaching the higher spot in the rank-order of their desires. When the questions shifted from preference to *performance*, wider gaps among the respondents opened up. Over

half of the entire sample reported that they had not published a single scientific or scholarly paper in the two years preceding the survey, while only three percent of the group reported that they published ten or more. In addition, faculty members in top-rated universities were much more likely to be research activists than those in institutions of reputedly lower quality.

On the other hand, the academic division of labor, stark when it came to research, was much less evident when it came to teaching. Almost all of the respondents, including those in the research power-houses, testified that they taught a good deal; moreover, those who were most active in research taught almost as much as their less productive colleagues. "Judged by the staff's self-conceptions," wrote Oliver Fulton and Martin Trow in a published analysis of these data, "the American academic system as a whole is primarily a teaching system." They were stretching things a bit. The Carnegie survey did not pick up the full-time researchers who were beginning to arrive in droves on irregular appointments and soft financing; in the loud hurrah for teaching sounded by university professors, graduate and undergraduate levels were not always clearly differentiated. Nevertheless, these statistical tables did reveal that regular faculty members cared enormously about teaching whether or not they did research. This strongly suggests that a craving for success at a podium visited several times a week, semester after semester, year after year, was as strong a sign of professorial devotion as was the urge, felt by a smaller number and most of them only sporadically, to seek the bubble reputation in the cannon's mouth of scholarship.¹³

The last thing I have to say about Rudolph's treatise goes back to the first thing his reviewers noticed: his plan for curricular reform. He himself was not reticent about praising his handiwork. Not distinguishing between a curriculum and an epiphany, he allowed that the widespread adoption of his blueprint would not only rectify the curricular errors of the last century but would in the future "enable the American people to live responsibly and joyfully, fulfilling their promise as individual human beings and their obligations as democratic citizens." To this extravaganza of

self-praise, one can only reply, only half-amused: Is that all?

In the abstract, Rudolph's plan has its merits. In order to think critically about something, it is helpful to possess a repertory of alternative ways of thinking and to let the best examples of each way serve as the guide to choice. But the notion that a brave new world of required college courses could be constructed on such pillars is pure fantasy. Most teachers would be inclined to discuss methodology in the context of their own subjects; in this event, a webwork of courses on different "modes of inquiry" would probably turn out to be nothing more (and might with added verbal baggage turn out to be something less) than introductions to different disciplines, which could easily devolve into the old and much demeaned scheme of distribution requirements, hardly an effective formula for battling incoherence.

In the unlikely event that a committee on instruction would actually cook up and serve their students a full array of dishes à la Rudolph, an even more serious problem would arise. No course on "modes of inquiry" could avoid steering into the troubled waters of epistemology and metaphysics; hence every such course would make heavy demands on the navigational skill of the instructor. Did Rudolph never wonder whether the ordinary run of academic scientist put in charge of one of his suggested general education courses would be competent to discuss the possibility of an inter-subjective criterion of truth or the existence of an independent reality to which human utterances correspond? Did he never worry about how newly minted Ph.D.s trained in counterworking graduate schools would handle questions of this sort, or about how a college could find enough broad-ranging teachers in its midst to staff a required college-wide program of such sweep (especially since he told us that academics are massively afflicted with tunnel vision), or about how, if a college was unable to cull requisite talents from its current faculty, it could purchase what it needed in the academic labor market without going into budgetary arrest? At this point, one is tempted to wonder whether the author was undeterred by operational difficulties because he thought that his curricular plan would never be put into operation. If this was the case, and I think it was, he would be acquitted

of the charge of quixotry, but would in effect admit that the main point of his exercise was to rail at professors, not to change them. And if the same can be said about a good many contributors to this genre, and I think it can, one would have to conclude that educational reform was much more the instrument than the goal of each outbreak of critical expressiveness.¹⁴

WORD TO THE WHY'S

Why has so much been written about undergraduate education?

Because writings on this topic attract public attention and sell well.

Why is so much of what is written about undergraduate education highly critical of it?

Because bad news sells itself better than good news.

Because teaching makes extravagant promises that cannot always be fulfilled and that can only rarely be fulfilled demonstrably. Hence it is apt to become a nursery of disappointments.

Because mass higher education cannot help but mirror some of the characteristics of mass culture and there is always much to criticize in mass culture.

Because mass higher education is the best means we have for keeping the warts of mass culture from spreading boundlessly, but a book or article to this effect would be too pollyannaish to interest readers.

Why is so much criticism of undergraduate education aimed at the immediate purveyors of it—the faculty—and not at the students, administrators, and trustees on the inside, or the relevant powers-that-be in the world without?

Because American professors, combining privilege with weakness, meet the classic requirements for scapegoat far better than any of the aforementioned social groups.

Because American professors have a passion for self-indictment unmatched by any other element within or beyond the university. (Indeed, it may be unmatched by any social

type in history, with the possible exception of the revolutionaries who sprang from the loins of the nineteenth and twentieth century bourgeoisie.)

Because American professors lack the organizational capacity to retaliate against their detractors, and thus are an appealing quarry for critics who want to hit out hard yet play it safe.

Because the foundations, associations, and study panels that subsidize and shepherd works of academic criticism are heavily populated by administrators who have their own scores to settle with professors.

Because professor-bashing is one of the few acts of group aggression for which it is always open season, almost every other group having been declared a protected species.

Because bashing professors is easy, since one can get the hang of it with very little training or study, so that critics presented with publisher deadlines need not fear that they will be "dead" (from overwork) when they reach the "line."

Because putting professors on the hook is a way of getting taxpayers off it. When one gets carried away by group psychology, the subject one gets carried away from is likely to be political economy. At that point, critics can inquire into why teaching programs fail without casting a glance at the dwindling of educational resources.

Because in so large a work force as the academic there are bound to be persons who do live down to the nasty things that are said about them, and who thus, through anecdotal evidence, manage to give sloganeering and stereotyping a good name.

NOTES

¹ Bloom, 1987; d'Souza, 1991; Sykes, 1988; Sykes, 1990; Bernstein, 1994; Kimball, 1990.

² Chomsky, 1969; Friedenber, 1965; Goodman, 1956; Kenniston, 1965; Kenniston, 1968; Wolff, 1969; Roszak, 1969; Roszak, 1968; Wallerstein, 1969.

³ Nisbet, 1965; Nisbet, 1973; O'Toole, 1978; Silber, 1974; Hentoff, 1969. See Smith, 1973.

⁴ Barzun, 1945; Hofstadter, 1963; Bestor, 1953.

⁵ Cf., Brubacher and Rudy, 1958.

⁶ Sanford, 1962.

⁷ Some prominent members of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), whose historic function has been the defense of academic freedom and tenure above all else, were not convinced that there could be a genuine civil libertarian thrust behind the hostility to "political correctness," perhaps because of the rise of a new organization of academics, the National Association of Scholars, whose anti-"p.c." alarums had a distinctly right-wing tone. In the fall of 1991, the AAUP entered the national debate on this subject with an unreviewed and hastily published statement by a special committee to the effect that the anti "p.c." attack sought primarily to turn back the clock on civil rights. Those who have accused American higher education of submitting to the domination of exponents of "political correctness," the statement read, have frequently been less than candid about its actual origin, which appears to lie in "an only partly concealed animosity toward equal opportunity and its first effects of modestly increasing the participation of women and racial and cultural minorities on campus ("Statement on the 'Political Correctness' Controversy," *Academe* 77 [September-October, 1991], 48). In the next issue of *Academe*, five former chairs of Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure over the past two decades and the current one administered an unprecedented public spanking to the authors of this statement. They denied that the special committee spoke for the Association, repudiated its view that criticism of political correctness was a form of "aggression against individual rights," and took the occasion to remind readers that academic freedom was a neutral principle, as available to the right as to the left.

⁸ Woodward, 1986.

⁹ Genovese, 1991.

¹⁰ That the tent has seemed to many to be a gathering place for right-wingers only may be attributed to the fact that, in a conservative age, conservatives tend to hog the spotlight of the media. Genovese found an outlet for his views in higher brow journals of limited circulation, but in this era a member of what is left of the left is not the first person chosen by talk show hosts and publishers to discourse on what is wrong with American higher education.

¹¹ Bennett, assisted by a "Study Group on the State of Learning in the Humanities in Higher Education," 1984; Association of American Colleges, 1985; Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, National Institute of Education, 1984; National Commission on Higher

Education Issues, 1982; Gamson and Associates, 1984; Commission for Educational Quality, Southern Regional Education Board, 1985; Cheney, 1988; Cheney, 1989; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Boyer, 1987; See also Boyer, 1990.

¹² This is the point at which Bennett's plea for the highest form of higher education slides into the ordinariness of professor bashing. In this respect he keeps company not with St. Thomas and Kant but with such sneerers at academic intellectuals as Anonymous, 1973; Kolstoe, 1975; Lewis, 1975; Mandell, 1977; Williams, 1958. Wilke, 1979; *et al.*

¹³ Cf. Bayer, 1970; Fulton and Trow, 1975. Later surveys of American faculties do not uncover important changes in teaching and research preferences and performances. Cf. Bowen and Schuster, 1986.

¹⁴ Of the critical reports on college teaching published in this period, the one entitled *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education*, written by Kenneth Mortimer, vice president at Pennsylvania State University, and guided by a National Institute of Education panel composed of well-known figures in the field of educational research would seem least to fit the Bennett-Rudolph pattern. In place of the chiliastic idiom of those authors, Mortimer employed the lingo of scientific management, using terms like "feedback," "frontloading," "monitoring," and "outcomes"; instead of painting a picture of a college system *in extremis*, he depicted a college system beset by a series of difficulties but with still much life in it; instead of prescribing one heroic remedy for what ailed the college, he offered 27 practical proposals, including "competency-based learning," "computer-assisted instruction," and "learning contracts" to boost its vital signs. Yet I find the stamp of the genre even on this seemingly aberrant work. It too considers undergraduate education in this country to be an abysmal failure; though it offers larger helpings of statistical supporting evidence, it too makes very scant use of historical evidence; and—this is to be the litmus test—it too demeans professors, not by demonizing them, but by proposing to disempower them, leaving to managerial administrators the task of initiating changes that would increase the efficiency of "personnel." Taylorism finds a place in this genre, too.

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