THE HIGHER LEARNING IN AMERICA: FIVE VIEWS OF ITS PRESENT STATE AND HOW IT GOT THAT WAY

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BEFORE TRYING TO ANSWER, THE CENTRAL QUESTION of this issue of *The Hedgehog Review*–"What's the university for"?–I'd ask "Who wants to know?" and "Which university?" There are so many replies to these questions, so many views of the American institution of

higher learning, that saggy pachyderm. In this review, I am only able to offer a sampling of views. The authors include a journalist, historians, and men of letters. None is blind, but each view is partial. Left out of account is any insider's view of university science and engineering, medicine or law. Each of the writers discussed here knows best the elite research university, not the middling and struggling places serving most of America. Each reporter has spent a lifetime in the academy; there is no fresh anthropological explorer of this falsely familiar but consistently odd culture. But still there is much to learn, both fresh and familiar.

Anne Matthews, a professor of journalism at NYU offers the most general survey of the "hundreds of small intense worlds [to be found in the university], a chunk of the 12th century dropped live and squabbling on the threshold of the 21st." She has eavesdropped on many of those worlds, and the scraps of unguarded remarks she confides make her account gossip-spicy. Her far-reaching report is loosely organized around the rhythm of the academic year.

Summer is a time for the ambitious (or those ambitious for their charges) to match their gifts and preoccupations with what colleges say they can offer. We witness the "college fair" in Manhattan, where instant matchmaking advice is dispensed to those who know the bachelor's degree is their ticket. ("You are really serious about volleyball? Indiana, NCAA Division I.")

Fall is the time of collision, as students find themselves drowning in their university: the classroom, the dormitory, the dining hall, cyberspace, and the half-secret "night campus" where drunken sex and violence agitate the shadows. Students' lives, we prefer not to be reminded, are complex and mostly hidden from many of us. This protects some from full realization of how small a part of students' time is given to any life of the mind. Faculty can still treasure the few "free spirits," as Matthews calls them, for whom ideas have the savor we remember. Around us we catch glimpses of those who outnumber the free spirits: the strivers after resume items and reward in the hereafter; the adventurous politicos; the counter-cultural rebels. These are all ignored by the genial small-letter greeks. To all of them the university is part home away from home, part arena for experiment, part posh resort. Where

else in this cold world could you find the college's amenities–medical care, recreational equipment, easy-going companionship, music, beer and circuses[1]–and most of all, the disposable time for all that? Here you can be an almost-adult, privileged but without full responsibility.

Winter is given over to the "important minds" of the university. Matthews eavesdrops at an art history conference at Yale–Such mastery of detail! Such bitchy backbiting! And at the Modern Language Association conference, we hear the desperation in the voices of the academic migrant laborers, the adjunct faculty paid by piecework. The arc of the academic career is up (to the selective graduate school), up (to the first real academic job), up (to tenure, that puzzling security), and perhaps up to greater glory: the named professorship, the plenary lecture at conferences, the Great Work that transforms the discipline. But for every up, there are many outs, and every step leaves many disappointed. Afterwards comes the difficult part of the middling academic life.

Spring presents special challenges for those about to depart, and for those who stay. Students who have not exchanged a personal word with any teachers now need their counsel and support. Teachers endure students' familiar evasiveness and savor the occasional sweet surprise. Now the designated grownups in the academy, the administrators, play their role. Matthews personalizes and exemplifies these misunderstood figures by following the whirlwind public life of the president of the College of Charleston. Surely the most admirable character in *Bright College Years*, he is John McPhee's *Headmaster* of Deerfield Academy brought into a new and worrisome setting. The wry observer knows not all of this man's virtue: the servant-master supports all initiative, disappoints no one, calls on his old friends and foes–the alumni–to save the institution that he loves and those it nurtures.

Summer brings the alumni back to colleges. Though reunions are a "long term development" effort in the eyes of some, it is in this exercise of

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[1] See Murray Sperber, *Beer and Circus: How Big-Time Sports is Crippling Undergraduate Education* (New York: Holt, 2000).

unreliable memory that Anne Matthews finds the words and the images to express the affection so many bear for this curious institution.

Memoirs are written for revenge, self-justification, or just to explain what was so sweet. Nostalgia, which we should remember refers to pain, informs *In Plato's Cave*, Alvin Kernan's account of his passage from bright young initiate into the New Criticism's clean, quiet, well-lighted space to steersman of Yale University through the dark and disorderly times of the sixties and seventies. He recalls his time at Williams College, where he shared in the ritual two or three nights each week of serious drinking and nourished a deep and widely shared interest in sex by reports from Kinsey, drafts from Freud, and the generosity of one special Bennington student. He survived the unsettling effect of a first exposure to cultural anthropology, and even recalls a few teachers distinguished by their passion for literature or some striking eccentricity of manner. Mr. Chips, if present, made little impression. His own interest in drama flowered in Oxford, another case of the curriculum's irrelevance since English study was linguistic and philological. It was his special revelation to find the New Criticism prospering at Yale. But the most searing memories of graduate school for Kernan were the grinding poverty, the frustrating attempt to teach literature to the indifferent and hostile he names "Smithers," and the grueling and arbitrary doctoral oral.

Apart from that singular trauma, life as an instructor at Yale in the 1950s was not much of a change. It did require one new trick, the "necessary but risky" socializing with the senior faculty. This reminds us of Amis' classic *Lucky Jim*; but in place of that hero's drudgework scholarship, we find Kernan's serious attempt to recover an authentic text of *Othello*. The effort called into question the very notion of authenticity, and contributed to the gloomy mood of Kernan's existential and tragic 1950s.

Kernan savored the variety of topic and personality in his Yale residential college conversations–not with the student members, but with other young instructors: Allan Bromley on nuclear physics and weapons, Bernard Knox on modern war and ancient Greece, Ed Lindblom on political economics. In 1959 C. P. Snow's account of *The*

Two Cultures seemed to make that community illusory if not impossible. Although Snow's charges were denied or even rebutted, the ability of science to make discoveries of lasting importance recommended it to many disciplines. It was considered the highest achievement to arrive, by reason and rigor exercised within a reliable theoretical frame, at knowledge that could be called scientific. Claude Levi-Strauss' structuralism promised to deliver such a framework.

Kernan describes the aspirations of Northrop Frye, who sought a grand structural code, perhaps the genome of its time and place. But try as he might, Kernan could not yoke his scholarly impulse to the text alone. The oddities of Renaissance Satire to him made sense only as an expression of contemporary intent, shaped by history and setting. The writer's block which made his tenure book at first such an ordeal vanished one Christmas eve, when he abandoned the tight focus of the New Criticism.

Occasionally it is given us to understand the view from across the desk. Kernan relates an ordeal, his most memorable teaching experience. Opening a graduate seminar in Shakespeare, he thought to break the ice and get acquainted with his students by posing them each a little question: When was Shakespeare born? What is the number of Shakespeare's plays? Did he have any brothers or sisters? Were their names at all suggestive? Finding that they knew nothing, not even that Lear dies, he collapsed into a safer style. As a survivor related some years afterwards, Kernan had so terrified those around the table ("Please, please let me be invisible, and I will work with the poor in Calcutta.") that they resolved never to come to class without having mastered the play of the day. It was not necessary–Kernan lectured from his yellow legal pads thereafter, without flash or eloquence. But his unremitting concentration and depth of thought on the scene at hand impressed his companions in another way. From that 1967 seminar came some of the greatest Shakespearean scholars of the last thirty years, including a New Historicist who helped to overthrow the orthodoxy Kernan helped construct.

This able scholar was somehow convinced to serve as associate provost; he found the life in administration "of endless interest, and also

extremely busy." But then came the Bobby Seale trial in 1970–the sixties came that late to New Haven. "History had overcome us, and a new myth of the university…was challenging our view of things." And then, all came apart: Structures collapsed. Madness was abroad in the land. Language lost its meaning. God and the author were both dead. Acting provost Kernan hired Paul de Man. Desperate times! Then, it seemed, it was time to go, to be a dean at Princeton.

That, of course, was a disillusion. In this office he saw first hand the impact of the federal government's power to change the university, once dependent on its grants, always with conditions. Politicization, litigation, duck bites! This was not endurable for long. A leave in London, and a return to his scholarship was soothing. But the New Criticism was no longer new, and Princeton English no longer seemed like home.

If we sense the sorrow in Kernan's memoir of a lost time, we find no such regret in James Axtell's account of his good life in the academy. Axtell, an historian especially interested in the long-ignored Native American contribution to American history (and now at home in Williamsburg with the Indians of William and Mary), has an agenda. He would like to administer some correctives to the generally fact-free public discussion of the sins of the professoriate. He does marshal some survey data that seem to show most faculty to be (by their own testimony–who else would know?) serious and hard-working. The apparently relaxed schedule of the academy leaves little enough time for the demands of teaching, we are to believe. Teaching, he makes clear, takes many forms for its many clienteles, and the hidden investment is great. We are assured that the investment of time and attention necessary to serious scholarship is extraordinary. Giving effective guidance to graduate students is another serious and time-consuming task, often hidden from the view of legislatures, parents, and the greater number of undergraduate students.

Among the secretly consuming preoccupations of the faculty is the cultivation of a circle of peers and colleagues, typically scattered (first)world-wide. Publications are, typically, for such small coteries; conferences around the world bring them together for more timely exchange, since in disciplines outside science publication is still slow

and chancy. Axtell undercuts his case somewhat with his essay "Twenty-five Reasons to Publish" –reprinted from the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* (October 1997)–which is apparently intended to chip away at "the professorial resistance to habitual scholarship." In a charitable mood one acknowledges that there is always something more urgent (perhaps not more important) to be done. But a part of the problem is the persistent and artificial opposition between teaching and research: of course carbon dioxide and sunlight seem very different; but both are necessary to photosynthesis and the organism's survival.

The university is still a mystery to most of our society, so Axtell lays out the checklist by which we can recognize one which can claim to be great; notable faculty, students, libraries and laboratories, graduate programs, and money define a minimum. A university press and an art museum add conviction that we are in a great institution. Other symptoms–vivid student life, a history, an engaging design, loyal alumni, a demanding curriculum, rich extracurricular fare–may be easier to recognize. He does not fail to mention an enterprising president and an adventurous board of trustees, by whose efforts the institution can flourish.

Axtell the instructor returns at last to summarize and simplify his account of university life, and to make a closing statement to the jury on tenure, research and teaching and their apparent but illusory conflict, the curriculum, and responsiveness to new technologies and ideas. In the meanwhile, with relief one understands, he turns to genial and relaxed reminiscences, tales of searching out precious old books, golden times in college towns, the intellectual adventure of crossing disciplinary boundaries and finding a new public audience, vacations full of travel and shop-talk. These are the pleasures.

Even in Arcadia, there am I also–and Axtell's sunny world has some ominous shadows. There are stresses, debts, injustices. But he is not the one to make the dark side his subject. For that we turn to cultural studies. Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt "make no apology for and offer no retreat from the very bleak, even apocalyptic, portrait [they] paint of higher education's prospects." In their *Academic Keywords: A Devil's Dictionary for Higher Education*, they share their constructive anger and

sense of urgency. Vexed issues such as Debt, Distance Learning, the Corporate University, Affirmative Action, Accountability, Outsourcing, Sexual Harassment, and Part-Time Faculty are addressed here, if hardly at all elsewhere in our short stack. The motive is to stir into action very resistant faculty, so that simple justice can be done to those now left without a living wage, humane health coverage, and some little dignity, from the university's cafeteria workers to part-time faculty.

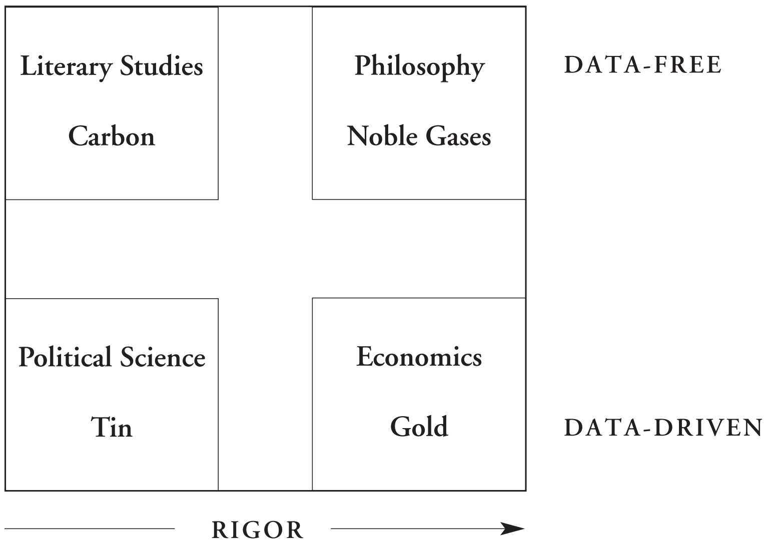
They seem angry, but cannot hide their love for the institution and their deep wish that it be the best that it once was and the best it can become. It is worth noting that Nelson and Watt's treatment of tenure, research and teaching and their apparent conflict, the curriculum, and the institution's responsiveness to new technologies and ideas is not in any substantial disagreement with Axtell's gentler remarks.

Left out of the discussion, however, is any treatment of the actual intellectual achievement of any discipline new or emergent. For that we turn to Thomas Bender and Carl E. Schorske's *American Academic Culture in Transition: Fifty Years, Four Disciplines.*

The four disciplines are Philosophy, Literary Studies, Economics, and Political Science. Giants in each discipline give us a broad view of the evolution of the discipline. Here is Ed Lindblom, Alvin Kernan's old friend from Yale's residential college, now as founder and father! As witnesses, their accounts are convincing and judicious. The editors have somehow fostered communication among the contributors and provided admirable summary essays. Among all these fine books, this is the most impressive achievement.

The very rich discussion resists summary, if not praise. But there are enough similarities in historical pattern across the spectrum to justify an attempt. I have placed the disciplines in a grid (see graph on page 141). The axes might be labeled RIGOR and ISOLATION. Kinder terms will suggest themselves. All the disciplines responded at mid-century to the perceived challenge of physical and biological sciences. (Their practitioners took no notice.) These fields seemed to operate within secure and powerful theoretical frames (Evolution, Newton's laws, the laws of Thermodynamics, Quantum Theory, the Periodic

Table) and to be able to generate reliable knowledge. This, of course, was of particular importance to philosophy. As Quine said, philosophy of science is philosophy enough. This banished such ancient subjects as aesthetics and ethics to a darker corner of the field, or even to other disciplines. Likewise economics turned from description of institutions and historical accounts of commercial empires to mathematization and model building, so that quantitative assertions could be made about measurable quantities. This is why I have placed Philosophy and Economics at the extreme right of the RIGOR axis.



As we have already learned from Alvin Kernan, the New Criticism and Structuralism was his discipline's turn away from historical particulars and toward the subtleties of the text in view. And political science borrowed survey techniques from sociology, behavioristic accounts of decision-making from psychology, and game theoretic modeling from economics. Economics and political science set new value on data, and exiled any more sympathetic and softer discussion of the moral behavior of principled individuals. So the vertical axis of my chart might be DATA, with fields data-driven at the bottom and those data-free at the top.

Every essayist makes clear that these sweeping assertions cannot be true: Ordinary-language philosophy coexisted with analytic philosophy, while American pragmatism and realism still survived. Political theory did not vanish. New Criticism's dominance was never total. Even economic history was slow to disappear. Broadly however, the triumph of RIGOR was most complete in philosophy and economics and partial in political science and literary study.[2]

The remaining thirty years can be told by the responses of the disciplines to the cultural upheaval of the late sixties and early seventies. Put simply, none of the disciplines was ready for the demands placed upon it by newly assertive social activists. Philosophy could only offer to judge the structure of others' arguments, though it exported ethicists to law, business, and especially medicine. Abstract and model-bound economics continued to serve its clientele, the military-industrial complex, but offered no way to change what it studied and abetted. Value-neutral political science could describe voting behavior and the functioning of institutions, but could offer no guidance on what they should be doing and how to change them into something better. And the importance of the author's intent and understanding and the exact nature of the text seemed to be dissolving into air, that is to say, into the discourse.

Philosophy (impassive as the Noble Gases) and Economics (preoccupied with the noble metal, gold) were the least affected by the upheaval. They maintained disciplinary integrity (in one view) or clung to their isolated niches. Some of those in philosophy (Richard Rorty) who took notice of the stormy world of affairs found a more comfortable perch in literary studies. Others migrated into the theory wing of Political Science (as conductive and malleable as tin), or into the spacious domains of History. Of all the disciplines, Literary Studies (as versatile,

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2 Though it is not part of Bender and Schorske's purpose to trace the evolution of the sciences, one sees immediately the transformation in biology (organismal to molecular, descriptive field studies decline) and chemistry (mass spectrometry, gas chromatography, and various spectroscopies replace chemical means of analysis and test).

as reactive, and as essential to the life of the institution as Carbon) was most welcoming and vulnerable to new responses. The new emphasis on process rather than agents, on the cultural milieu and conventions of discourse, on the denial of the possibility (or the desirability) of finding an objective and value-free external reality, and the invention of far-reaching Cultural Studies disquieted and reformed the discipline.[3] The impact is broader than these examples show.[4]

This radical shift in perspective could be called The Opening of the American Mind (historian Levine) or its Closing (philosopher and political theorist Bloom). It accompanied a particularly American change in the makeup of participants in the grand conversation. New voices are to be heard, and diversity to be valued over coherence. Race, Class, and Gender, now noticed, are seen by many to bear the highest significance. The university is a more important and more capable institution now than it once was. Daniel Webster would find it now a larger place, but still there are those who love it.

Five views: breezy journalistic album of snapshots, elegiac memoir, contented reminiscence with a fair defense, a tough-loving critique, and a thorough comparative intellectual history, all informed by personal involvement and affection for the beast. We may not have captured the whole elephant, but these readings bring even insiders more than suspicions confirmed. The institution inspires those it nurtures and tries in many ways.

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[3] Cultural Studies takes all discourse as its domain, but so far as it has attracted the attention of the sciences, it has provoked only exasperation and occasional ridicule.

[4] Biology becomes ecological, and a kind of natural history re-emerges. But nature writing, once the province of field biologists, becomes a genre in Literary Studies.