

The Death of Thought

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Dumbing Down: Essays on the Strip Mining of American Culture, edited by Katherine Washburn and John F. Thornton, with an introduction by John Simon, *New York: W.W. Norton, 1996. 332 pp. \$22.50.*

OF RELATIVELY RECENT COINAGE, the phrase “dumbing down” refers most often to the practice of removing difficult material from text books or curricula to ease the way for slower students. Thus publishers of high-school and even college history books replace the words of past statesmen, authors, and generals with attractive pictures that do not require a dictionary to decipher. Thus, too, teachers spend ever more time enhancing students’ fragile self-images, and less and less time demanding that they write essays, analyze poetry, conjugate verbs, or solve problems. But as this timely collection of essays makes painfully clear, educators are not the only ones retreating from intellectual rigor. Writers, artists, business executives, museum curators, filmmakers, and clergymen are also shirking the demands of serious thought. In the editorial office, the studio, the boardroom, and the pulpit, sustained reflection and sophistication are

giving way to cheap stunts and raw impulse.

Hence, few readers will resist the editors’ central contention: namely, that the life of the intellect is ebbing away in modern America. How could they? The symptoms of what the editors call a “wasting disease” abound: high school graduates who can barely read their diplomas; politicians who know nothing of the history or constitutional responsibilities of the positions they hold; writers and artists who are trashing our literary and aesthetic traditions. Even at the nation’s top universities and most prestigious periodicals—once citadels protecting standards set by a thoughtful elite over many centuries—we can now detect the same symptoms of mindlessness evident in inferior community colleges and third-rate newspapers. But what are the pathogens causing this national disease of the mind, and who has spread them? The question “Who is to blame?” well deserves the emphasis the editors give it, as does the ancillary question “What are their motives?”

While documenting the gravity of our intellectual malaise, the contributors to this volume indict many of those who have helped cause it and uncover many of their motives. This is not to say that readers must always defer to the views of the jury that Washburn and Thornton have here impaneled. Perceptive readers will likely dissent, for instance, when

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Anthony DeCurtis defends contemporary pop music against the “reactionary longing for cultural privilege,” despite his own admission that much of this music is “frighteningly stupid.” Sensible readers will protest even more vigorously against the opinions of Michael Miller. Miller recognizes in today’s “high-tech obscenity” a symptom of “post-civilization, [of] things coming apart”; nonetheless, he justifies the crudest of profanity as he cheers for those who have overcome “restriction and censorship” to create a “culture that openly acknowledges our animal longings and impulses.”

Fortunately, other contributors, seeing more clearly than DeCurtis or Miller, indict those truly culpable of crimes against the intellect and adduce compelling evidence of their guilt. With good reason, several contributors point fingers of accusation at the hucksters and profiteers who have reduced so much of our intellectual life to bottom-line calculations. In the emergence of what he calls “Adcult,” James B. Twitchell describes the almost irresistible economic logic in favor of “selling out to the lowest common denominator.” Serious art, literature, and philosophy must give way to “mindless humor, maudlin sentimentality, exaggerated action, and frivolous entertainment” because the makers of Adcult resemble “the carnival barker [who] doesn’t care what is behind the tent only how long the line is in front.” No wonder, then, that when Kent Carroll looks at the world of publishing, he sees a world in which “editorial decisions have been usurped by the sales department.” “Who wants to be Max Perkins,” Carroll asks, “when, if you can find the next Rush Limbaugh or Howard Stern, you could be Rupert Murdoch’s supereditor, Judith Regan?”

Numerous though their depredations against the national intellect may be, profiteers are nonetheless not the most dangerous malefactors under indictment

in this volume. Several contributors recognize that it is the ideologue—typically a college professor, a journalist, or a politician—who poses a far more insidious threat to intellectual life than the mere huckster or profiteer. After all, the motives of the profiteer are transparent: he means to turn a buck. All but the extremely shallow and gullible can resist his assaults on the mind. But the ideologue understands how to hide his motives behind a screen of lofty rhetoric. Worse, the ideologue understands how to turn the very substance of thought (language, logic, and reason) into intellectual venom.

Many of these ideologues stand guilty of fulfilling Tocqueville’s prophecy (cited by the editors) that the future would inevitably bring “an egalitarian dismissal of excellence—seen by democratic man as an easily removable cause of envy and exclusiveness.” Thus, as poet David R. Slavitt argues, “the jolly equality of the New Age classroom” requires that teachers and writers engage in “strenuous exercises in pandering” and that they avoid any hint of suggesting “that anything—or anyone—is wrong.” But behind the amorality which Slavitt deplores a new morality lies hidden, a new morality codified in the “political correctness” now stifling serious thinking in the very place once devoted to its cultivation, namely the university.

Rejecting the inherited wisdom and faith of our ancestors, the morality of political correctness requires professors and students to join in a mass exercise of un-thought, as they recite their litany of utopian mantras: men and women are completely equal, especially women; the cultures of all ethnic groups are all equally valid and meaningful, and therefore the values of minorities are superior to those of European whites; all restraints upon human appetite are oppressive; marriage and family life are impediments to individual fulfillment;

tolerance outweighs all other virtues, and its modern exemplars must stamp out all deviations from its dictates; evil is a figment of the imaginations of demented and evil theologians; and on and on. After thousands of recitations, these mantras have acquired a fearful potency, quite sufficient to cow any professor whose research or reasoning might lead him to question their veracity.

Bewailing the effects of these mantras of political correctness, sociologist Steven Goldberg informs readers that “there are now hundreds of thousands of students who have been force-fed ideology rather than have been taught that which is most reasonably believed to be true.” But the mendacity of political correctness does not come up to its imaginative barrenness and its aesthetic sterility. For it is only under the spell of political correctness that otherwise bright college students could have learned how to throw the greatest works of Western art into what Joseph Epstein here calls “the meat grinder of race, class, and gender.”

But, then, art can serve as no more than butcher-shop window dressing at a politically correct university, where more and more lectures, books, and discussions presuppose (in Heather MacDonald’s diagnosis) “the centrality of politics to every human endeavor.” And as the quest for political power displaces the search for truth, the mind must atrophy. Reverence and humility vanish as the intellect loses every faculty not useful for securing group and individual advantage.

Reduced to power-seeking cunning, contemporary Marxists, feminists, homosexual activists, and ethnic ideologues have expended an astonishing amount of their intellectual energy in devising a mythology of victimhood useful for expanding their political influence. Dissected here by Gilbert Sewell, this mythology serves to endow its cre-

ators—self-proclaimed victims all—with an intellectual and moral superiority over the defenders of “the ideas and symbols that have allowed the dominant race, class, and gender to maintain hegemony over others.” Though zealously insistent upon their identity as victims, modern ideologues almost never offer any genuine insight into the nature of human suffering or the meaning of tragedy. For in the ideological melodrama they have scripted, the victim suffers only until he (or more likely *she*) can seize the levers of power and so turn the tables on the oppressors. To acknowledge that suffering signifies more than an absence of political power, to acknowledge that suffering inheres within the human condition itself, would require coming to terms with realities which transcend individual and group interest. But as Sewell points out, the modern mythology of victimhood requires its adherents to repudiate the very possibility of such transcendence and to discount all “ideals of truth, objectivity, reason, argument, evidence, impartiality, et cetera—elements of a ‘regime of truth’—[as] themselves instruments of oppression.”

Though initially exhilarating, the modern ideologue’s repudiation of transcendence and objectivity eventually leaves the intellect with no check on its own fantasies, no escape from its own narcissism, a narcissism finally too evil to be adequately subsumed under a rubric as banal as “dumbing down.” Those who succumb to this narcissism do perhaps deserve our pity as victims, though their victimhood is of their own devising.

Of course, the monsters of our century have reduced millions of men and women to a status of victimhood which is not self-imposed, not a figment of the ideologue’s imagination. Yet one toughminded contributor, Jonathan Rosen, questions the modern assumption that victimhood in and of itself en-

nobles those who experience it. "Victims," he writes, "don't occupy a higher moral plane. They've just suffered more." Furthermore, he argues, "the facile identification with victims does not lead to higher behavior," particularly within "contemporary American culture, which has a habit of trivializing tragedy and adapting it for personal use."

Some victims of real oppression—Solzhenitsyn in the gulag, Thomas More in the Tower, the Apostle Paul in his bonds—have profoundly enriched noetic life, yet it is not victimhood as such which enabled them to inspire us to deeper, more fruitful thinking. Rather it has been their faith, their devotion. It has been their understanding that the mind finds its ultimate fulfillment not in devising ways to wrest power away from oppressors but rather in contemplating and praising God.

Much of what we attribute to the process of "dumbing down" proves, on closer inspection, to be the end result of our turning away from God. The horrid intellectual consequences of unbelief and apostasy have multiplied during the last thirty years, but today's skeptics and apostates are treading paths marked out more than a century ago. In his *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (1985), historian James Turner explains with laudable clarity how, by as early as the 1880s, "unbelief had assumed its present status as a fully available option in American culture." Of course, once we as Americans granted respectability to atheism and agnosticism, we lost "the unifying and defining element of [our] entire culture." "The option of godlessness," Turner concludes, "has disintegrated our common intellectual life, both in formal disciplines like philosophy, science, and literature, and in those informal habits of mind by which we, as a culture, experience and order our world."

Clearly visible even in the 1880s, the

cultural disintegration effected by unbelief now threatens to overwhelm and destroy us. We may interpret the irrationality, sloth, incompetence, amnesia, illiteracy, mendacity, and chaos which the editors of this volume call "dumbing down" as doleful evidence of just how complete this disintegration now is. So complete has been the triumph of unbelief in unraveling our national and cultural life that faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has almost disappeared even from many churches and synagogues. David Klinghoffer detects scarcely a trace of the God of Scripture in the liberal Christian and Jewish denominations he scrutinizes in his essay on "Kitsch Religion." What he sees instead are progressivist pastors and rabbis "watering down.... moral requirements," "substituting politics for morality," and converting churches and synagogues into social institutions. Rather than defend "the authority of ancient traditions," the practitioners of kitsch religion bow to "the prevailing opinion of the secular world," a world which allows them "to believe what they want about virtue, sin, and salvation." Adherents to a faith of intellectual integrity and doctrinal principles might hope to confront and to reverse the "dumbing down" of our national culture. But what intellectual resources can men draw upon if their religion is just "a vacuous, no-demand, no-standards, no-requirements, no-guilt, do-good enterprise of sloppy sentimentality"?

Most of the contributors to this volume steer clear of explicitly religious or theological questions as they analyze the "dumbing down" of our culture. Because he deepens his inquiry into our cultural discontents by probing such questions, Klinghoffer stands out as a writer who merits our attention and appreciation. But other contributors still deserve our respect for their willingness to bear witness against the deepening