

Eugene Goodheart. *Does Literary Studies Have a Future?* Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999. 137p.

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This is a valuable book! Morris Dickstein, City University of New York, has even called it “an epitaph to the culture wars.” In a thoughtful and thought-provoking analysis of the “current Balkanization” of literary studies in the United States, Eugene Goodheart asks the questions we must answer if we are concerned about the present condition and future of literary studies. Why do we distort issues when we debate the canon, gender studies, and literary theory? Why is the academy now infatuated with popular culture? How can ideology and aesthetics both be used fruitfully in literary studies?

Goodheart is a Socratic reasoner, not a divisive culture warrior, as he persuades us to engage in dialogue with our opponents (those both within and outside the academy) rather than continuing “the hermeneutics of suspicion,” a destructive mindset based on intolerance and even contempt for those who do not agree with us. Whether we are traditionalists or antitraditionalists, he encourages us to think against ourselves; to realize that truth is dispersed, not absolute; and to debate with strong adversaries, not hearing words simply to refute, but primarily listening to understand and value our opponents’ most intellectually compelling arguments, even if we don’t ultimately agree with all of the conclusions. Goodheart feels that the purpose of this cogent discussion of issues is not to decide, but to explore issues of contention—to begin conversing with one another again.

What I like most about the book is that Goodheart consistently models the intellectual approach he’d like us to take. Rather than simply ignoring the “cultural right,” for example, he admits that he avoided reading Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* for the longest time, but that, when he did finally read it, he found himself intrigued but finally unconvinced by Bloom’s analysis of the Western intellectual tradition. Before arriving at his final assessment, he carefully considered Bloom’s ideas, and, based upon the evidence presented, agreed, in part, with Bloom’s analysis. But often he found himself disagreeing with Bloom on a perception or interpretation of the evidence. Goodheart’s important point is that, even between irreconcilable antagonists, there is usually some point of agreement that makes a scholarly debate possible.

Here is a dominant issue in the book I found intriguing: Goodheart’s perceptive analysis of the evolution of literary theory during a key thirty-year period. He describes what he feels are the devastating effects of the radical shift from the vernacular style of the New Criticism of the 1950s (where the reigning values were

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aesthetic) to the sociological prose of a specialized discourse community in the Poststructuralism of the 1980s (where the reigning values were theoretical). What troubles Goodheart the most is that “a literary sensibility” is not even requisite today for professional entry into the discipline. As a way of infusing a new vitality into the discipline, Goodheart proposes reinfranchising certain ideas that have apparently become disreputable in the humanities: objectivity, disinterestedness, tradition, and aesthetic appreciation—intellectual attributes that should be the common possession of scholars whatever their political or cultural position: left, right, or center.

These few ideas I have focused on are certainly only suggestive of the book’s intellectual richness. To savor fully the subtlety, perceptiveness, and persuasiveness of Goodheart’s compelling argument, you need to immerse yourself in his lucid and arresting prose. *Does Literary Studies Have a Future?* is one of those few books described by Francis Bacon, in *Of Studies*, that needs “to be chewed and digested.” ❁