
REVIEWS

Alvin Kernan, ed. *What's Happened to the Humanities?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. 268p.

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While the number of institutions of higher education and the number of students attending them have increased dramatically between 1960 and 1990 (from 2000 to 3595 institutions and from 3.5 to 15.3 million full-time students, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics), the humanities and liberal arts in general have not fared well. Between 1966 and 1993, the percentage of Bachelor's degrees awarded in the humanities dropped from 20.7 to 12.7, and the percentage of doctoral degrees awarded in the humanities fell from 13.8 to 9.1. According to editor Alvin Kernan, these statistics and others (which he includes in a very useful Appendix) indicate that "the humanities are playing a less important part within the totality of higher education in America."

Divided into five sections focusing primarily on literature and history, the essays in *What's Happened to the Humanities?* attempt to explore this decline. In "Democratization and Decline? The Consequences of Demographic Change in the Humanities," Lynn Hunt analyzes the changing demographics and their negative impact on teachers. In "Funding Trends in the Academic Humanities, 1970-1995," John D'Arms reports on funding sources and argues that the responsibility for the humanities has shifted from traditional sources of support to colleges and universities themselves. In "Ignorant Armies and Nighttime Clashes: Changes in the Humanities Classroom, 1970-1995," Francis Oakley reads course catalogs to examine the changes in how the humanities are taught. She suggests that the right's fears about curriculum changes have been greatly exaggerated. Margery Sabin continues this exploration of the humanities classroom in "Evolution and Revolution: Change in the Literary Humanities, 1968-1995," arguing that "innovation and tradition can be and are being effectively integrated in some current approaches to reading and writing in the humanities."

In "Humanities and the Library in the Digital Age," Carla Hesse explores the impact electronic technologies make on research libraries. Like other contributors, she sees a shift in "scholarly and educational priorities" from the humanities to "the laboratories of the hard sciences and the professions." In "The Practice of

Reading” Denis Donoghue draws on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* to argue for a return to earlier forms of scholarship, which he associates with teaching “great works rather than mediocre ones” and with scholarly “disinterestedness.” According to Donoghue, “if we cannot or will not sequester our immediately pressing interests, put them in parenthesis for the time being, we have no hope of reading literature.” “Beyond Method” continues this lament for earlier forms of scholarship as Gertrude Himmelfarb calls for a rejection of social constructionist theories of knowledge and a return to an objective, impersonal methodology. Like Donoghue and Himmelfarb, Frank Kermode views earlier modes of scholarship as more useful to the humanities and in “Changing Epochs” asserts that we need an elite group of scholars and students, or what he describes as “a saving remnant willing to be despised as aesthetes or ideological innocents — as, in a bizarrely anachronistic way, dedicated to *literature*” (his italics). Christopher Ricks takes a different tact in “The Pursuit of Metaphor” and suggests that, rather than attack recent developments in “postmodernist” scholarship, he and his colleagues should simply continue with their own (non-postmodernist) work.

Focusing primarily on literary studies and literature, in “The Demise of Disciplinary Authority,” Louis Menand provides a brief history of the professionalization of the humanities and the rise and fall of discrete disciplinary boundaries, arguing that “the disciplinary structure of literary studies has lost its authority.” And in “Scholarship as Social Action,” David Bromwich explores the post-1960s role of advocacy in teaching and research. Like many of his fellow contributors, Bromwich views recent changes with deep suspicion, asking “How did the ethic of social engagement pass into the self-regard of confessional therapy...?”

According to Kernan, the essays in *What’s Happened to the Humanities?* are primarily descriptive rather than evaluative: “there has been a major effort here to describe what has actually happened in the humanities rather than to praise or blame it.” Yet as my brief chapter summaries indicate, the essays are not simply descriptive. In fact, at times while reading this volume I felt that the subtitle should be “How Postmodernists are Destroying the Humanities.” I’m exaggerating, but only slightly! Many essays contain a recurring note of nostalgia and regret for the changes which have occurred, as well as a tendency to blame “postmodernism” — especially social constructionist theories of knowledge, interdisciplinary studies, and “subjectivism” — for the humanities’ declining significance. The problem here, I believe, is the restrictive definitions of postmodernism many contributors employ. To be sure, postmodernism in its most ludic form can lead to superficiality and rampant relativism, but poststructuralism in the creative hands of theo-

rists like Gloria Anzaldúa, Henry Louis Gates, Jr, and others is anything but superficial.

I found two other things especially striking about this volume. First, the contributors speak from unacknowledged positions of privilege and prestige. As the brief biographical statements indicate, the essays are written by scholars well established in (or retired after) very successful careers at major research universities like Yale, Princeton, and Cambridge. Second, there are no essays written from other perspectives — from scholars in the first half of their careers and from scholars who use poststructuralism and view it as a positive tool, an effective way of bringing about social change.

Perhaps because I have not yet reached the halfway mark in my own academic career and because I employ poststructuralist theory in my teaching and scholarship, I found this nostalgic, anti-postmodernist perspective of limited usefulness. This volume would be more valuable if it included a wider variety of perspectives — essays by scholars who find merit in poststructuralist theory; essays by scholars who engage in multiculturalism, feminism, and ethnic studies; and essays by scholars who are in the earlier stages of their career. ❀