theory. So the relationship between writing and feminist literary criticism, at least according to this particular forum, appears to come down to simply sharing space in the house of literature. And to keeping the connecting doors open.

As a writer myself, I’ve always felt ambiva-
 lent toward literary criticism. But I’d never taken a close look at why I felt this uneasiness until reading The Vernacular Muse, a collection of eight critical essays by Dennis Cooley. Here is this Manitoba critic championing poetry that challenges the standards of “literary Mountains” and insisting upon the examination of the politics of a text. Talking about the voices of the margi-
nalized, and a new economy of poetry that has nothing to do with succedaneity of style. Those of us whose work has sometimes been judged po-

tentially meaningless, as American poet Carolyn Forché points out, that it doesn’t celebrate politi-
cally acceptable, and therefore invisible, values

should be chering, right? Finally we have an ally in the sober dwelling of Canadian scholarly criti-
cism, a renegade declaring that:

This is a common and a continuing right—to be able to say your voice is your own world. To get out from under the snare of an official culture that is im-
pacted and “high.” To be at home in the world. To

name and position an American part of sensivities, spoken but not written because the writing avail-
able to us would not accommodate our worlds.

Part of me did cheer, not only because Cooley writes with (unschooled) political conviction laid bare but because he does so clearly and inventively. Part of me wanted to argue, too—not a bad thing, of course, since it proves that The Vernacular Muse is engaging enough to make me pay attention. But I realized that my quarrel was often with the nature of criticism itself rather than with Cooley as a practitioner of the art. And I think that comes down to writers and critics having different relationships to language.

In an essay called “The Critical Word,” John Berger wrote that authenticity in literature “comes from a single faithfulness: that to the ambiguity of experiences.” Within this frame-

work, language is about possibility. But criti-
cism, by the nature of its discourse, sets up standards, an organization of understanding that can’t be ambiguous or it loses its authority as theory. Losses, in other words, its legitimation, which is based on narrowing possibilities. And this is true even of the most anti-conservative criticism, such as that contained in The Vernacular Muse.

A considerable chunk of the book is taken up with the analysis of work by Dorothy Livesay, Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Laurence, Robert Duncan and Sinclair Ross. These essays were a
critic’s criticisms—insightful, but not as interest-
ing to me (as a writer) as Cooley’s work on the

vernacular in poetry. So most of my remarks will concentrate on two essays on this topic, as well as a complementary piece on line breaks.

Cooley points out that “literary value resides...not as is often supposed, independently and inside the poem, but in how we decide to read the poem, and our thinking will vary tremen-
dously depending on a whole series of assump-
tions, strategies and claims we bring, however unreflectingly, to bear.” And he goes on to speak for “refusing the presented terms” and “bringing unassuming voices into the poem.” For him all the way on this (ideological) stand. How we differ is in strategies.

In the opening essay, Cooley compares “eye” poetry and “ear” poetry. He is careful to say that he finds merit in both forms, though he also makes evident, in his delineation of their charac-
teristics, where his greater allegiance lies. No

presence of disinterested scholarship. He regards eye poetry as more individualistic, setting up a particular hegemony: “the poet’s eye—a differ-

cent eye, a higher understanding—provides...over

a spatialized, silenced, and therefore socially popu-

lated landscape” with the poet as “originator of meaning.”

Ear poetry, on the other hand, doesn’t depend on dazzling metaphors or expressive language so much as colloquial patterns of speech, the quality of a “found text.” In contrasting the two modes, Cooley argues “how important the matter is for one poet, in self-lopey, unengaged in a dialogic way, sings her sensitive impressions to herself—

monologu; the other poet enters dialogue, ac-

knowledges a social setting...—dialogue.” (Coo-
ey describes vernacular, or ear poetry as more

often written by males and eye poetry by females, but unfortunately he doesn’t pursue the social/
cultural factors that might account for this differ-

ence.) He admits that the two forms seem mutu-

ally exclusive but because criticism is based on

opposition, he ends up not considering ambiguities,

scraps away fair on the surface, he is quick
to say “we can cultivate both of them, enjoy each for what it is.”

But look at the political implications of the two forms as Cooley has characterized them? He sug-

gests that “we witness the migration of au-

thority from author to reader” in poetry that abandons metaphor and nuanced language; that vernacular poetry subverts the dominant order through its resistance to formal structure and conventional interpretation. Essentially, that meaning resides in form.

I realize that content is a dirty word nowadays and that meaning is ambiguous anyway (like

experience itself). My concern with language-
based theory (what we’ve been talking about here and finally naming) is exactly the same objec-
tions that Cooley raises to contemplative poetics in being merely “objects of interpretation whose primary interest is semantic.” Like him I’m often impatient/disillusioned with the inwardsness of multi formal poetry. But the apparent outward-

ness of the vernacular doesn’t necessarily mean

that the form is less central in the poet. The organizing sensibility of the author is always

situated in the text, even though it may be dis-

guised; the problem is how to open up the author/ of the poems, whether using colloquial lan-


guage and/or metaphor.

I think Dennis Cooley and I would be in agreement about this, since all of the essays in The Vernacular Muse refuse to be cloistered, isolated from the social context. They challenge the unthinking use of language—as does good poetry. Proving, I guess, that however problem-

atic the relationship between writing and critical theory remains, because of their respective forms, there is a common bond.

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The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe by Russell Jacoby


The gist of The Last Intellectuals is the argument that a dramatic attitudinal and behavioral shift took place between the past two generations of American—and Canadians—intellectuals, and that the recent predominance of academic institu-

ions is largely responsible for this phenomenon.

According to Jacoby, many intellectuals of the older generation—those born in the first dec-

ades of this century—were able to convey their ideas to the educated public in plain English; they stimulated many discussions across the nation and were instrumental in enriching the intellec-

tual life of all Americans. As a result, a number
These "public intellectuals" were able to convey their ideas in plain English.

... the intellectual conservativeness of the new academicians. It was a formulary for an intellectual movement that had been in the making for some time. It was a movement that was not only narrowly academic but also had a broader social base. It was a movement that was not only cultural but also had a political dimension. It was a movement that was not only intellectual but also had a moral dimension. It was a movement that was not only academic but also had a public dimension. It was a movement that was not only intellectual but also had a practical dimension. It was a movement that was not only cultural but also had a social dimension. It was a movement that was not only intellectual but also had a political dimension.
indefensible. He cites the case of an influen-
tial neo-conservative writer (Daniel Bell) enu-
mistically supporting the tenure application of an
accomplished scholar at the other end of the
political spectrum (Paul Ficcarello). The bid even-
tually failed. The moral of the story is that true
intellectuals show respect for one another, de-
spite differences in their political views. More
typically, of course, academics as well as admin-
istrators tend to be intolerant of adherents of
ideologies they do not share: they try their best
to block any appointment of what they brand unde-
defeatable elements, as Jacoby illustrates elsewhere
in the book. Academic freedom is fragile.

Academic intellectuals who play the game well thrive in the system. They not professionally and scientifically in every respect: obscure jargons and elaborate models are their hallmarks. They establish their power bases by building empires: friends, associates and disciples band together for mutual benefits. They gauge their own achievements by noting successful confer-
ces and journals, not to mention research fund-
ing attracted. The quality of their intellectual ideas seems immutable. It hews out that the bulk of the literature produced is of questionable value; some of it in downright gratuitous nonsense. Jacoby expresses much contempt for this entire scene. He could have made reference to theories of bureaucraty: the behaviour he describes is characteristic of what Anthony Downs calls "clumsers," who struggle to expand the territo-
ries of their respective groups. The bureaucratic environment breeds these creatures, along with a few monsters.

The book devotes considerable space to a compari-
nson of Jewish and non-Jewish intellectual-
als. It seeks to refute a certain popular notion that Jews are more radical. Jacoby explains that Jewish thinkers of the previous generation, being children of immigrants, could afford to reject dominant values of their host country; they craved acceptance in mainstream society. With few exceptions, youthful Radicalism marinated into conservatism. Jacoby thus interprets this Jewish phenomenon as the product of a particular social setting. Again, the environment is decisive.

The Last Intellectuals is one of several recent books addressing the current state of intellectuals and intellectual ideas. Two other books that have received wide attention are Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind and E. D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy. All three are critical of the status quo, albeit from different perspectives. Bloom is a self-appointed guardian of traditional American values. Defending what he claims to be traditional and thus presumably good, he passio-
nately attacks the dissemination and cultivation of pluralistic ideas in universities today. Hirsch also opposes pluralism in the educational system, but he does so on pragmatic grounds. If people in the same society lack a common body of knowledge, he argues, they are incapable of communicating effectively with one another. The stress here is on shared information rather than shared values. For Jacoby, however, educa-
tion is more encompassing than what one re-
ceives in schools and universities. It is an ongo-
ing process. One has to keep learning and think-
ing critically about the changing world for as long as one lives. That is why Jacoby is gravely concerned about the disappearance of public in-
tellectuals, who are public educators in the broadest sense. Confusing intellectual activities to academic departments deprives the majority of the population from continuing their education.

Few of the ideas in Jacoby's book appear to be original. The reader has probably encountered many of them diffused in works by Lewis Coser, Emily Abel, Alexander Bloom, Richard Mandell and several others. So what are the merits of Jacoby's contribution? Most fundamentally, he brings into prominence the theme of the lost intellectual voice—a theme that Hitchens has not been properly developed. The need for public intellectuals in this age of specialization and professionalism is a notion that has received only peripheral treatment. His emphasis on the rift between the two generations calls attention to the gravity of the situation. Unlike a myriad of soci-
ologists and historians, Jacoby never pretends to be a disinterested observer: he seeks to persuade the reader and, implicitly, pleads immediate action. In other words, he functions not as a technical specialist, but as an intellectual, in the very sense in which he uses the term.

Furthermore, he brings the discussion up to date: the book is a rich source of information on

the American intellectual scene. In addition to
injecting vigour into an extensive body of litera-
ture, the author frequently draws on cases of
well-known intellectuals and performs his share of
mockery. This approach gives his account an unusual vividness. Jacoby has the courage to
candidly criticize the people he associates with.
Considering that he himself is an unharmed aca-
demic, he might be brining the book that feeds him. Although he is sympathetic with ideas on the left, Jacoby admires certain conservative thinkers for their integrity. He is able to look beyond the various schools of thought for the common problem.

Perhaps Jacoby places an excessive blame on
academics. Each type of institution has its con-
straints and yet simultaneously offers opportuni-
ties. Despite all its drawbacks, the university
provides intellectuals with job security and in-
come stability. Even academics without tenure
are financially better off than most bohemians,
who constantly have had to resist the temptation
of commercial success if they wished to remain
intellectuals. As long as academics do not insist
on keeping career advancement as their top priori-
ty, there is still a chance for them to overcome
barriers to emerge as public intellectuals. While
Jacoby reproaches certain academics—espe-
cially the supposedly radical thinkers—for their
blunt caricature, he virtually discourses all poss-
ibilities of individual initiative. Inevitably his pessimism may have rationalized the atti-

ditudes and behaviours of many intellectuals in
academic institutions.

Given the scope and complexity of the prob-
lem being investigated, the author has done an
admirable job. The cogent and thought-provok-
ing argument presented in this book is something
all members of the educated public should con-
template. The writing style is lucid, eloquent,
confident, witty, sarcastic and, most importantly,
neither technical nor pedantic. At the very least,
Jacoby has qualified himself as a public intellec-
tual—a sign that the picture he paints need not be
so gloomy after all.

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