

theory. So the relationship between writing and feminist literary criticism, at least according to this particular forum, appeared 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 ambivalent 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 Mounties" and insisting upon the examination of the politics of a text. Talking about the voices of the marginalized, and a new economy of poetry that has nothing to do with succinctness of style. Those of us whose work has sometimes been judged polemical (meaning, as American poet Carolyn Forché points out, that it doesn't celebrate politically acceptable, and therefore invisible, values) should be cheering, right? Finally we have an ally in the sober dwelling of Canadian scholarly criticism, a renegade declaring that:

This is a common and a continuing fight—to be able to use yr own voice in yr own world. To get out from under the smother of an official culture that is imported and "high." To be at home in the world. To name and proclaim an unwritten part of ourselves, spoken but never written because the writing available to us would not accommodate our worlds.

Part of me did cheer, not only because Cooley writes with (unscholarly) 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 Credible Word," John Berger wrote that authenticity in literature "comes from a single faithfulness: that to the ambiguity of experience." Within this framework, language is about possibility. But criticism, 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. Loses, 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 criticism—insightful, but not as interesting 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 tremendously depending on a whole series of assumptions, 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." I'm with 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 characteristics, where his greater allegiance lies. No pretence of disinterested scholarship. He regards eye poetry as more individualistic, setting up a particular hegemony: "the poet's eye—a *different* eye, a higher understanding—presides...over a spatialized, silenced, and therefore scarcely populated 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 soliloquy, unengaged in a dialogic way, sings her sensitive impressions to herself—monologic; the other poet enters dialogue, acknowledges a social setting...—dialogic." (Cooley 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 difference.) He admits that the two forms aren't mutually exclusive but *because criticism is based on opposition*, he ends up not considering ambiguities. Scrupulously 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 suggests that "we witness the migration of authority 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 objections that Cooley raises to contemplative poems as being merely "objects of interpretation whose primary interest is semantic." Like him I'm often impatient/dissatisfied with the inwardness of much formal poetry. But the apparent outwardness 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 disguised; the problem is how to open up the authority of the poem, whether using colloquial language 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 whatever problematic the relationship between writing and critical theory remains, because of their respective forms, there is a common bond.

Barbara Corey is a poet and reviewer who was recently appointed managing editor of Books in Canada.

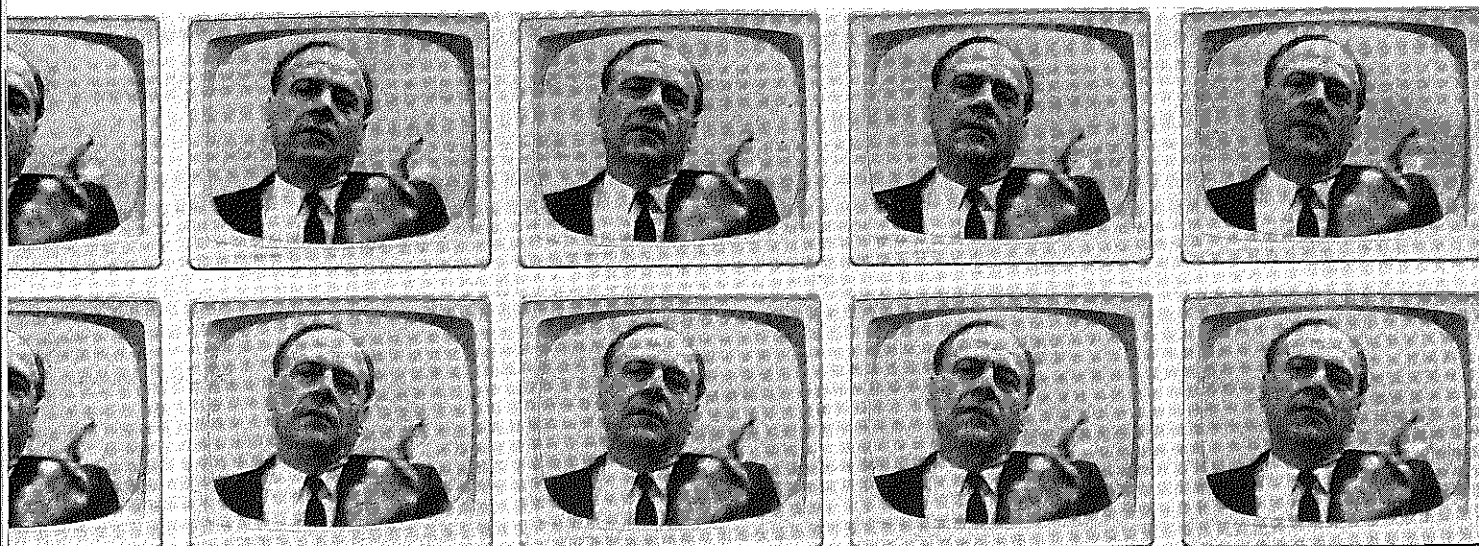


**The Last Intellectuals:  
American Culture in the Age of Academe**  
by Russell Jacoby

New York: Basic Books, 1987, 290 pp.

The gist of *The Last Intellectuals* is the argument that a dramatic attitudinal and behavioural shift took place between the past two generations of American—and Canadian—intellectuals, and that the recent predominance of academic institutions is largely responsible for this phenomenon.

According to Jacoby, many intellectuals of the older generation—those born in the first decades 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 intellectual life of all Americans. As a result, a number



of these people, whom Jacoby calls public intellectuals, became almost household names: Lewis Mumford, Edmund Wilson, Jane Jacobs, Irving Howe, J. K. Galbraith, Daniel Bell, C. Wright Mills, Marshall McLuhan, just to name a few. In contrast, intellectuals of the present generation—roughly those under 45 years of age—are virtually unknown to people outside their specific disciplines. Younger intellectuals have a predilection to express themselves in convoluted, cumbersome, jargon-filled sentences. Their writings, typically published in specialist journals, are not intended for the educated public; they are usually unintelligible and of minimal interest to anyone not trained in the particular field or school of thought to which the writers belong. Put simply, intellectuals today aim at small groups of specialized audiences, whereas those of the previous generation addressed the educated public as a whole. Generalists, or men and women of letters, no longer have a legitimate place in society.

Jacoby maintains that the crucial factor for this dramatic shift is the large-scale migration of younger intellectuals into universities. Unlike their predecessors, who considered academic life just one of several career options, intellectuals today are almost as a rule academics. And as academics, they do not need the public for livelihood or recognition. The determination of salary level, promotion, prestige and even survival in the profession is completely dependent upon the rules of the academe and the opinions of colleagues. It is understandable that university-based intellectuals must learn to play the academic game: they cautiously tread along a path defined by limited academic freedom, they publish in specialist journals and attempt to impress colleagues, all at the expense of the educated public. Intellectuals are now cloistered within invisible campus walls.

The migration of intellectuals into universities, in Jacoby's view, is itself the outcome of a series of social changes. Life for most independent intellectuals had always been plagued with uncertainty and poverty. As public demand for their literature dwindled, those who wrote for the public, especially the less established ones, had little choice but to seek alternative ways to make

ends meet. At about the same time, major literary magazines became reluctant to publish articles by writers of the younger generation, thus denying them not only a source of income, but also some of the best opportunities to establish themselves as public intellectuals.

One dimension of intellectual life which Jacoby stresses is the need for community. In the first half of the century, bohemia provided a fertile milieu for independent intellectuals. Inexpensive dwellings permitted low-income writers to survive and to reside in proximity to one another; cheap cafes offered them informal meeting places. However, subsequent urban renewals proved detrimental to bohemia: members of the community were forced to scatter, mainly to the suburbs. Lacking frequent face-to-face contact, the once dynamic community failed to rejuvenate.

In the late 50s and 60s the American university system expanded at an unprecedented rate. Budding intellectuals of all persuasions were absorbed into the system. Even radical social thinkers, who previously could not dream of being part of the establishment, accepted academic positions. Although some of these latter ones encountered resistance, hostility and rejection from conservative elements in the academe, the majority of them settled down to a middle-class life. With the exception of using apparently radical rhetorics in specialist journals, which outsiders cannot comprehend anyway, so-called radical intellectuals today are virtually indistinguishable from their conservative colleagues, at least in the eye of the public. That is the basic message, and complaint, of *The Last Intellectuals*.

The noun "intellectual" has been employed in so many ways that it requires clarification. For some, an intellectual is simply an educated person, or roughly one who holds a university degree in any field; some others restrict the term to one who creates theoretical knowledge, as opposed to one who merely applies or disseminates knowledge. Historically, however, "intellectuals" were a very specific type of people. The term gained currency during the Dreyfus Affair almost a century ago. A group of educated people who defended the innocence of Captain Dreyfus

against the accusation of the state called themselves "intellectuals." They acted in the name of justice. In return, antagonists of the group referred to group members likewise, albeit with a pejorative connotation. Since then the term designates a learned person who is profoundly concerned with the basic values and moral standards of society, and criticizes various ideas and practices on that moral basis. This specific concept of an intellectual, rather than the broader ones mentioned earlier, is essentially what Jacoby has in mind.

As a result of social and political differences, discussions on the role of intellectuals differ on two sides of the Atlantic. For instance, certain European Marxists hail intellectuals as the revolutionary vanguard: the writings of Lenin, Gramsci and Althusser represent variations of this theme. But liberal, democratic and individualistic America has never been fertile soil for serious ideas of revolution. Even radical thinkers perceive themselves mainly as critics, not revolutionaries. One of Jacoby's heroes is C. Wright Mills, "the American rebel—obviously the rebel with a cause. There are many more reasons why Europeans and Americans belong to distinct traditions.

It is clear that Jacoby looks at American intellectuals in terms of the recent American tradition. Not only does he refuse to borrow the European intellectual scene as a point of reference, he deliberately excludes foreign-born and foreign-educated thinkers in America from his study. He ridicules the present generation of fashionable European theories: like sleek foreign cars, these theories appeal to trendy academics much more than the "clunky American models." Jacoby is by no means xenophobic: he is in fact well-versed in European ideas himself, as he has demonstrated in his numerous other publications. What he recognizes is that America has its uniqueness and its own reading public. The prevailing trend of abandoning one's tradition while embracing the exotic reflects the inability and unwillingness of current intellectuals to relate to the American public.

Throughout the book Jacoby persistently depicts the power of academic institutions as

insurmountable. He criticizes the intellectual neo-conservative who is typically, of course, an accomplished scholar. He also criticizes the political spectrum (P.S.) which has typically failed. The modern intellectuals show respect for differences in spite of differences in their practices, of course, and administrators tend to be no block any appointment of desirable elements, as Jacoby points out in the book. Academic

Academic intellectuals well thrive in the system and scientifically in the system. They establish their empires: friends, associates, together for mutual own achievements, books and journals, not being attracted. The ideas seems immature of the literature produced; some of it is done. Jacoby expresses much of the scene. He could have of bureaucracy: the characteristic of who "climbers," who struggles of their respective environment breeds a few monsters.

The book devotes a comparison of Jewish intellectuals. It seeks to refute Jews are more radical Jewish thinkers of the children of immigrants dominant values of craved acceptance in few exceptions, youth conservatism. Jacoby phenomenon as the setting. Again, the

*The Last Intellectuals* books addressing the



insurmountable. He cites the case of an influential neo-conservative writer (Daniel Bell) enthusiastically supporting the tenure application of an accomplished scholar at the other end of the political spectrum (Paul Piccone). The bid eventually failed. The moral of the story is that true intellectuals show respect for one another, despite differences in their political views. More typically, of course, academics as well as administrators tend to be intolerant of adherents to block any appointment that they try their best to disallow. The moral of the story is that true intellectuals show respect for one another, despite differences in their political views. More typically, of course, academics as well as administrators tend to be intolerant of adherents to block any appointment that they try their best to disallow. The moral of the story is that true intellectuals show respect for one another, despite differences in their political views. More typically, of course, academics as well as administrators tend to be intolerant of adherents to block any appointment that they try their best to disallow.

Academic intellectuals who play the game well thrive in the system. They act 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 conferences and journals, not to mention research funding attracted. The quality of their intellectual ideas seems immaterial. It turns out that the bulk of the literature produced is of questionable value; some of it is downright glorified nonsense. Jacoby expresses much contempt for this entire scene. He could have made reference to theories of bureaucracy: the behaviour he describes is characteristic of what Anthony Downs calls "climbers," who struggle to expand the territories of their respective groups. The bureaucratic environment breeds these creatures, along with a few monsters.

The book devotes considerable space to a comparison of Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals. 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 ill afford to reject dominant values of their host country; they craved acceptance in mainstream society. With few exceptions, youthful radicalism matured 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, Jr.'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 passionately 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, education is more encompassing than what one receives in schools and universities. It is an ongoing process. One has to keep learning and thinking critically about the changing world for as long as one lives. That is why Jacoby is gravely concerned about the disappearance of public intellectuals, who are public educators in the broadest sense. Confining 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 contributions? Most fundamentally, he brings into prominence the theme of the lost intellectual voice—a theme that hitherto 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 sociologists 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 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 literature, the author frequently draws on cases of well-known intellectuals and performs his share of muckraking. 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 untenured academic, he might be biting the hand that feeds him. Although he is sympathetic with ideas on the left, Jacoby admires conservative thinkers for their integrity. He is able to look beyond the various schools of thought to search for the common problem.

Perhaps Jacoby places an excessive blame on academe. Each type of institution has its constraints and yet simultaneously offers opportunities. Despite all its drawbacks, the university provides intellectuals with job security and income 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 priority, there is still a chance for them to overcome barriers to emerge as public intellectuals. While Jacoby reproaches certain academics—especially the supposedly radical theorists—for their blatant careerism, he virtually discounts all possibilities of individual initiative. Inadvertently his pessimism may have rationalized the attitudes and behaviours of many intellectuals in academic institutions.

Given the scope and complexity of the problem being investigated, the author has done an admirable job. The cogent and thought-provoking argument presented in this book is something all members of the educated public should contemplate. 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 intellectual—a sign that the picture he paints need not be so gloomy after all.

*Wayne Yeechong is a graduate student in Social and Political Thought at York University.*