

The Contemporary Attack On the Humanities: A Rejoinder

M. E. Bradford

I. The Problem

MY CONCERN ON THIS OCCASION is with the relentless attack now being made within the academy on the long and well-established role of humane letters—the humanities, understood broadly—in attending to the intellectual formation and instruction of young American men and women. This attack is designed to discredit among us all the forms of nurturing customarily associated with humane learning. Below the college level it is reflected in the choice of texts and the planning of curricula for the secondary schools. At the college level it involves these choices and many others. It is nihilistic in method and (at least to begin with) nihilistic in purpose, animated by a virulent hatred for the regime which inexplicably tolerates its tendentious excesses and patiently considers its few legitimate suggestions. In sum, it is a root-and-branch critique of Western culture in all of its manifestations: a critique which looks primarily to discredit the means by which contemporary custodians of that culture set out to perpetuate it and the sedimentary process by which it was formed. With such purposes it is difficult for representatives of that culture to compromise, make armistice, or even coexist.

My awareness of this drift toward confrontation comes primarily from years of paying close attention to the conversation within my own discipline, an exchange concerning which texts are a necessary part of any reputable version of a liberal education. But this discussion of the canon of time-tested and well-respected books, questions and approaches is replicated in all of the fields customarily associated with the study of literature: and therefore is

M. E. Bradford, professor of English at the University of Dallas, is the author of Remembering Who We Are and other books. This article is based on an address delivered by Professor Bradford at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, on March 15 of this year.

definitive of what we mean by “the creation of fully educated persons”—by the “transmission of civilization” as a habit of thought embodied in a durable curiosity and a set of texts: what we ordinarily contrast to mere training in various skills. It is a vital issue in the field of pedagogy, in exchanges between prescriptive teachers and aspiring reformers, in the study of “cultural self-perpetuation” and “cultural repression” by the sociologists. It has power over what is fashionable in history, political science and classics, and is even more influential in the rationalization of contemporary literary theory at its outermost fringes. We read about the subject in the press, learn of its impact on the meeting of editorial boards and the making of appointments to faculty and observe its purchase on the architects of cultural policy. In all of these manifestations of cultural rebellion anarchy holds sway, confusion of terms and of

“Rhetoricians know that most human choices are made on balance, without anything more than a reasonable preponderance of evidence to support going in one direction and refusing to go in another. In their company, to prove uncertainty is to prove nothing.”

ends: and especially theoretical confusion about the nature of the educational process, the extent to which it embodies the experience of an entire civilization and its natural impulse to sustain itself through the generations by reproducing its finest products, literate men and women. For those who reject that civilization as hostile to their dream of self-realization, as conducive to the perpetuation of a wicked world, one in which talk of merit and achievement, of intelligence and rational distinction means primarily an indifference to the pure doctrine of equality, disrespect for ordinary humanity and the pretensions of class, race and sex, the canon is a hostile structure, to be pulled down as soon as possible. Within the academy the number of those