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The Tyranny of Virtue: Identity, the Academy, and the Hunt for Political Heresies, Robert Boyers, Scribner, 2019, pp. 168, $15.99 hardcover.

Not Your Father's Campus Anymore

Gorman Beauchamp

As a liberal of the old school, I found Robert Boyers's *The Tyranny of Virtue* profoundly depressing. This response is not meant as a criticism of this admirable book—I'm not one to shoot the messenger—but stems from its disheartening analysis of the state of the American academy and its sometime adjuncts: museums, theaters, and publishing venues. To put it baldly, a concatenation of illiberal ideas has coalesced to create a regime—self-righteous, intolerant, censorious, and solipsistic—that prevails, to greater or lesser degree, at most of our academic and cultural institutions. Here reigns that "tyranny of virtue," if we understand the "virtue" ironically.

Let me jump deep into the book to make this argument in a concrete way. Boyers has taught at Skidmore College for forty some odd years and recounts personal experiences with these corrosive phenomena. One day he saw on campus posters headed KEEP SKIDMORE SAFE. The posters were designed by health professionals and disability scholars to alert students to the prevalence of "ableist language," to ask their teachers to refrain from such language, and if a teacher failed to comply "to contact advisors and file an online 'bias report' naming the professor." The kind of verboten language includes words like "blind" and "deaf"—as in, I suppose, "I was blind-sided by his attack" or "he was deaf to my entreaties." Boyers correctly concludes "our institutions of higher learning have fostered a new paternalism, promising an environment in which surveillance is the norm."

I will lay my cards on the table: this kind of thing makes me crazy. My contrarian inclination runs to violating such taboos any and every way possible: I would be blind to their objections, deaf to their warnings.

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I would dismiss their arguments as toothless, characterize their positions as schizophrenic, judge their prose lame and mute anything annoying. I would begin a campaign to MAKE SKIDMORE DANGEROUS. Of course, I can't do any of that, mere wish fulfillment—but it's exactly what such intellectual infantilism *deserves*.

First discussed in Boyers's *sottisier* stands the most recent inanity to have infected academia, privilege. Privilege, as best I can explain it, involves the expression of an idea or opinion by one who occupies a position of superiority (criteria variable) to the less privileged exposed to it, a kind of intolerable hubris in the age of egalitarianism. Again a concrete example: at a panel on political fiction, countering the statement that it was mainly a male genre, Boyers offered the names of several important women writers, from Doris Lessing to Joyce Carol Oates, who wrote political fiction. An indignant graduate student (perhaps a redundancy) then asked "whether I was aware of the privilege I had exercised in addressing the question." What privilege? "Your authority, your presumption, the sense of entitlement that permits you to feel free to pronounce on any question." This exchange occurred at the New York Summer Writers Institute, where Boyers is director, so he no doubt felt obligated to offer the sort of gentle answers that turneth away wrath, instead of the answer the inquiry deserved: because I am far more knowledgeable than you on the subject and probably much smarter. My fear that Boyers might prove squishy in confronting "privilege," being too nice, proved unfounded.

> Privilege has been invoked as a noise word intended to distract . . . from the substance of our discussion . . . There is comedy in the rush of the well-heeled and enlightened to affirm their virtue by signaling their guilt and their difference from those who have not yet mastered the rituals of self-disparagement and privilege-bashing required of them.

Acute as Boyers's criticism of privilege is, it does not expose the consequence of taking such a phenomenon seriously, difficult as that would be: it would subvert the very idea of teaching. Teaching *is* the exercise of privilege. Imagine teaching a composition course: you must point out misspellings, poor word choice, errors in grammar, lack of clarity, faulty reasoning, unclear thesis, along, of course, with all the positive features of a paper. You do this

because you have knowledge of such matters, knowledge that the student is there to learn—which the good ones do. In short, knowledge *is* privilege. The whole privilege argument may be encapsulated in one teacher's favorite student evaluation, as reported in *Reader's Digest*: "He knows a lot more than me and that makes me feel bad."

The next chapter, "The Academy as Total Cultural Environment," derives its title from a description by Lionel Trilling of such an environment built on "firm presuppositions, received ideas, and approved attitudes." Such a closed system the academy has become, or at best, is becoming, Boyers argues. This, by now, is an oft told tale, recounted not only by critics on the right, but by old school liberals, who cling to ideas like free speech, rational argument, and the marketplace of ideas and adhere, as much as possible, to what seems like an antediluvian faith in Mill's *On Liberty*. Boyers brings new to this tale only the personal experience of functioning in such a culture, from inside the whale.

Probably the most stunning information in this chapter appears in a footnote and depends on knowing what a microaggression is: a statement taken as an insult, made intentionally or not. "Wesley Yang notes that at schools like UC Berkeley a 'list of microaggressions [is] circulated to Professors' that are 'so pernicious' that university officials 'no longer believe they should be engaged with, debated or debunked': one of which is 'America is a land of opportunity.'" As of 2017, Yang reports, "Two hundred thirty-one universities now have 'bias response teams' that investigate the speech of professors and students, often with the aid of campus police officers, for infractions that include microaggressive speech."

Boyers's chapter attempting to explain how academia came to this strait is not easy to understand. Suffice it to say here that Boyers attributes much to faculty indolence. But then he is off to the races, in several different directions, the connections of which I can't see; so I'll not try to summarize them, but concentrate on one important argument. He notes the unfortunate residue left behind by Herbert Marcuse for his generation (and mine): "false consciousness." All the rage among graduate students in the 1970s, Marcuse argued that because most people were controlled by "the system," we could not really grasp what was actually happening to us; the best we can hope for is to be re-educated into the truth by an enlightened minority "who are entitled to suppress rival and harmful opinions." Thus freedom

of speech is not an intrinsic good, "for to allow freedom of speech in the present society is to assist in the propagation of error." One can see in so many campus speech codes these days a trickle-down version of bell-bottom Marcusianism: one can reveal his "true" self in the slip of the tongue, a poorly chosen word, a politically incorrect anachronism. Any questioning or attenuation of the going orthodoxy can expose one's secret self. "At a lecture, a distinguished classicist argues that the Western attack on honor killings in Islamic societies betrays what she calls 'entirely insidious motives.'" What motives? Such criticism is "a way of attacking immigrant communities and encouraging racial hatred." And suttee and foot binding, genital female mutilation, and the killing and selling the body parts of children with albinism in Africa? Do we expose ourselves as racist xenophobes in deploring these?

In the next chapter, "The Identity Trap," Boyers enters familiar territory and has a clearer focus: he makes a good case for the kind of damage identity politics has done to the idea and practice of education. "The rage for 'identity' too often bespeaks a preference for simplicity rather than for complexity," while true education consists in confronting complexity. He quotes Ian Buruma, who declares that "identity, more and more, rests on the pseudoreligion of victimhood." Precisely this sense of grievance provides the rationale for most identity studies programs. Boyers cites Edward Said, a somewhat surprising witness in this context, to such compelling effect that I want to quote him at some length: "To assume that the ends of education are best advanced by focusing principally on our own separateness, our own ethnic identity, culture, and traditions ironically places us where as subaltern, inferior, or lesser races we have been placed by nineteenth-century racial theory." Further:

> The world we live in is made up of numerous identities interacting, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes antithetically . . . . [And thus we cannot] advocate knowledge only of and about ourselves . . . . Inside the academy we should be able to discover and travel among other selves, other identities . . .

As a statement of the educational ideal this could hardly be bettered; but as its opposite Boyers adduces a statement from a young woman in a *New Yorker* profile that she "is going home, back to the 'hood of Chicago,'

to be exactly who I was before I came to Oberlin." Those may be the saddest words in *The Tyranny of Virtue*.

A number of books have recently appeared that deal with identity and with the political problems that it poses: Anthony Appiah's *The Lies that Bind* (2018), Adam Gopnik's *A Thousand Small Sanities* (2020), Frances Fukuyama's *Identity* (2018), Mark Lilla's *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (2018), Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt's *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2019), and add now *The Tyranny of Virtue.* While they have different arguments and perspectives, the conclusion that emerges from them posits that grievance identity politics divides people, pits one group against others, renders what Lukianoff and Haidt call "Common Humanity Identity Politics"—what will benefit us all—more difficult. For leftist politics in the larger, "real world" sense, academic identity politics has become a Trojan Horse.

Boyers gamely confronts an academic milieu where "safety" through conformity seems to be the ideal, the less friction the better. "More and more in such settings the learning agenda is controlled by bureaucrats and the academic enablers who, as David Bromwich has described them, regard 'learning as a formal adjustment' and believe that it is their business to promote 'adherence to accepted community values.'" Controversy, the life blood of a vigorous intellectual milieu, may, it's claimed, actually "harm" students, who must be protected from it.

Boyers cannot, in short space, account for the emergence of this phenomenon, yet he must disconcert many of its proponents by likening it to the phenomenon described by Czeslaw Milosz in *The Captive Mind* (1990) of the drifting of Polish intellectuals in the Communist dominated 1950s "into the fond embrace of safe and reassuring ideological postures, including the intolerance of ideas and persons felt to be divisive . . . an unmistakable feature of the present moment."

Skipping past his chapter on the crimes of the language police, we arrive at a chapter on my particular *bete noir*, appropriation. Of all the silly ideas that infect academia and its ancellaria now, appropriation is the silliest: the argument that artists cannot use—"appropriate"—any material not of their own particular race, gender, or milieu. Boyers opens with a question posed to Jamaica Kincaid at his writers institute: "aren't you bothered when a writer appropriates somebody else's material?" "I don't understand what the question's about," she replied. "It's a complaint bound to come from

people who don't know what goes into making something like a novel or a painting." Exactly!

A little later Boyers includes an anecdote that demonstrates the scope of the problem. A student in one of his classes objects to his assigning Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* (2001) "because it's always a bad idea for a white writer to be sticking her nose into this kind of thing [life in a black community]." That an obviously not very bright undergraduate feels that she can decide what Gordimer should and should not write about is laughable in itself; but Boyers goes on to explain that "she had been through two other courses in which appropriation had been front and center and she was primed to be offended." Now Skidmore, where he teaches, has fewer than three thousand students: what does it say about pedagogy that a student there had *already* had two course*s* where this bankrupt idea was front and center?

The trouble with almost any literary theory consists in the substitution of formula for insight and taste. The appropriation gambit fails even beyond this, in that it is really not about art *qua* art at all, but about some weird sort of sociology, a kind of Cliff Notes ethnology. Does X (the work of art) accurately *represent* Z (the subject matter)? There is so much wrong with that question. First, art is not representation. Art may or may not want to depict accurately Z: there may be all sorts of reasons for exaggerating, distorting, or idealizing Z. My wife reacted so negatively to the image of Venice in *Don't Look Now* (that marauding killer dwarf) that it took me years to get her to go back to the city itself: that was not the real Venice according to, say, police statistics, but it made a very good movie. In fact, artistically speaking, there is no *real* Venice, there is only the Venice the artist needs, for *The Merchant of Venice* or *The Wings of the Dove* or *Death in Venice* or *Summertime*. None of these succeeds or fails because of its accurate representation of Venice.

Boyers makes this case more broadly, again invoking Edward Said, disturbed at the "flat-minded" thinking about race that his *Orientalism* had engendered; in "Orientalism Reconsidered," he refused to subscribe to any fixed notion of a "real, true, authentic" identity that would forbid imaginative access to others. "Monolithic conceptions of whiteness or blackness, like grotesque racial stereotypes purporting to differentiate one set of inherent characteristics from others," Boyers concludes, "are of no use in thinking about what matters in a first-rate painting or novel." There are

infinite indefinite articles for Z, but no definite *the*.

Finally and most important, if appropriation were taken seriously, it would mean the end of literature. Lionel Shriver, in a speech she gave in 2016 to a writers conference in Australia that brought the issue to wide public attention—coverage in the *New York Times*, etc. —made this point unequivocally: "Taken to their logical conclusion, ideologies recently came into vogue challenging our right to write fiction at all." Again: "The ultimate endpoint of keeping our mitts off experience *that doesn't belong to us* is there is no fiction . . . . All that's left is memoir." (The panicked conference organizers, an easily panicked type, after protests removed her speech from the proceedings but it's still available on the *Guardian* website online (as "I hope the concept of cultural appropriation is a passing fad" and provides essential reading on this issue.)

Consider the roster of great works that would never have been written had the appropriation edict been in effect—and what that portends for the future. Boyer asks what Flaubert could have known of the life of a middle-class provincial housewife that allowed him to write *Madame Bovary* and similar questions about other, more contemporary works; Schriver does the same. Any writer on the subject could. I have just finished reading George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, the work of a woman raised as a low church protestant who became a well-known agnostic yet wrote one of the greatest fictions about the Jewish experience, foretelling Zionism two decades before it became a movement or had a name. Had she any right to? At the establishment of Israel in 1947 all three major cities Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem all had streets named for her. Does that answer the question?

In the last chapter Boyers deplores "the convictions and passion that have the appearance of benevolence but are increasingly harnessed to create a surveillance culture in which strict adherence to irrational codes and 'principles' is demanded."

> Academic liberals who would have laughed thirty or forty years ago at the prospect of speech codes and draconian punishments for verbal indecorum or "presumption" are now not only compliant but enthusiastic about efforts to enforce standards many of them know to be intellectually indefensible.

Here lies the hurt, the sort of *trahison des clercs* of those who should

be upholding the principles of the democratic left—freedom of speech and thought, open and fearless inquiry—but have instead succumbed to an anti-intellectual, infantilizing academic orthodoxy—all in the name of virtue. And who, of course, consider themselves virtuous.

My biggest problem with *The Tyranny of Virtue* lies with the answer to the Leninesque question Boyers poses as the title of his last chapter, "What is to be done?" He gives, in fact, five steps that the academic would-be legitimate liberal ought not take. One: use ideas "such as privilege, appropriation, ableism and microaggression to sow hostility, persecute other members of a community, and make meaningful conversation impossible." The others are in the same vein: don't engage in the sort of harmful, illiberal practices I've illustrated in this book. I noted earlier that a number of prominent, public intellectuals have made the same or similar arguments, but, I wonder, to what avail. Is there evidence that the sort of academic community analyzed and critiqued in *The Tyranny of Virtue* and the young being trained there have changed—or are likely to? Given the interests that they have vested—the programs, the policies, the publications—it seems unlikely. There may be welcome developments that I know not of, that Boyers heralds—or, at least, hopes for. But, of this likelihood, I am reminded of a review George Bernard Shaw wrote of a production of *Henry IV* starring Beerbohm Tree as Falstaff: "Mr. Tree lacks nothing to make him a great Falstaff except to get born over again as unlike himself as possible."