

Under the Glass

Catharine Savage Brosman's critique of *The New Yorker* ("The New Yorker Under the Glass," *Vital Signs*, March) is a welcome respite from the nasty, nonsensical scribbling of today's cultural critics. I'm sure Dr. Brosman is aware that infantilism and mediocrity prevail not only among popular literary editors and "American consumers of print, electronic media, and entertainment," but among literature professors, who, of all people, should know better.

I recently completed graduate studies in literature and in law. In which department did I read Sophocles, Shakespeare, Melville, Tolstoy, Kafka, Yeats, and Dosztoevsky? If you guessed literature, you were wrong. American law schools have become an unlikely site for a return to major Western writers and traditions.

On the other hand, I learned from my English professors that literature courses are for "scholars," not enthusiasts (as if a person couldn't be both). Students

shouldn't love the Great Books, mere marketing devices with an oppressive, ideological logic. I learned that aesthetic taste is a product of social engineering and that books, like grammar, are markers of class and therefore dispensable. (Perhaps this explains the "degraded grammar" that has become "house style" at *The New Yorker*.) I learned that students should resist institutions—religious and academic—that appropriate art and enable and affirm hierarchical structures. And, of course, I learned that literary studies concern the function, not the form, of writing.

What I didn't learn was why the general public prefers the Great Books, how professors manage to grade papers (after all, grammar and style are tools of domination, and rankings indicate status and standing), or why contemporary "Theory" is unintelligible to anyone without a Ph.D. in English.

Unintentional irony is business-as-usual in the literature profession. English departments are so entrenched in simple-

minded liberalism that their constituents no longer know what a conservative is. (Once, my entire classroom erupted with laughter when I mentioned antiwar conservatives. Everyone thought I was joking.)

Our liberal educators don't educate. Worse, they can't educate—they lack the requisite knowledge. And they don't know where to find that knowledge, since they dismiss out of hand the habits, customs, and foundations of Western civilization.

Dr. Brosman's articles—to say nothing of her poems—are rare delights in this anything-goes age of chicanery and charlatanism. Believe it or not, some of us young readers appreciate taste, clarity, and distinction, despite what we are taught in school. Dr. Brosman is right: Eustace Tilley should drop his monocle and set aside his dress clothes. And when he does, I might just steal his outfit. I'd look better in it anyway.

—Allen Mendenhall
Marietta, GA



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