

discussed since, chastised writers for leaving reality to the journalists and rebutted recent laments, like Philip Roth's, that the real world had become hyperreal, daily discharging in the news figures that dwarf those born of the novelistic imagination. Nonsense, cried Wolfe, the world of the real was ready and waiting to be novelized, if only there could be mustered sufficient notebook-toting Zolas for the task.

Birkerts disagrees, in part because he believes Roth's claim extends beyond the extraordinary characters in the news to include a "shattering of the context that might explain them":

The real has become surreal. Some bonding element in the social order has crumbled away, shivering our picture of public life into fragments. Watergate long ago proved that the social contract was a tissue of lies and evasions, and that government ran on fear and self-interest; assassinations pointed to the retributive violence alive in the American heart. All heroism leaked out of political life, and with it all confidence in solid goals and purposes. The strain of counter-culture solidarity that had run through the liberal-democratic part of the culture gave way to narcissistic self-protection.

Literary criticism has become surreal, perhaps, when the Trickster is held culpable for the crappy novels coming over the transom.

As is often the case in the compassionate soul, individual failures of achievement are blamed on everyone and everything but the individual. Instead of bad novelists we have bad conditions for the novel. It is not a document of reality we need, Birkerts avers, but rather novels that have in their vision a loss of confidence in reality, the vague dread he believes endemic to our age. He adjudges only Pynchon, DeLillo, and Robert Stone as successes in this regard, because they are "paranoids" who have rendered the modern American soul in chiaroscuro. The future of the novel rests in uncovering "the black hole at the heart of the contemporary."

When he trades the spray-paint can of manifesto for the ball-point of reflection, however, Birkerts is one of the better critics. His genealogy of the larger trends

may be a little screwy, but his readings of particular books and authors rarely err, and the essays in the book's final section, "American Writers," display the crisp style that made the first collection such a pleasure.

Birkerts's sense of the state of modern fiction is nowhere more evident than in his decision to end the book with a piece on David Foster Wallace. Wallace, let me proclaim in the spirit of manifesto, is by quite a long chalk the finest writer under 30 in the nation. His work is Woolf's map of the subjective submerged in Wolfe's external reality. It is without paranoia; it simply exists in the benumbed realm of the audiovisual, and is at once hilarious and disturbing as hell. Wallace's selection as final author in the book hints that Birkerts may recognize that he is wrong about his own prescrip-

tions to restore American fiction to vitality. As Birkerts writes, "Wallace's stories are as startling and barometrically accurate as anything in recent decades . . . [he] is, for better or worse, the savvy and watchful voice of the *now*." He goes on:

Between Wolfe and Wallace, we find ourselves in a strange bind. If fiction is to win and hold a readership, it will probably have to move Wolfe's way. But the new social novel does not hold much of the truth about the changed conditions of our subjective lives . . . the man—or woman—hunched over coffee in the mall. . . . Where shall we get the picture of who we are?

One hopes Sven Birkerts will use his talents to address this question thoroughly, and this question only, next time around. □

POPULISM AND ELITISM: POLITICS IN THE AGE OF EQUALITY

Jeffrey Bell

Regnery Gateway / 190 pages / \$21.95

reviewed by WILLIAM TUCKER

This is a book that I have been looking forward to reading for years. For at a time when it has become possible to talk about a universal sociology, social scientists are mired in the past, still thinking in terms of "class conflict" between rich and poor. Academia trudges on, assembling the evidence of how business elites "exploit the masses"—without ever addressing the fact that they themselves are a rival elite, trying to work out their own system of exploitation.

Jeffrey Bell gives us a completely different paradigm: of history as a chess game between "the people" and various elites. The vast majority of people embody a common sense that makes self-government possible, while elite

William Tucker is TAS's New York correspondent.

opinion has quirky desires and values that rarely coincide with those of the majority. Thus, politics becomes the competition among elites to conform most closely to mainstream opinion. In the end, says Bell, populism always wins, but only after detours and derailments.

Until the American revolution, elites ruled everywhere through force or fear, perpetuating themselves through various rules of succession. Today, no group can rule a nation without presenting at least the *pretext* that their actions reflect the "will of the people." Yet because democracy operates almost everywhere through representative government, the people must choose members of one or another elite to lead them. Only Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who wanted the whole world to be split into self-sufficient cantons, was willing to confront

the consequences of direct democracy.

Those in power are always falling behind the times, while simultaneously trying to institutionalize their own position. In America, for example, the House of Representatives—intended to be the branch of government closest to the people—has become the branch of permanent power. The presidency—intended to be remote from the people—has become the real medium for change.

Intellectuals, always a formidable elite, vie for power as fiercely as generals, businessmen, and politicians, and in contemporary American politics, the Democratic party has become the party of the upper-middle-class intelligentsia. Thirty years ago, this same party was an alliance between the working class, the poor, and the "Solid South." Since 1968, however, the party has been successfully invaded by a university- and government-based professoriate. (At the 1992 convention, there were more delegates with *graduate* degrees than with undergraduate degrees only.)

The professional classes were indeed once conservative and Republican: in 1948, Thomas Dewey was the candidate of the Eastern Establishment, and in 1960 Richard Nixon outpolled John Kennedy on Ivy League campuses. But today the teachers' unions and the Association of Trial Lawyers of America prevail. (As Bell notes, it is the Democrats' stronghold in the professional classes that enables them to field a stronger line-up of candidates. Democratic lawyers, professors, and teachers' union representatives are always far more appealing and articulate than the entrepreneurial clodhoppers and Christian fundamentalists who represent the Republicans.)

Although the Republicans were slow to seize the opportunity, they finally came crashing through in 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan. The result, as Bell notes, was the most purely populist presidency since Andrew Jackson. Like Jackson, Reagan came to office with a program for limiting government and liberating the forces of enterprise. Like Jackson, Reagan was rejected by Congress and condemned by the Eastern elite. And just as Jackson passed the torch to Martin Van Buren,

Reagan left his legacy in the hands of another Eastern protégé, who quickly dissipated it. On an optimistic note, Jackson's economic plan was eventually accepted by both parties with the election of James Polk in 1844.

Populism and Elitism has its flaws, particularly the two-chapter rehearsal of every twist and turn on the American political scene since 1968. And there are a couple of problems that go unaddressed: First, how deeply has democracy really penetrated the rest of the world, even in countries where regular elections have been established? Second, isn't it possible that, as America becomes more affluent, elite opinion could expand to become the mainstream itself? A recent Gallup poll, for example, reported that 57 percent of Americans claim they would sacrifice jobs and prosperity to "preserve the environment." Although such casual expressions of support are always suspect (they probably aren't talking about their own jobs), it is not at all incon-

ceivable that elite attitudes—a rejection of economic progress, the casual acceptance of sexual experimentation, a covert admiration for criminals—could become widespread.

Still, the basic point remains clear. The Democratic party has become the repository of elite opinion, for the most part at variance with the mainstream. Although the media produce a steady drumbeat of criticism that Republican positions on issues such as crime and taxes are "unpopular," popular opinion remains unconvinced.

Even so, armed with Bell's analysis, it is easy to see why the Republican ascendancy finally collapsed in 1992. "The setting of society's standards is, in the final analysis, what politics is about," says Bell. Having taken on the trappings of an isolated elite themselves, the Republicans simply forgot to present an agenda, relying instead on past success. Victory in the Cold War only means that people will want to move on to the next problem—as well they should. □

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IMPOSTORS IN THE TEMPLE:
THE DECLINE OF THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

Martin Anderson

Simon & Schuster / 448 pages / \$22

THE IDEA OF THE UNIVERSITY:
A REEXAMINATION

Jaroslav Pelikan

Yale University Press / 238 pages / \$30

reviewed by D. G. MYERS

report on the business practices of universities, from the treatment of their customers (the students) and the economic viability of their leading product (research) to the responsibility of their directors (the board of trustees).

Pelikan, 68, is a cultural conservative and a lifelong academic who earned his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago at 23, and now is Sterling Professor of History at Yale, where he has held an endowed chair for thirty years. Best known as a religious historian, he has written twenty-five books, including a five-volume history of Christian doctrine. Although scornful of those (like Jerry Herron in *Universities and the Myth of Cultural Decline*) who smugly quack that the university is not in trouble, Pelikan is also suspicious of calls for root-and-branch change, "as though we in the present generation were free to define the university in any way we wish without attention to its heritage." For Pelikan—the insider—the chief enemy of the university is outside the gates.

Anderson argues that today's universities lack integrity. Trivialization of research, abuse of tenure, abandonment of teaching, grade inflation, exploitation of graduate assistants, the fraudulence of college sports—one by one Anderson shows how the activities of a university have been corrupted by the reluctance of professors and administrators to be honest about this state of affairs. "They begin by lying to others," Anderson says, "and end by lying to themselves."

Political correctness is not the issue. It is a scandal, of course. Not only does it discourage the independence of mind upon which genuine scholarship depends; it also leads to "one-party rule" in everything from admissions to hiring and promotion. Naturally enough, professors and administrators deny that it exists. (As if in a hurry to confirm Anderson's analysis, a gang of left-wing academics including Stanley Fish, Jonathan Culler, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. recently organized Teachers for a Democratic Culture, for the purpose of disputing the existence of left-wing gangs within the university.) Anderson is baffled by this refusal to acknowledge the obvious. To the extent that political correctness and a one-party rule dominate the university, he says, "we have unprofessional conduct on the part of professors and administrators." It is

Too much has already been said about the present crisis in the university, and these books say even more. Yet they (and the subject itself) have a claim on conservatives' attention. As Martin Anderson warns, "To a very large extent—some 60 percent worth—you are watching your tax dollars at work when you look at today's public universities."

More than financial self-interest, though, ought to alarm us. Outside of soccer, as Jaroslav Pelikan observes, the university may be the largest man-made institution in the world. It has become a vested interest, a massive international bureaucracy more worried about clutching its privileges than educating young minds or promoting the cause of truth. And like most bureaucracies, the university is not staffed by the very best people available. As Pelikan says, quoting another recent writer, "Just as the modern university has no time for the most important human subjects, it has, ironically, no place on its faculty for the brightest people." More than one onlooker has suggested that the quickest solution to the crisis of the university might be to hire better professors.

In recent years, only criticism by outsiders has contributed to an intelligent

appreciation of the university. One thinks of Charles Sykes's *ProfScam* (1988), Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* (1990), Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* (1991). And though the loudest blast issued from the interior, Allan Bloom found himself treated like a stranger after writing *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). Earlier, quieter inquiries by university men—such as Michael Oakeshott's essays written from 1948 to 1972 and collected as *The Voice of Liberal Learning* (1989), Robert Nisbet's *The Degradation of Academic Dogma* (1971), and Kenneth Minogue's *The Concept of a University* (1973)—were largely ignored (evidently even by such readers as Pelikan, who neglects to mention them in his otherwise useful guide to the mounting literature on the subject).

Both Anderson and Pelikan know the inner workings of universities, and both are conservative—though the similarities pretty much stop there. Anderson, 56, is an economic conservative and was an adviser to Presidents Nixon and Reagan. A former business school professor who earned a Ph.D. in industrial management from MIT and has been associated with the Hoover Institution at Stanford for two decades, Anderson is at home in the university without feeling sentimentally attached to it. *Impostors in the Temple*, his sixth book, can be thought of as a consultant's

D.G. Myers teaches at Texas A&M and contributes to *The American Spectator*, *Commentary*, and *the New Criterion*.