

The New Patriots of the Cultural Left

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*THE EMPLOYMENT OF ENGLISH:
THEORY, JOBS AND THE FUTURE OF
LITERARY STUDIES*

Michael Bérubé

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Something new is afoot among that loose confederacy that is sometimes labeled the “Academic Left.” For quite some time these tenured radicals have been chiefly occupied with acts of valor on the battlegrounds of the culture wars. Indeed, simply exploding the lies about academic life concocted by the likes of D’Souza, Kimball, Wills, and their journalistic minions has created a cottage defense industry, albeit supported by none of the big bucks commanded by the New Right. More recently, however, these enemies are being displaced by another, yet more sinister foe—systemic economic threat to the profession.

Undermined by cuts in state and federal support of higher education, forced to consider re-engineering models inspired by the ruthless corporate world, and attacked by legislators for protecting such undeserved privileges as sabbaticals and tenure, universities have turned more and more to hiring part-time and temporary faculty members. The result is an exploding academic labor crisis. Hence, we read that venerable spokesman for the Left, Richard Rorty, in the April 3rd issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* writing about “The Dark Side of the Academic Left.” After praise for the cultural left’s role in diminishing “socially acceptable sadism” in the last 20 years, he points to growing “economic inequality and insecurity” and asks whether this “Left is unable to engage in national politics.” We need, Rorty argues, less theorizing and more mobilization on behalf of American labor, including academic labor: “the present cultural Left” needs to “reform itself by opening relations with...the labor unions.” At center stage for the

Modern Language Association stands the results not of further skirmishes over whether the English curriculum should require Shakespeare or Morrison but instead the “Final Report of the MLA Committee on Professional Employment,” which cites as the clearest evidence of crisis employment patterns that suggest that “fewer than half of the seven or eight thousand graduate students likely to earn PhDs in English and foreign languages between 1996 and 2000 can expect to obtain full-time tenure-track positions within a year of receiving their degrees” (emphasis theirs).

In the heat of this re-defining fire, a young but accomplished cultural critic, Michael Bérubé, forges his newest book, *The Employment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future of Literary Studies*. Now well-established and tenured at the University of Illinois, Bérubé is ready to tell us what he really thinks of the state of the profession. He foregrounds “the figure of the graduate student” because he, like Rorty and the MLA, recognizes that the crisis in the job market has exposed a dark underside to systems of academic labor. Increasingly, graduate students find themselves exploited, conscripted into teaching more courses per term than the so-called faculty, while being paid less-than-living-wages with no benefits and with no real prospects for joining the profession—at least not as practiced by their graduate profs.

Bérubé’s most compelling chapter, “The Blessed of the Earth,” offers an unflinching look at the disgraceful responses of the Yale faculty to the graduate student strike at Yale in the fall of 1995. According to Bérubé, “the actions of the faculty at Yale...provide...an object lesson in just how politically obtuse, shortsighted, and self-serving a university faculty can be.” His earlier books—including most notably *Life As We Know It*, his moving account of the ways that the birth of a Down’s syndrome child changed his family life—have shown Bérubé’s development of an irreverent,

flexible prose style that can accommodate a range of real feeling within a deeply intellectual discourse. This style serves him well when he catches one Yale prof objecting to the strike “because the graduate student ‘union’ is affiliated with the smelly hotel and restaurant workers.” Later, he notes, “something strange is going on here. When a professor of English begins sounding like an employer of migrant citrus workers... then clearly some of the protocols of the profession have gone haywire.” As Bérubé eschews white-glove manners to write with scorn for the academic myopia that leads professors at one of the richest and most elite universities to write with such foolish cruelty about their own students, this is moral criticism at its best.

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Employment is, however, far from a screed against his profession. Much of the time, Bérubé writes to cheer us about our prospects. If only we are brave enough to confront the challenges of our labor crisis, he can offer us plenty of reassurance about the future of literary study in America. Early on, he disputes “the narrative of decline” in the humanities promulgated chiefly by the New Right but often also taken up by leftist defenders like John Guillory. He notes statistics that show a “resurgence of undergraduate interest in the English major” in the last ten years, and he credits the turn of English toward cultural studies with powering this rebirth. Partly, at least, Bérubé seems intent on calming down colleagues like George Levine and Stanley Fish, who fear that these newfangled cultural critics are throwing out the literary baby with the bathwater of aestheticism. In fact, Bérubé begins his book with a humorous nod toward these placating purposes: “I love literature. I really do.” Instead of dooming literary studies, he argues, cultural studies may be the only way to save literary study from being ruled irrelevant by crude instrumentalists for whom the only thing that English does that counts is processing warm student bodies in freshman writing. Moves toward embracing global culture through “literatures in English” and

the “rhetorical techniques of interpretation that can be applied to a vast variety of cultural ‘texts’” may allow English “to recoup some of its lost authority by redefining its object.” Thus, English has something to offer “the enterprising professional-manager of the future” besides writing skill.

Although this line of defense may look a shade like cynical calculation, Bérubé, in the course of defending himself against Stanley Fish’s ridicule, reveals a genuinely touching faith: “Apparently what makes me so inviting a target is my belief that interpretations can matter to the world.” Bobbing and weaving around Fish’s dismantling of the metaphysical status of his claims, Bérubé struggles to build a foundation for the modest, pragmatic hope “that transformative reflection is possible.” Thus, again, Bérubé, to Fish’s insistence that literary study can have no effect on extraliterary contexts, counters, “I contend that our skills *may* have political force, and that we should proceed (if we are progressive-left educators) as if they will.” He goes on to make more grandiose, and less convincing, arguments about connections between aesthetic autonomy and the capabilities needed to ensure the functioning of institutions in civil society.

Along with its many moral and stylistic virtues, Bérubé’s book also has a few infelicities, most of them related to this uncertain focus on an appropriate scope for his claims, on what precisely this book is actually about. Parts of a long chapter written with his wife, Janet Lyon, in defense of interdisciplinary in general and the U of I’s Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory (where Lyon and Bérubé both have appointments) in particular seem either repetitive of earlier arguments on behalf of cultural studies or so abstractly anti-establishment in its talk of dereifying knowledge that it appears to contradict his earlier pragmatism about the uses of cultural studies in a democratic society. In the end, these oddnesses left this reader feeling that she had just read a woolly bit of special pleading to keep funding for the Unit. The book would be better if it were tighter. Two other chapters are more persuasive and successful but still stretched the book’s premises too far. Even though it was pleasant to read a warm appreciation of the outstanding work done in English at Illinois State in Normal, espe-

cially coming from a prof employed by the flagship university just down I-74, it was hard for me to understand what this account of reactions to authors supported by Fiction Collective 2 was doing in this book. While ISU may offer a model of support for contemporary literary culture, it has most definitely not solved the employment problems that are the subject of the rest of this book. Likewise, a brief chapter lamenting “the coarsening of American conservatism” exemplified by D’Souza’s *The End of Racism* could have served its purpose in the argument even if shrunk to a couple of paragraphs in the last chapter.

At one point, Bérubé says that the academic Left may be faulted for “self-absorption.” The generosity of his interests in life outside the academy almost entirely rescues Bérubé from this charge. Almost. Besides his inclination to sweep too much into his purview, I also found Bérubé’s inclination toward self-quotation from earlier publications wearing. Too often, too much time is spent in parsing the sentences of people with whom he has quarrels. For someone who comes out swinging as he does against colleagues like those at Yale, these tendencies make him seem remarkably thin-skinned—as when the vice president of the MLA’s graduate student caucus attacks Bérubé’s ideas for forcing early retirements of unproductive faculty members by asking whether he himself would be willing to “retire in midcareer for the good of the profession” and Bérubé replies wistfully, “I’m not sure what fuels the antagonism of this response, though I suppose I have a clue.”

Nevertheless, Bérubé’s struggle to construct a new social activism for the academic left is a welcome departure from the stasis and sterility that has accompanied some contemporary advances in literary theory. He ends his book in a flurry of embarrassed self-justification about taking on the role of public spokesman for the new, activist Left. He recognizes that many will see his writing in such nonacademic places as *The New Yorker* or *Harper’s* as “selling out,” pandering to this lower common denominator outside cult crit circles by dumbing down theoretical subtleties. But, he says, we must “reclaim and rejuvenate ‘the public’ in the name of the people,” or else New Right hacks like D’Souza will succeed in so coarsening public sensibilities that racism will again become socially acceptable, and we will lose all possibility for a moral, civil society. Here again, he sounds a note strikingly similar to Rorty’s recent *Chronicle* piece as he calls on the academic Left to speak up more about issues in public policy and to embrace a new kind of patriotism, “redefined as that sentiment that prevents us from letting our fellow citizens starve, beg, or go homeless.” *The Employment of English* offers a striking new purpose and moral direction for literary studies, and in so doing, it gives hope in the midst of this social and economic crisis in higher education.

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