

2014

Paul Jay. The Humanities "Crisis" and the Future of Literary Studies

Carl Singleton

Fort Hays State University, cssingleton@fhsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.fhsu.edu/ts>

Recommended Citation

Singleton, Carl (2014) "Paul Jay. The Humanities "Crisis" and the Future of Literary Studies," *Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University*: Vol. 6, Article 8.

Available at: <http://scholars.fhsu.edu/ts/vol6/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University by an authorized administrator of FHSU Scholars Repository.

Paul Jay. *The Humanities "Crisis" and the Future of Literary Studies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2014. 210 p. ISBN 9781137403308. \$95.

Perhaps it would be too harsh to label as bipolar Paul Jay's recent scholarly book entitled *The Humanities "Crisis" and the Future of Literary Studies*. Nevertheless, it is telling that the author uses an "and" in the title rather than the expected colon to introduce a subtitle. Throughout the work, he continuously (and continually) balances and juxtaposes the two indicated topics. Sometimes he does so with success. The work is not bipolar, but it is a dichotomous endeavor, which often exudes rough edges in the amalgam of collected lectures that focus on two subjects that are connected only tangentially.

The most valuable part of the book is its opening chapter. Here, Jay effectively justifies the quotation marks on the word "Crisis" in the title. Simply put, he argues forcefully that our present "crisis" is nothing new; scholars and the professoriate have been pronouncing for centuries that the sky is falling upon the study of humanities. Through the use of meticulous, appropriate, and rather endless historical recalls, Jay shows that our current worries about the death of the humanities and liberal arts in the curricula of higher education are nothing more than a continuously revisited—and false—myth. The ongoing debate about matters such as the decline in the study of classical and foreign languages, the requirements that students read a canon of Great Books, the conviction that humanities and arts students cannot contribute to their societies are all shown to be ongoing battles that are never won or lost. The demise of the Humanities is not forthcoming.

Jay takes up a number of other matters important to teachers at comprehensive state universities. Important among these is the perceived conflict between business and vocational training on one side and liberal arts on another. Jay accommodates the place of vocational training and business schools with more than a semblance of their acceptance as integral: "Higher education has to continually mediate between professionalization, vocational training, and practical value, on the one hand, and the more abstract ideals of a humanities education on the other" (104). He sees this as something of a marriage—perhaps with humanities necessarily being the weaker vessel. However, among those students who seriously pursue literature and the arts, Jay strenuously supports traditional aesthetics, close reading, and literary theory with all its various foci. At the same time, he asserts that "there is no such thing as literature itself, and that historical and critical thinking, professional methods of inquiry, and training in how to think theoretically about art, philosophy, history and their relation to culture, equips students with important skills they can draw on when they graduate, no matter what career they choose" (131). Thus, he finds both practical and valuable the study of literature and the arts as being useful to students in job markets other than directly derived from their majors at our universities. Skills and expertise learned by

students in the arts are very well “applicable outside it [the study of arts] in a multiplicity of workplaces in our society” (149).

A final topic Jay addresses is the impact of computers and the internet upon the arts as these are studied in our universities. Unafraid of these current, ongoing developments, he argues that there is really nothing new about them either, and their advent offers very little to the centuries-old debate he analyzes in his work. Indeed, the “digital humanities seem to be replaying all over again the larger ‘theory crisis’ that plagued the humanities in general from the late-1970s through the mid-1990s” (157). Throughout these lectures, Jay provides excellent arguments that this is in fact the case.

Carl Singleton
Fort Hays State University