

The University in Ruins, by Bill Readings. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1996, 256 pp., \$29.95 hardbound.

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The argument of Bill Readings's *The University in Ruins* is easy to summarize.

The university began as one medieval guild among many, like the chandlers, saddlers, and silversmiths. Its purpose was to confer professional certification in law, medicine, and theology. In the Enlightenment, however, the university became an engine for liberation from feudalism. Although it flew the flag of reason, the university, like the liberal state, was in reality only another manifestation of rampant capitalism. Its product was "culture," and its purpose was to justify the state that supported and sustained it. To this end it created elaborate mystifications designed to reinforce the national loyalties of those who passed through it.

But capitalism marches on. Today, having outgrown its need for the nation state, and requiring instead an unimpeded flow of capital and infinite access to markets everywhere, capitalism has discarded the outworn husk of nationalism in favor of a technocratic globalism. And the university must, of course, follow suit.

In docile obedience, the university has now dropped any pretense of inculcating national culture and has instead taken refuge in an ideology of "excellence." This, according to Readings, has little or nothing to do with the quality of the work performed in the university, and everything to do with the intellectually empty but easily quantifiable technical and bureaucratic standards of the cost-accountant: dollars raised, buildings built, degrees awarded, prizes won.

Readings's argument is, of course, a just-so story, supported by a highly selective reading of historical sources. The debate over whether universities should serve the interests of the *polis*, strive to uphold universal ideals, or seek some complex equilibration of the two is fundamental. It is visible, for example, in the earliest struggles between the universities and their ecclesiastical overseers. It is also perennial. Cardinal Newman delivered the first lectures for what became *The Idea of the University* in 1852, at the very height of European nationalistic fervor. Contemporary works, such as Jaroslav Pelikan's *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination* (1992) and Charles Anderson's *Prescribing the Life of the Mind* (1993) show that the debate on these matters is far from the simplistic postmodern nursery tale that Readings, who was a professor of comparative literature at the University of Montreal until his death in 1994, has concocted.

No précis, however accurate, can do justice to *The University in Ruins*. A précis by necessity considers only the book's armature, and there the rusty, creaking, and now slightly ludicrous machinery of late Leninism is all too apparent. Few readers, for example, will be surprised, and fewer still amused, when Readings predictably pulls his version of Marcuse's "repressive toleration" out of the hat. (The technocrats who run the "University of Excellence" are so unprincipled and so cynical that they can seamlessly incorporate even the clarion calls of campus revolutionaries into their life-destroying schema, etc.)

Truly to savor *The University in Ruins* it is, alas, necessary to consider its prose. For example, take this passage—chosen almost at random—which is one of Readings's many reiterations of his basic thesis:

The implication of this shift in function is that the analysis of the University as an Ideological State Apparatus, in Althusser's terms, is no longer appropriate, since the University is no longer primarily an ideological arm of the nation-state but an autonomous bureaucratic corporation. To take another, perhaps less weighted example, we can compare the University to the National Basketball Association. Both are bureaucratic systems that govern an area of activity whose systemic functioning and external effects are not dependent on an external reference. (40)

Such writing defies analysis: one can only point to the ponderous syntax, the pompous allusion to Frankfurt School jargon, the stolid humorlessness with which the bizarre "example" of the NBA is introduced, and the pervasive impression that one is reading not English but a text inexpertly translated from another language.

What cannot be conveyed by brief quotations is the aroma of self-indulgence and self-satisfaction of which the book is redolent: that, unfortunately, requires immersion. The following passages, however, may provide a hint of the grandiosity and preciousness which are to be found on every page of *The University in Ruins*. In the first, Readings warns his readers against spending too much time fighting the historical inevitability which has produced the postmodern university:

What is required is that...we do not satisfy ourselves with rebuilding a ghost town. Energies directed exclusively toward University reform risk blinding us to the dimensions of the task that faces us—in the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences—the task of rethinking the categories that have governed intellectual life for over two hundred years. (169)

Or this, for those who have been thirsting for an explication of J. Hillis Miller's explication of Jacques Derrida:

Miller unpacks Derrida's account of the literary as marked by the topography of the secret in a way that disbars the kind of easy referentiality that the romantic literary landscape seems to offer. One might even go so far as to say that tourism is the desire to suspend the question of the literary opened up by this topography of the secret, to allay the anxiety opened up by literature's performative suspension of reference. One would, of course, have to make it clear that this is a notion of literature radically at odds with that with which we are familiar from the history of university teaching of national literatures. (212)

Or this, for those who can take their bun-kum neat:

The referent of teaching, that to which it points, is the name of Thought. Let me stress that this is not a quasi-religious dedication. I say "name" and I capitalize "Thought" not in order to indicate a mystical transcendence but in order to avoid the confusion of the referent with any one signification. The name of Thought precisely is a name in that it *has no intrinsic meaning*. (159, Readings's italics)

And there, as Habermas might have said, you have it.

Those who persevere in the exercise of reading—decoding, really—*The University in Ruins* will, I expect, be pleased to discover that one thing ties the intellectual and moral shambles that is the postmodern university to the palmier days when universities were merely the running dogs of nationalism. That one thing is...tenure.

It naturally comes as a considerable relief to learn that, as we face the daunting "task of rethinking the categories that have governed intellectual life" since the Enlightenment, an exercise presumably made no easier by the discovery that the "name" of "Thought" is empty, we shall at least all be tenured. But we should not

be complacent. While Readings “presume[s]” the continuation of tenure, he also remarks archly that “the increasing proletarianization of the professoriat suggests that tenure may not *necessarily*—I italicize, to remind readers that I only wish to consider a possibility—be the most effective defense of faculty interests in the future.” (226)

I do not want to mislead by implying that *The University in Ruins* is wholly without interest. In fact, it is deeply interesting from at least two different perspectives.

The first is economic. What is the market for such books? Who are the buyers that the Harvard University Press imagines are eagerly awaiting these orotund vacuities? Can it be that *The University in Ruins* actually turned a profit? Someone must surely have thought it would, for it is impossible to conceive that any editor of reasonable intelligence and moderate education would have wished to see it in print for any other reason.

The second is anthropological. Despite its shortcomings as a work of schol-

arship, *The University in Ruins* is—entirely unwittingly—an ideal field guide to the cultish mysteries of the emergent pseudo-discipline of “Cultural Studies.” When, if ever, a serious intellectual historian comes to write the history of the seamier side of our age and wishes to know what titillated, say, the Miami Theory Collective at the fin de siècle, *The University in Ruins* could serve as Exhibit A.

The university, as readers of this journal know, has many problems. It is beset from within and without. To preserve it and reform it will take much hard work and all the good will, imagination, and intelligence we can muster. But it is not, I believe, in ruins, though there are many who would like to trash it. If one wants a catalog of some of their chosen tools, then a perusal of *The University in Ruins* will be instructive.

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An error in the composition of the special Peter Shaw memorial issue of *Academic Questions* (Volume 9, Number 5) resulted in the inclusion of a paragraph of author Wilfred M. McClay's text in a quotation attributed to Carl Schorske. The Schorske passage should end at the period, six lines from the top of page 57 of that issue. *Academic Questions* regrets the error.