

The Art of Scam

by Paul Gottfried

The Rape of the Masters: How Political Correctness Sabotages Art
by Robert Kimball
San Francisco: Encounter Books;
186 pp., \$25.95

Roger Kimball, who edits the *New Criterion* and does art criticism for *National Review*, has set out to achieve two goals in this thin, concise book: pointing out “the depredations practiced by criticism on art” and aiming “to encourage the benevolent civilizing elements that have traditionally been accorded to our encounters with good art.” Despite the limited range of the examples of fine art that Kimball examines (owing to his need to find illustrations for “the rape of the masters”), he does advance both of his purposes in the course of his work. Those artists he discusses—Courbet, Cézanne, Winslow Homer, Sargent, Rubens, Mark Rothko, Van Gogh, and Gauguin—become more familiar to us through his treatment of their would-be interpreters; and though not every artist considered ranks among the great geniuses, Kimball shows what the observer should be alert to in viewing his art. Since his tastes, moreover, are broad enough to embrace artistic developments over many centuries, Kimball can explain with equal ease the distinctive characteristics of artists in different periods and employing different techniques.

Kimball is devastating in skewering psychoanalytic and other indefensibly subjective interpretations of artists and their works. Indeed, by the time one has read through several chapters, it would seem that the sick puppies have taken over in the field of art criticism. Freudian art critic Michael Fried (J.R. Herbert Boone Professor of Humanities at the Johns Hopkins University and director of its humanities institute) has produced a study of Courbet’s *La Curee* that Kimball quite rightly suggests is either a put-on or proof positive of insanity. In this picture of a slain deer, hounds (who bear a striking resemblance to my basset, Murray), and a lackey cradling a horn, Fried perceives Courbet’s fear of being castrated. In fact, all of Courbet’s work is supposedly full of sexual images that the critic effusively reveals

to those of us obtuse enough not to have noticed. Fried understands his writings on Courbet as an extended meditation on “the metaphors of phallicism, menstrual bleeding, pregnancy and flowers.” Those who cannot believe that such drivel passes for serious thought and that its sources are honored at the highest universities should read the ravings of the interpretive authorities Kimball cites. And these are far from the worst of their kind. One Freudian art interpreter omitted by Kimball (Steven Z. Levine, a professor of humanities at Bryn Mawr) has written even more laughable prose than what Kimball serves up. Levine’s book on Monet and Narcissus, in particular, is a muddle of dangling syntax full of disconnected allusions that I would defy anyone to read from cover to cover. In 1998, the already celebrated Levine received a dubious award from the journal *Philosophy and Literature* for the sheer “badness” of his writing.

My one major criticism of Kimball’s book has to do with his sneering attack directed at the neoconservatives’ *bête noire*, Martin Heidegger, *apropos* of Heidegger’s (admittedly less-than-memorable) comments on Van Gogh’s *A Pair of Shoes*. Heidegger, I suspect, owes his inclusion in *The Rape of the Masters* to something beyond his putative similarity to other silly art critics. Surely, he cannot have made the grade simply on account of his remarks about Van Gogh’s painting. All of Kimball’s other targets have identifiably Eastern European Jewish names, while even one of Kimball’s least-favorite authors—Jacques Derrida—though a North African Francophone, was Jewish. In Heidegger, by contrast, we have a seemingly unobjectionable heavy: a Swabian Catholic who cultivated the Nazis in 1933 and is lambasted by Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* as a proto-Nazi and precursor of the New Left. Yet this object lesson is not particularly effective; Kimball might have done better as a critic of bad aesthetics than to belittle a major Western existentialist philosopher. Heidegger was a morally flawed man who occasionally wrote murky prose; unlike Levine and Fried, however, he was not a lightweight or an academic huckster.

Another difference that I have with Kimball concerns his designation of his subjects as “politically correct.” Although some of the critics he discusses have expressed negative views regarding male chauvinism, the problem Kimball high-

lights is not political. Rather, the scam he identifies occurs mainly in the sphere of private discourse. And it is promoted by the moral and cultural irresponsibility of private schools and patrons. Shouldn’t those who endow the chairs held by those Kimball castigates have a care for the intellectual honesty of their occupants? From the evidence, this is not the case. In the now-vanished bourgeois age, the “rape of the masters” could never have been a lucrative business. What has made it profitable is the phenomenon Kimball explored in his earlier books: the rise of a postmodern (read: postbourgeois) culture. This metaphorical rape did not come about from government policy. It is not public administrators and judges who are pushing neo-Freudianism as a form of social indoctrination.

A minor point (from a non-neo-Freudian professor of humanities): Kimball’s dedication of his book to an acknowledged mentor, William F. Buckley, Jr., contains a misspelled Greek phrase. “For the benefit of many” should read “*pollon houneka*,” not “*pollon ouneka*.”

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Victims of Pleasure

by Jonathan Chaves

Footprints in the Snow of the Moon
by John R. Harris
Beechgrove, TN: Mathews Book Publishers; 397 pp., \$14.99

I had long since given up on contemporary American fiction, although the Neoformalist movement has reinvigorated my interest in some of today’s American poets. The last American novelist I really admired was Walker Percy. And even he never gave us what I had vaguely been looking for: a dramatization of the lives destroyed—or nearly so—by the 60’s and 70’s. But now I have discovered this novel, one that is quite literally dedicated “To the memory of an undistinguished generation cruelly sacrificed at the altar of Pleasure.”

John Harris, a former professor of English literature, is the editor of *Praesidium*, a fine journal of ideas and criticism that appears both in print and online (literaturevalues.org/prae-4.3.htm). He is also a novelist who, judging from this book, deserves to be much better known. From the epigraph from *Orlando Furioso* (*Le lacrime e i sospiri degli amanti . . .*) to the final sentence on page 397, there is not a false note. It is as if an American Dostoyevsky had taken on the Baby Boom generation and shown us just how their ideas and pursuits, while providing “great times” for some of them for a while, contributed to the construction of a living hell for others and, eventually, for some of themselves. I have suspected for decades that my first wife and my three children—to say nothing of myself during the worst period of my 61-year existence—were among those legions for whom the Dionysian dismantling of traditional constraints, coupled with the falsely Apollonian pursuit of angelic compassion (to borrow a useful polarity from Joseph Epstein), led not to blissful freedom and utopian harmony but to hellish confusion and emptiness. And, until now, I was unaware that their story had been told, or even identified.

As an introduction to *Footprints in the Snow of the Moon*, however, this formulation is unfairly abstract. Harris is a maker of fictions *par excellence* who understands that the most effective “novel of ideas” is the one that takes place entirely in the soul as an arena of spiritual battle: the soul of a real human person. And Anthony Toole is such a person, as are his parents, his younger brother, his younger sister, and especially the two women in his life, Celine and Gina, as well as his corporeal enemy but spiritual friend, Richard. Anthony hardly even realizes what the real struggle within himself is but ultimately learns that what he wants is to be a *good* man, a moral man, at a point in history when the official doctrine of his generation’s “intellectuals” is that the whole distinction between good and evil is a mere social construct. The powerful psychological and spiritual tension that is, almost incredibly, maintained on every page derives from this gap, the one that separates “Tonio’s” pursuit of the ancient quest for the Holy Grail, requiring sacrifice and patience, from the pursuit of pleasure *now* and “social justice” *now* all around him.

Not that Tonio is pulled in that direction. But Celine and Gina, whose lives

are interwoven with his more significantly than anyone else’s, are, unbeknownst to themselves, placed in false positions by the *Zeitgeist*: Celine because, as a *truly* natural woman, she is temperamentally at odds with the bogus naturalism of the “movement”; and Gina because, as an exponent and champion of feminist ideology, she paints herself into an inevitable corner of unhappiness. The real triumph of the novel is that these two women are far from being embodiments of concepts: They are thoroughly living beings. Celine’s yearning sense of beauty and deep-rooted guilt live in her emerald eyes and strawberry-blond hair, while Gina’s wit, brilliance, and willfully suppressed desire for truth and real love scintillate in her black locks, deep brown eyes, and queenly elegance of manner. The temptation with which Tonio is confronted in the climactic scene of the novel, the unforgettable reception for foreign diplomats at the state capitol in Austin, is rendered as concrete and real as the bizarre landscape of Lake Wachita as seen from Eagle Rock.

Thus, the novel is not a screed against the Baby Boomers but is partly generated by a righteous and entirely justified anger at the depredations of feminist ideology, which has never been so well dissected since Chesterton wrote “Feminism, or the Mistake About Women” in *What’s Wrong With the World* in 1910. It is precisely because Harris has a light touch and touches only tangentially on the impact of the new “ideas” (actually, mere

justifications for desires, as he shows) on real people that the force of the insights is so deeply felt. Tonio is even aware of the potential unfairness of turning actual people into living symbols of the attitudes he has come to hate, as when a hospital nurse questions him about Celine’s suicide attempt and he assumes her to be categorizing him as one of the standard “cultural enemies” of feminist thought—the male whose insensitivity drives the woman to suicide. He is surprised, however, when she shows him some real sympathy. She is human, after all. Later, when feeling particularly alone, he even contemplates seeking her out for comfort! So Harris evades the trap of becoming an ideologue—or counter-ideologue—himself. His characters are human, and so is he.

There are lesser delights in this novel as well. On one level, the book joins the ranks of academic dystopias, as its hero passes from graduate student to dorm warden to become, eventually, a counselor in the state university system of Texas; and yet nowhere in the Groves does he encounter what he yearns to find, which is real culture. He thinks he encounters it, ironically, at the thoroughly artificial reception at the state capitol, where, under the influence of champagne and cognac, he is delighted by the banter of the various diplomatic personnel. And, in fact, he is right, to this extent: They keep alive a kind of traditional sense of cultivated decorum that has been thrown, lock, stock, and barrel, out of the quon-

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dam Ivory Tower.

I did find myself wishing that Tonio, having learned the hard way that there is such a thing as sin and that one must fight against it, might take the next step by looking into religion. Instead, he briefly expresses the view that the Church is just as bad as secularism, and so tries to maintain his “independence” — not grasping, apparently, that he is performing a variation on an error for which he had accurately indicted the “new women” of the day, with their false conception of autonomy. This is the only point at which I am a bit disappointed with Harris’s protagonist. But maybe I am being unfair — asking for a different book, or even a sequel comparable to the conversion novels of Joris-Karl Huysmans, which is not at all what Harris has in mind.

Anyway, this is a good novel — perhaps even a great one. It belongs on anybody’s short list of books that have a chance of passing into a future canon of works exploring the effects moral decadence has had on American society.

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LIBERAL ARTS

MEXICAN LESSONS IN DEMOCRACY

“Although affirming that he is not worried about evil spells that they could do against his political party, the local legislator Angel Deschamps Falcón clarified that his proposed legislation to outlaw witchcraft was not aimed at legitimate practitioners, but at charlatans.

“He even sent an invitation to the witches of the region to sit and negotiate to create the legislation together, with the intention that the witches of both black and white magic would not be prejudiced legally.

“Then two of those witches, *The Diabolical and The Tiger*, launched a message to the National Action Party: Terminate your legislative proposal that tries to make witchcraft a crime, or you’ll be the object of evil spells that will affect you in the next elections.”

—translated from an August 27, 2003, article in *El Universal*

Who Will Judge the Judges?

by William J. Quirk and William J. Watkins, Jr.

The People Themselves:
Popular Constitutionalism
and Judicial Review

by Larry D. Kramer
New York: Oxford University Press;
363 pp., \$29.95



Abraham Lincoln, in his 1860 Cooper Union speech, asked, “What is the frame of government under which we live?” The answer must be, he said, the Constitution of the United States. The answer today, as *Chronicles’* reviewer of Quirk’s and Bridewell’s *Judicial Dictatorship* stated in 1995, is a judicial dictatorship imposed by the Supreme Court. If 80 percent of the people want to try term limits to make Congress more responsive, the idea must be presented to the Court for approval or rejection. The same goes for school vouchers, campaign-finance reform, and so on. The Court now decides all kinds of questions that used to be left to the legislature. May the President conduct a “War on Terror”? The Court now tells him what rights he must allow to his captives, though, in all preceding wars, it had deferred to the executive. The Court now stands astride the country like a colossus.

The imperial judiciary, though, has suddenly come under heavy attack. On July 22, the House of Representatives passed the Marriage Protection Act (H.R. 3313), which would remove the “gay marriage” issue from the Supreme Court’s docket. Of course, if you can put “gay marriage” off limits to the Court, you can do the same with any other kind of case: All it takes is a statute passed by Congress and signed by the president. Indeed, the 2004 Republican platform proposes removing a few other things from the Court’s docket by “using Article III of the Constitution to limit federal court jurisdiction” over cases trying to delete “under God” from the Pledge of Allegiance and those prohibiting public depictions of the Ten Commandments. On the heels of these developments, the press reports that Karl Rove’s current reading includes Larry D. Kramer’s *The People Themselves*, published last July. In this book, Kramer,

dean of the Stanford Law School, makes a comprehensive attack on judicial supremacy. Judge Richard A. Posner, in his review in the *New Republic* (July 19), notes that Kramer is one of a small band of “mainly left-leaning law professors” from such elite schools as Georgetown and New York University who, within the past four or five years, have challenged judicial supremacy. Is the imperial judiciary falling out of favor with respectable opinionmakers?

The imperial judiciary finds support in neither the text of the Constitution nor the history of our country’s founding, while contravening the philosophies of all our great presidents. The Founding Fathers’ revolutionary ideology was formed in a bloody eight-year war to get rid of the English and their king. In Philadelphia in 1787, a people, for the first time in history, deliberately constructed a form of government of their own choosing. Is it reasonable to think that Washington, Franklin, Hamilton, and Madison wished to live under rules imposed by an unelected court? Clearly not, for, if any one “co-equal” branch was intended to be supreme, it is Congress. As James Madison noted in *Federalist* 51, “In republican government the legislative authority, necessarily, predominates.” This only makes sense. The legislature crafts the rules and regulations for society. Also, because members of the popular branch of the legislature are typically chosen from small districts with short election cycles, they are more in touch with local circumstances and are more susceptible to censure should they violate the people’s trust. In Article I, we see that Congress’s authority far eclipses that of the other branches. Congress, for example, has the power to raise and spend money, declare war, impeach members of the other two branches, and control the Supreme Court’s appellate jurisdiction.

Viewed in the light of history and the text of the Constitution itself, the acceptance of judicial supremacy in modern times is astonishing. Congress, if it chose, could abolish all federal courts except the Supreme Court, and it could reduce that Court’s jurisdiction to only those cases affecting ambassadors, other public ministers and consuls, and ones to which a state is a party. Except for guaranteeing the bare existence of the Supreme Court — with the minor jurisdiction mentioned — the Constitution authorizes Congress to establish and regulate the judicial system. Congress controls such matters as how