

istence of society," but then he concludes that such laws would only be permissible if "everyone (or nearly everyone) agrees to their necessity." It could be argued that if such a consensus existed, no such laws would be required; it is only because a significant number of people reject these moral standards that laws become necessary. Johnston is willing to restrict individual liberty by advocating universal (not merely selective) peacetime military conscription; it is not difficult to view the government prohibition of pornography and marijuana (the private indulgence of which Johnston would not disallow) and the government promotion of the family as also vital to the nation's well-being.

These comments are not intended to diminish the value of this truly outstanding book. For Johnston has undertaken a monumental task. And he skillfully weaves together a vast amount of information in the diverse areas of law, politics, history, and economics to substantiate his theoretical position, which justifies the mainstream conservative position on most particular issues. Furthermore, his arguments are logically presented in a highly lucid style and are imbued with a deep sense of realism. In sum, the work possesses both theoretical brilliance and practical relevance. It definitely deserves to be read by anyone interested in paring down or at least preventing the further expansion of the American welfare state. For, as Johnston cogently points out, "unless the reform of government is based upon rational and fundamental principles, the effort will be in vain, because the proponents of reform will have no persuasive reasons for resisting the corrosive political forces of populism and expediency."

—Reviewed by Stephen J. Sniegoski

Making Meaning in Relation to Others

When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions

of Language, Character, and Community, by James Boyd White, *Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984. xvi + 377 pp. \$25.00.*

A culture is not a flow, nor even a confluence; the form of its existence is struggle or at least debate—it is nothing if not a dialectic. And in any culture there are likely to be certain artists who contain a large part of the dialectic within themselves, their meaning and power lying in their contradictions; they contain within themselves, it may be said, the very essence of the culture, and the sign of this is that they do not submit to serve the ends of any one ideological group or tendency.

—Lionel Trilling

PROFESSOR JAMES BOYD WHITE, with appointments in law, English, and the classics at the University of Michigan, has produced a startlingly strong yet subtle work that engages with seven masterpieces of Western culture—Homer's *Iliad*, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Plato's *Gorgias*, Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, Johnson's *Rambler* essays, Austen's *Emma*, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*—and then closes by showing that the same activities of imagination and argument that go into the reading (and writing) of these masterpieces also go into the work of defining and realizing the possibilities of American law. Here White's texts are the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and Justice Marshall's famous opinion in *McCulloch v. Maryland*. He concludes:

What Marshall claims at last is that the Constitution is not to be regarded as establishing a separate sphere of life or language; it must be seen as an integral part of the culture of which it is made and which it, in turn, reconstitutes. This is indeed why it must be regarded not as a mere legal instrument, resting on some abstract authority, but as a true *constitution*: of language, of community, and of culture.

In this sense this book too is a "true constitution," because it does not establish a separate sphere of speech but rather emphasizes the integrity of our lives and

language; it is not mere literary criticism, but rather is a compendium of questions and concerns and attitudes and responses that constitutes a way of reading, a way of living in language. This "way" is always open to us, because "in language" is always the way we live (whether or not we are conscious of this fact).

White begins his book by acknowledging this fact: "Our life is a life of language, and this book is about what that fact has meant, and can mean, to us and to others." This sentence says everything and nothing. It says everything because our life is, first and last, a life of and in language. But, left alone, unarticulated and unelaborated, this sentence says nothing, because what this fact means to and for us, and what it can mean (its implications), are left unsaid. White knows this, and the book as a whole is meant as an elaboration on this sentence, a working out of its significance, making it meaningful. Thus the action or movement of the book demonstrates White's insight that the life of a text (as well as the life of language) is as much in its performance as it is in its message or statement. "This book is itself a reconstitution of culture, for in it I have chosen certain texts and arranged them in a certain order and have made, I hope, something new out of my own inherited materials. It is meant to have a shape and life of its own and to work, partly by incorporation and juxtaposition, not only to say something to its reader but to engage him in an activity."

In an earlier book, *The Legal Imagination* (1973), White had profitably appealed to his experience of literature in characterizing and contrasting the experience of acquiring the skills and understandings of a lawyer. There White claimed that his reading and understanding of literature informed (and, reciprocally, was informed by) his reading and understanding of law. Now, as though in response to the question "How could that possibly be?" White gives us this book:

The texts read here have been drawn from a wide diversity of generic types: poetry, his-

tory, philosophy, fiction, and law and the less easily classifiable texts by Swift, Johnson, and Burke. But we have read each of these texts in much the same way, pursuing the same questions, drawing analogies and connections between the texts, and so on. This has in part been a way of defining our subject not as poetry or philosophy or law or any of the others but as the general activity of which each of these is a species, namely, the cultural and ethical activity of making meaning in relation to others.

The cultural and ethical activity of making meaning in relation to others is an activity shared by literature and law, by poet and philosopher, by writer and reader, and it is this shared activity which is the central topic of conversation in White's book. I say "conversation" advisedly, because the book proceeds by conversing with each of its texts, examining each by questioning it (without giving the impression of cross-examining it), asking "what they mean, how they can be understood, what connections can be drawn among them, what force and life they can be seen to have in our present world, and so on." Thus, the book teaches us a method of inquiry, a set of questions and concerns and attitudes and responses that evoke the life of a text, of a language, and of a culture, by way of its activity of reading.

But then, as White also says, to speak of a "method" can be misleading, because "what I mean by a way of reading is not a value-free technique of investigation—one that can be applied, without itself being changed, to whatever text comes along." The emphasis here on the reciprocal nature of the reading relation is one of White's great themes, in which he brings to our attention the extent to which in reading these texts (these texts, or any text, any work we have chosen to engage with), we reconstitute the world and are reconstituted ourselves. That is, by the kind of participatory reading White exemplifies, we both change the world and change ourselves, or it changes us. In each case, character is formed or defined; we give a character, or definition, to the world, as seen in the text, and we give a

character to ourselves, as readers (and, as White shows, as builders, makers):

To put it in a single word, I would say that our subject is rhetoric, if by that is meant the study of the ways in which character and community—and motive, value, reason, social structure, everything, in short, that makes a culture—are defined and made real in performances of language. Whenever you speak, you define a character for yourself and for at least one other—your audience—and make a community at least between the two of you; and you do this in a language that is of necessity provided to you by others and modified in your use of it. How this complex process works, and can work well, is our concern. As the object of art is beauty and of philosophy truth, the object of rhetoric is justice: the constitution of a social world.

The point of departure and return for the readings that compose this book is “the premise implicit in the title . . . that language is not stable but changing and that it is perpetually remade by its speakers, who are themselves remade, both as individuals and as communities, in what they say. The basic question asked of each text is how it performs as a response to this situation.” *When Words Lose Their Meaning* responds to this situation by revealing how we can live productively with the uncertainties of this world and our language, through understanding the necessity of this continual process of making meaning out of the linguistic and cultural resources (relations and connections) we inherit. Only so can we even momentarily determine, or stabilize, our sense of the world and our places in it.

[T]he title of this book does not express a postmodern despair but, rather, implies a kind of optimism. Of course words lose their meaning. That is what they have always done and will always do. What matters, in the face of this fact, is to understand the reconstitutions of language, character, and community that people have nonetheless managed to achieve in the texts they have made with each other and with us.

Homer, Thucydides, Plato, Swift, Johnson, Austen, Burke, Marshall—and now White—

have worked with this constant change and decay in our cultural resources and have managed to reconstitute these resources, to reinvigorate and revivify them, by using them.

But there are destructive as well as beneficial uses of our language, our cultural resources, and it seems to me that this is a discovery of permanent value that White has made. One way to record it is to say that some uses are exhaustive or debilitating, others restorative or rehabilitating. White reveals, in particular, the danger of our “consumer” attitude towards language and culture. These are not independent “products” that come to us from a distance and that are here for us simply to use and discard. They are not mere conveniences for our satisfaction. They are entitlements, yes, because they are a part of our inheritance, but as such, they also are entrustments—their continued vitality and fecundity are entrusted to our care. Fragile artifacts, they have been created by the natural human activity of making meaning, and they are perishable. They are a resource that can be exhausted; they are no more permanent than we are, or than is our faithfulness to ourselves and our cultural commitments. We can destroy language and culture if we use them without replenishing them, reconstituting them. To do so would be to violate our trusteeship, our conservatorship.

White argues for, and performs, a vision of language and culture based upon conservation, not consumption, by which we regenerate the materials we have inherited. It is a vision at once profound, moving, and—I dare to add—true.

One way to sum up my views is to say that I regard all speaking and writing, and reading too, as a cultural and ethical activity that is itself a kind of literary and social art, a way of doing one thing with something else. This art is the activity by which the individual makes out of common materials a new version of what he has inherited, a reconstitution of his language and culture. This is of necessity a social and ethical process, for the writer or speaker always acts in the

relationship of two that is implied in the act of expression; and a question that must then always be addressed is who these two are as individuals, as a community, and as a culture. This view brings together into the same field of action and comprehension matters often thought of as quite distinct, perhaps as unconnectable: ideas of culture and community, of beauty and justice; the processes of politics and friendship; the public and the private; the self and the world.

—Reviewed by Thomas D. Eisele

Education as Political Indoctrination

Education in the Third Reich: A Study of Race and History in Nazi Textbooks, by Gilmer W. Blackburn, *Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985. viii + 117 pp. \$34.95 (paper \$14.95).*

GILMER W. BLACKBURN, director of graduate studies and a professor of history at Gardner-Webb College, has written a book which documents the National Socialist attempt to refashion the German psyche through education. *Education in the Third Reich* examines a broad range of primers, reading books, and history textbooks used in the schools of Nazi Germany for historical introduction and political indoctrination. The cover illustration shows an innocent little schoolboy standing before his desk with a pile of textbooks ready to teach him about truth, goodness, and beauty. Behind him is the ominous and huge black shadow of a soldier with helmet, cape, and rifle. The powerful directness of this cartoon is matched by the careful, persistent, objective writing of Professor Blackburn. This book is the story of how Nazi educators turned history into fiction with consummate skill and perverse consistency.

It is a serious mistake to think that

National Socialism was merely the product of a political megalomaniac with no metaphysical system. More and more historians are discovering that Hitler's movement was not ideologically sterile. This means that National Socialism was more dangerous than was formerly believed. Hitler was not just a political upstart whose movement could be stopped with his demise. He was the embodiment of an idea which could be taught and which could fashion a culture. Professor Blackburn does not say this, but his book implies throughout that ideas do not die when people die and that an educational system can become the tool of people in power.

National Socialism had a *Weltanschauung*. It was the Darwinian struggle for existence. The application of this principle to politics and economics provided an acceptable program to the German people in the 1930s after their ignominious defeat in World War I and the economic prostration that followed. The democratic policies of the Weimar Republic did not satisfy the metaphysical needs of the German people. Hitler supplied these needs with his apocalyptic vision of *Blut und Boden* and the destiny of the master race.

Hitler maintained a perverse consistency in his belief that life is a struggle, that the world is a battlefield. He drew from Nietzsche the notion that the weak must be annihilated in order that human beings might surpass themselves and become superhuman. But Blackburn thinks that Hitler was even more enamored of Richard Wagner and the revival of Nordic myths about the gods in Valhalla. Hitler's actions in his last days played out this perversity when he preferred Soviet occupation of Germany to that of the Western democracies. That is why he ordered Albert Speer to scorch the sacred soil of Germany. The eastern nation proved stronger, says Blackburn, and so the Aryan had lost to the Slav, and Stalin had ironically proved Hitler's theory to be true.

Blackburn cites a host of ironies in the National Socialist movement that derived from Hitler's contradictory personality.