

have instead come to constitute the major part of our cultural conversation about the human psyche, while "what is repressed . . . is the force of the prosaic, . . . the myriad of minute and careful adjustments that we are ready to offer in the interest of a habitable social world." This "counter-authenticity," as Bernstein calls it, is what makes decency possible. Safe in their faculty compounds and studios, professors and artists who romanticize the demonic invite a repetition of the horrors that are the real story of the 20th century.

The Mythical Middle

THE CULTURE OF COMPLAINT:
THE FRAYING OF AMERICA.
By ROBERT HUGHES. *Oxford*.
210 pp. \$19.95.

Reviewed by DONALD LYONS

ROBERT HUGHES, the art critic for *Time*, expands in this little best-selling book on three lectures he gave in 1992. He is, with great fanfare, raising his voice in alarm at the deterioration of language, culture, and education in our "polity." This deterioration he traces to a clash between, on the one hand, perfervid multiculturalists and, on the other hand, rigid conservatives. Seeing language in particular as the key to cultural health, Hughes clearly aspires to write a 1993 version of George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language."

But there are a few things lacking in Hughes's impersonation of Orwell—stylistic gravity and intellectual integrity, to begin with. Hughes's first chapter, for instance, attempts to expose some of the follies of political correctness, that amorphous but ubiquitous force for proper utterance and behavior which is the latest manifestation of the cultural and academic Left. Hughes musters a familiar selection of outrageous examples, such as the waitress who claimed that a customer reading

Playboy was *ipso facto* sexually harassing her.

But then Hughes elaborately balances his attack on those who perpetrate such things with an even fiercer attack on those, precisely, who oppose them. The Right, Hughes says,

has a ball with political correctness. Yet its glee is hollow and there is something distasteful about its caperings. . . . Why? Because the Right is as corroded by defunct ideologies as the academic Left.

This is a typical Hughes performance, from its positing of a false symmetry between Left and Right all the way down to its *Time*-esque cuteness ("caperings"). What the Left/Right balancing act conceals is that Hughes's indictment of political correctness is not original, but merely echoes and agrees with the pioneering work of a number of conservative critics over the last five years and more. Lest he be suspected, however, of being one of their company, he strives to make of them a menace as monstrous as the evil they are combating.

This trick requires a fair amount of contortion and inaccuracy. Thus, foremost among the "defunct ideologies" by which conservatives are allegedly "corroded" would be, presumably, anti-totalitarianism. Yet any need for vigilance on this score, Hughes writes, has passed—and no thanks to the Right: "Bush was lucky that the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet monolith, its underpinnings rotted beyond repair during the Brezhnev years, collapsed during his presidency." That Bush was not a chance onlooker but the continuator of policies which abetted the Soviet collapse; that there never was a Soviet monolith; that monoliths do not have underpinnings (Orwell, thou shouldst be living at this hour); that the military machine which was the USSR was gradually undone, and not from the Brezhnev but from the Stalin years, by the same Western might which Hughes affects to scorn—such considerations escape Hughes, and escape him totally and disingenuously, in the very

spirit of that Left correctness he affects to repudiate.

In the second part of the book, Hughes strives to narrow the focus of his attention (and his wisecracks) to one issue: that of multiculturalism, which he puerilely persists in calling "multi-culti." Once again balancing Left and Right, Hughes places himself in some mythical middle between them—or, rather, above them. He considers himself, he tells us, a "genuine" multiculturalist, one who "cares about differences of culture, aspiration, and history between societies or groups." But this noble notion, he writes, is in need of rescue from the current deformation that travels under its banner and that now exercises near-total hegemony in the teaching of history and literature in our schools and universities.

In American history, for example, Columbus is routinely idealized, out of a need for "absolute goodies and absolute baddies." How would Hughes correct the situation? Inveterately splitting the difference, he would deromanticize Mesoamerica, "a theocratic ant-state whose rigidity might have made Albert Speer faint," but (naturally) retain the scenario of Columbus-as-Satan. He is more forthright on the fantasies of Afrocentrism which are so championed by multiculturalism. Concerning them he remarks that

the *African* [his emphasis] slave trade as such, the black traffic, was a Muslim invention, developed by Arab traders with the enthusiastic collaborations of black African ones, institutionalized with the most unrelenting brutality centuries before the white man appeared on the African continent and continuing long after the slave market in North America was finally crushed.

But as if to atone for these frank words, when he turns to the area of Islamic culture Hughes appears to feel that *not enough* has been done by multiculturalism, which he now redefines as, in America, "an improved understanding of the art, literature, history, and values of cultures other

than the dominant Anglo-Jewish one." (That last phrase is, to say the least, disturbingly clumsy.) To illustrate this allegedly dominant perspective, Hughes tells us how, in 1991, he

watched the Gulf war on television . . . and saw how that conflict brought to an ugly climax America's long-implanted habit of hostile ignorance about the Arab world, past and present, . . . a succession of pundits came forth to assure the public that Arabs were basically a bunch of volatile religious maniacs, hostage-takers, sons of thornbush and dune whose whole past disposed them against intercourse with more civilized states. Modern Islamic fundamentalism filled the screen with screaming mouths and waving arms; of the Islamic past—let alone present-day Arab dissent from fundamentalist xenophobia and militarism—one heard much less.

I do not know what channels Hughes was watching, but I doubt most television sets were equipped to receive them. For one thing, the Gulf war was fought by us *with* numerous Arab allies like Egypt and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states (not to mention such non-Arab Muslim allies as Turkey) and on behalf of an Arab state. Is it really likely that "a succession of pundits"—or any sane speakers—would have indulged in such lurid racist rhetoric, calling our allies "maniacs"?

Nor were screens filled with the "screaming mouths and waving

arms" of puppets of the mullahs, for the very good reason that we were fighting not the fundamentalist and non-Arab (Hughes seems a bit shaky on all this) polity of Iran but the secular state of Iraq.

Finally, the "Islamic past" was colossally irrelevant to the Gulf war; perhaps Hughes longed for a refreshing discussion of the Alhambra as the Scuds were falling, but it is no more reasonable to expect U.S. television to have obliged than to have expected a discussion of Goethe on the radio during the Normandy invasion. Indeed, the whole fantastic scenario seems to owe more to the apologetics of Edward Said than to actuality. It shows, in fact, in its hysteria and paranoia, the very mindset out of which emerge the extremes of multiculturalism—the same extremes Hughes professes to moderate.

What Hughes refuses to "get" is that today's multiculturalism *is* those extremes. Indeed, he persists in thinking, or in pretending to think, that the whole thing is a matter not of ideas but of manners, and that he, as it were, is in the position of Mrs. Moore in E.M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India*, wishing to desegregate the Raj lawn party. He takes avuncular satisfaction in welcoming the likes of the radical black nationalist Amiri Baraka and the radical anti-colonialist Frantz Fanon to the dinner table of the Canon, in contrast to those Scrooges on the Right, with their "conservative fear of mix-

ture," who would debar them. For who, besides phallocratic baddies like William J. Bennett, or philhellenic snobs like Allan Bloom, could object to Fanon sharing a reading list with Plato?

This whole line of argument is dishonest, as anyone knows who has stepped into a real-life multiculturalist classroom these days, where Plato is likely to be kept around only on sufferance and as subject to correction or erasure by the likes of Fanon and Jacques Derrida. Multiculturalism, in short, is the very antithesis of that genuinely humane and universal *paideia* that is eager to include the Sanskrit epic or the Mayan hieroglyphs or the Nigerian novel. It is, to the contrary, instinctively totalitarian and exclusivist; it demands a hierarchy of blameless victims and (white male) oppressors; it is the new Stalinism of the blackboard. Hughes's inability—or refusal—to see this unfits him utterly as an heir to Orwell.

A third and final chapter, on recent controversies over federal funding of the arts, again makes a show of straddling the fence; it knocks Jesse Helms *and* Robert Mapplethorpe *and* multicultural arts grants for "folk" crafts. But once again, what looks like complexity of attitude is really just more gyrating, designed to position Hughes as a friendly critic of the Left and a thoroughgoing enemy of the Right. Which in a nutshell is the story of this slipshod book.