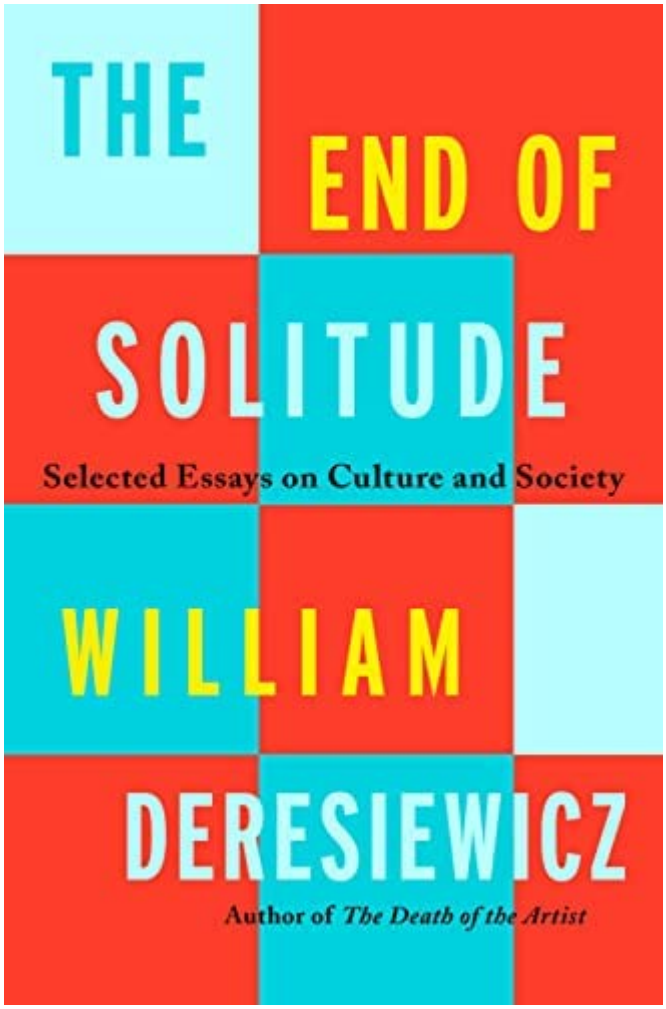
A Lament for the Lost University



book review by Theodore Dalrymple

There comes a time in life when lamentation is one of its greatest consolations, and William Deresiewicz, the author of *The End of Solitude*, appears to have reached that age. This is not to say that what he laments is not lamentable: good reasons for lamentation are never lacking. In fact, I have myself made a small but enjoyable career of such lamentation.

The author, William Deresiewicz, wanted nothing so much as to teach literature in a university: indeed, he had a vocation for it. He taught for ten years at Yale but gave up his academic career for two reasons: first, he couldn't find a

permanent and properly-paid job, and second, the academy had been so morally, intellectually, and financially corrupted that he preferred to try his chances as a freelance writer, and thereby become a free man.

In a review of a book titled *The Dream of the Great American Novel* by an emeritus professor of literature at Harvard, Lawrence Buell, he gives an example of the vapid scholarship he escaped:

> *Admittedly any such dyadic comparison risks oversimplifying the menu of eligible strategies, but the risk is lessened when one bears in mind that to envisage novels as potential GANs is necessarily to conceive them as belonging to more extensive domains of narrative practice that draw on repertoires of tropes and recipes for encapsulating nationness of the kinds sketched briefly here in the Introduction – such that you can't fully grasp what's at stake in any one possible GAN without imagining the individual work in multiple conversations with many others, and not just U.S. literature either.*

This, as the author points out, is far from the worst example of the genre that he could have chosen; but a lifetime of compulsory reading of even worse and more impenetrable drivel ceased to exert any charm for him.

There is an important question here: how is it possible not merely for Professor Buell, but for entire generations of literary academics to write so badly? They do so now as a precondition of an academic career, the other precondition being protestations of loyalty to an intellectually nugatory but socially destructive ideology. How have we arrived at this point? Several of Mr. Deresiewicz's essays try to answer this question.

An interesting shift is detectable over time in the answers he gives, from the period of 2008 to 2015 and the period from

2017 to the present. In the earlier period, he clearly considers himself a man of the left and still obeys some of its shibboleths; in the later period, he has moved, if not to the right exactly, at least to straightforward common sense.

His earlier writing is shot through, it seems to me, with evasions and half-truths: and whether half-truths are better than no truth at all, I leave to others to decide. For example, in an address to West Point recruits on the necessity of solitude to leadership, he fails to point out that leadership is one of those qualities, like heroism or originality, which is not a virtue in itself: a bad man in a worse cause can be an excellent leader, if by leader is meant someone who is able to induce his fellow-men to achieve a goal.

Although he comes increasingly to excoriate political correctness, he was originally not immune from it himself. For example, former North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory's statement that "we don't need gender studies," appeared to the author to be in the same category as the proposition that we don't need university departments of philosophy. But it is obvious that such "studies" are among the most potent sources of linguistic ideology that depend for their continuation upon a permanent effervescence of resentment and subsidised grievance. I would go further than saying that we do not need gender studies: I would say that we need *not* to have gender studies, though achieving this consummation devoutly to be wished must be by persuasion, not by compulsion.

The author's original explanation of all the ills of higher education is what he calls neoliberalism, which turns education into a consumer product. But the word neoliberalism, it seems to me, is a lazy and inaccurate term for our present dispensation, which is much more like corporatism than it is like any form of liberalism, neo- or paleo-. A dispensation in which tax codes run to more than a thousand pages, so that no single individual can master or even understand them, and in

which almost every activity is tied down by regulations like Gulliver waking in Lilliput, cannot be called liberal, at least not in the economic sense of the word. Whether we *should* live in a more liberal economy is a different question entirely, but I am with Confucius when he says that the first thing to do is get the names right.

> *Because his life has been so wrapped up with the university and then writing for the intelligentsia as a freelance, I think Deresiewicz underestimates the problems of political correctness (or Wokeness) in institutions other than those of higher education.*

Mr. Deresiewicz says that "the biggest challenges we face… will require nothing less than fundamental change, a new organization of society." Such words are enough to send shivers up the spine of anyone minimally aware of the "fundamental changes" that took place in Russia in November 1917, or in Germany in January 1933. Who is to direct the changes, and to what end? The author does not ask the questions, let alone answer them. His statement that "If ever we needed young people to imagine a different world, it is now" is an airy nothing, but airy nothings can be dangerous.

He tells us that the solution to the present, admittedly appalling state of higher education, especially in the humanities, is "to treat it as a right" instead of "a market commodity." But surely, in a civilised society, it should be neither. Again, the author's imprecision of thought is evident, all the worse because he insists that universities ought above all to teach students to think. Does he mean that every young person should have the right to study in a university department of philosophy, say, irrespective of aptitude or even effort, moreover at taxpayers' expense? What would such a right, if exercised, do to the quality of the philosophy taught? Behind the suggestion, surely, there hovers a patent falsehood, that aptitude for the study of humanities

is equally distributed in the population. By means of another airy nothing, the author evades a difficult and contentious question.

Although the author tells us that he is a language pedant who takes “a grim pleasure in observing the decline of the English tongue,” I regret to say that his own use of it is not always above reproach. He uses the ugly word “craftsperson” to avoid the dreadful syllable *man* (but who, exactly, was this *son* of *per* that he employs in order to avoid it?). Frequently he employs a singular subject with a plural verb, of course to avoid the use of those terrible, insulting words, the abstract *he* and *him*. He has no such inhibitions with the abstract *she* and *her*, however, as, for example, in “the story of an individual attempting to create herself against existing definitions.” And in the very next sentence, he writes of “the bureaucrats of identity”!

He often employs sentences without verbs and writes “It’s like fucking Kosovo.” But what is the difference between Kosovo and *fucking* Kosovo? I suspect that the word is used here not as an intensifier, but as an implicit claim that, Yale notwithstanding, he remains a man of the people.

Because his life has been so wrapped up with the university and then writing for the intelligentsia as a freelance, I think he underestimates the problems of political correctness (or Wokeness) in institutions other than those of higher education. If anything, the problems are now worse, and even more sinister, in primary and secondary than in tertiary education: give me a child until he is seven, etc. Hospital administration, the criminal justice system, fast food outlets, nothing now escapes the miasma of political correctness.

Despite my criticisms of this book, I think that the author’s heart is in the right place, and I have little doubt that he would have made an excellent teacher of literature had he been

able to find a job. He loves literature and knows that literary criticism should not be the search for divergences from modern pieties or moral enthusiasms that are likely to change with ever-accelerating frequency. Though not religious, he believes in the *sub specie aeternitatis.* He is against education as indoctrination, and would not have gone in for it himself, which set him against the whole profession that he tried to join. When I look back on my own education—which ended in literary subjects when I was 15—I recall with gratitude (that I did not feel at the time) that I was completely unaware of my teachers' political opinions.

The best essay in the book is "Why I left Academia (Since You're Wondering)." Here is an unvarnished account, written in 2021 and published for the first time, undistorted by any theoretical musings, of the author's discontents with academia as it now is. He says that he tried to play by the rules as he thought they ought to be rather than as they were, for example by not employing the kind of verbigeration which is now de rigueur in literature departments everywhere. His description of the reaction of his colleagues to his efforts to keep his thoughts comprehensible is hilarious, but also terrifying for those worried about the future. For this, he deserves great praise.

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