

**Journey Through the Dark Woods.** Wayne Burns. Foreword by Alex Comfort. Seattle: The Howe Street Press, 1982, 230 pages, \$6.95 paper.

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Good teachers are constant threats: to peace of mind, innocence, morality, good taste, proper behavior, religion, democracy, war efforts, "our way of life," university budgets, administrators, bad teachers, authority. Especially authority. Good teachers are generally ignored, usually underpaid, often denied tenure, frequently denied promotion, occasionally vilified, now and then attacked outright, and too often driven out of education. To the discredit of American education, a number of great and original thinkers have been ousted from teaching posts—or denied appointments—because they were intellectual boat-rockers: Albert Einstein, Thorstein Veblen, Bertrand Russell, Ezra Pound, and Theodore Roethke, to name but a handful. Little wonder "the crisis in American education" is a phrase always with us; no wonder so much big money is spent on paper: constant reports from perpetual commissions, studies upon studies. American education is in continual crisis. Administrators multiply; mediocrity is rewarded and encouraged; good teachers dwindle. Idiotic solutions to miseducation are not only taken seriously but applauded—Indiana's governor recently proposed lengthening the school year for high school students, as if by extending the inmates' sentences, as if by increasing the number of days of bored incarceration and angry rebellion, the inmates could be magically transformed into scholars; perhaps kisses will turn them into royalty. No, the crisis in American education won't be solved quickly, because few politicians and few administrators (to say nothing of parents) care for a solution that threatens their equilibrium: simply tolerating good teachers, intellectual boat-rockers, and perhaps eventually rewarding them.

*Journey Through the Dark Woods* showcases the problem; it exposes the dry rot at the core of American education. Wayne Burns is a great teacher who, throughout his career, has been barely tolerated at best, the kind of teacher who inspires devoted disciples, angers envious and narrow-minded colleagues, and makes administrators tremble. He opened closed minds, he kindled passions, he *taught*. This autobiographical book is an account of Wayne Burns's education, in both the broad and the narrow senses of the word. The primary focus of the book is Wayne Burns, teacher, but "teacher" as once defined by Theodore Roethke (who was a colleague of Burns at Washington): "one who carries on his education in public." *Journey Through the Dark Woods* carries on Wayne Burns's education in public; the reader learns as Burns learned, accompanying him analytical step by analytical step to conclusions about literature, about teaching, about authority. While not necessarily concurring with Burns's conclusions, the open-minded reader can not deny that Burns presents progress and process toward these conclusions with studied clarity.

If *Journey Through the Dark Woods* were a novel, it would be instantly classified: a *Bildungsroman*, the tale of an American Stephen Dedalus, raised in the intellectual backwater of a small Ohio village, who reacts against conventional mores, rejects hypocritical authority, and gradually discards the basic values those about him have unquestioningly assimilated. In some ways, Burns's rebellion is more compelling than that of his Dedalian counterpart, for he had nothing as specific as the Catholic church to rebel against. Yet, like Stephen's, his rebellion was also a search for a calling. Once Wayne Burns discovered his vocation, college teaching, he pursued it

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with a single-minded and tenacious dedication that virtually assured a success of Icarian spectacularity and ambiguity. The tale of Burns's education follows the rise and fall of Stephen's, and the Joycean pattern of illusion, disillusionment, and a painful coming to awareness would seem to be central to Burns's career. Indeed, one of the lessons that Burns passes on, that he sees as basic to great literature, is that disillusionment is at once painful and essential to learning.

This is a fascinating book, on many levels and for many reasons. It is a curious book, too, since Burns consciously omits details which, he declares, would "overwhelm the more analytic account of my emotional and intellectual development that I am trying to present here . . . for what it explains about my teaching." Consequently, a great deal of the book's passion is implied and indirect; Burns's fire is between the lines, lines invariably dispassionate, analytical, reasoned. Whatever the reader thinks of this approach, it is appropriate, for Burns is an example of that species common to American myth but rare in American life: the rugged individualist. Wayne Burns, by damn, does it his way. He is the loner of the classic western, an intellectual gunslinger daring to face down, alone, black-hatted superior numbers at High Noon. He is an intellectual embodiment of that mythical pioneer who, with an axe and a sack of beans, enters the wilderness alone and lays down the foundations of a civilization. He is up to the task, self-sufficient, hardy, heroic, a type: the man who made America great.

The reality, of course, diverges from the myth. Burns's childhood adequately measures the gap between American myth and reality. Bright enough to question authority, to see and question the hypocritical chasm between cherished American ideals in theory and practice, the young individualist is *forced* to become an outsider. Exercising freedom of speech, openly expressing opinions that diverge from the norm, elicits not admiration but the tremendous pressure Americans exert to keep strays in the flock. Suffice it to say that Burns's childhood was all too typical of the bright student—often brighter than his "superiors"—who questions their values, their behavior, their system; who, in fact, effectively asks that they practice what they profess. It is endless, of course. Witness Burns the young draftee who dares to declare himself a non-religious conscientious objector and who is consequently pummeled by the men going out to fight for freedom and democracy; certainly Americans are free to dissent, to disagree with the majority—but only the very strong dissent and remain unbroken.

Bookburners, those who fear the power of literature, would find their stand justified after reading *Journey Through the Dark Woods*, for as a young man Burns found justification, reinforcement, and strength for continued rebellion in novels—inheriting his uncle's library was a turning point in his life. From novels he learned that he was not alone in his attitudes, that he was human and not an aberrant creature. Literature is indeed dangerous—especially to the status quo. It is no accident that registrars, football coaches, and business professors would rather ridicule the English Department than any other university department. They rightly sense a dangerous potential, that somehow the English Department, so apparently harmless, nevertheless poses the greatest threat to them. Burns, however, is by no stretch of the imagination a hero to the English profession; his career adequately demonstrates that. For applying his slow and careful analytic process to literature, he very early rejected the fanciful but pervading notion that literature is somehow morally and culturally ennobling. This put him at immediate odds with the literary establishment, though it certainly put him in the company of most great writers.

The convenient pretense that literature is ennobling denies not only the horde of mean-spirited and narrow-minded teachers of literature but also products of striking examples of literary and cultural flowerings of immense grandeur: the genesis of Nazi

Germany from an "ennobling" culture, for one. Or that noble giant of morality, Milton, secretary to Cromwell and spiritual party to what came dangerously close to genocide in Ireland—the grandeur that is Milton was also the shame that was Drogheda, the destruction of an entire city of savage papists: men, women, children, babies, and even their Catholic dogs. Literary criticism makes a practice of ignoring the real, of refusing to examine literature as experience, as life. Wayne Burns insisted upon the real, and though largely ignored, he is potentially a literary critic of tremendous importance. Unfortunately, this book never makes his critical theory absolutely clear; the reader is tantalized by a partial explanation of the "Panzaic" approach to fiction, and Burns does provide the reader with sources. The reader who wishes to pursue Burns's literary theories is inevitably led, for example, to the literary journal, *Paunch*, and in *Paunch* are articles by and about Burns, as well as an extensive Burns bibliography. Whether or not one pursues Burns beyond *Journey Through the Dark Woods*, a great deal is to be gained from the book.

Burns underscores the fact, not news in itself, that the serious novel concentrates upon the individual rather than his or her society. True enough: though Dickens, Steinbeck, and even Harriet Beecher Stowe may be called sociological novelists, they are memorable first and foremost for the living individuals they create. Burns takes this idea further, and he declares that the serious novelist has no choice but to be "irresponsible" and to be "at war with society and its institutions." In fact, when Burns declared that the serious novelist is necessarily "irresponsible," he lost many compatriots who, to the point of that word *necessarily*, were in sympathy with his arguments. Yet numerous great artists have presented this argument themselves; the older aristocratic Yeats became, the stronger he preached that a chief responsibility of the artist is irresponsibility. The great writer must owe allegiance to no institutions. Indeed, it is difficult to think of great fiction which is not irresponsible, in the strictest sense of the word, which does not take the side of the individual against any institution: religious, political, economic, social. The names of the irresponsible come rapidly: Cervantes, Fielding, Swift, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Joyce. It is more difficult to think of a great novelist who gave precedence to institutions over individuals. It has been said that Jane Austen did so, but in the end we remember Elizabeth Bennet rather than her milieu, and to argue that Jane Austen clearly supported the social mores of her time is to ignore the wonderful portrait of Mr. Bennet, a stationary and dignified Panzaic figure.

Burns was ever (and still is) at odds with the central critical doctrine of his age: the New Criticism, which emphasized form to such an extreme that, as Burns writes, they "denied vision and turned fictional works into high level technical puzzles." "Deeply and unalterably opposed to the New Criticism," Burns was certainly right about its shortcomings; much of the New Criticism was a matter of "doing ingenious exercises" upon novels rather than "experiencing" them. Burns argued to his colleagues and to his students that serious novels "illuminated" experience, while counterfeit literature used expert technique to "insulate readers against it." Serious literature, Burns suggested, was read by the gut, not just the mind. If Burns seems overtly Laurentian, it is nevertheless clear that a counterbalance to the New Critics—especially in the classroom—has been seriously lacking. Novels can provide students "a way of understanding life in all of its dismaying complexity," but the legacy of the New Critics assures that this rarely happens.

On the first day of class, Burns informed his students of his position: that the novelist was a revolutionary, that Burns was thus a revolutionary "at second hand," that Freud was critically relevant, that the genuine rather than the counterfeit was of interest to him, that there were basic connections between the students' world and the

world of novels. The semester was then an exploration and amplification of these declarations, with interplay between students and professor encouraged. Burns welcomed opposition as an essential part of the learning process—opposition tested his conclusions. Indeed, Burns may bend too far in trying to allow his readers (as he must have done with his students) to *arrive* at some impartial judgement of his views. Burns presents, he probes, yet he allows others their points of view. He acknowledges the right of each reader and each student to an individual approach—however misguided it may seem to him. He hopes, of course, that most will see the validity of his point of view, but he prefers to lead rather than to push.

Burns leads. *Journey Through the Dark Woods* is brimming with stimulating ideas concerning literature and literary criticism. Burns suggests that serious art is never “pretty or comforting,” never “leaves us secure in our protective rationalizations. It always shocks or hurts.” He suggests, too, that non-fiction is invariably less threatening than fiction because it consists “mainly of ideas” and therefore “does not pose the same kind of threat to the reader that fictional literature does.” Nonfiction is abstract, and even if the ideas do disturb, there are always “other ideas, seemingly every bit as cogent, to counter the disturbing ones.” A computer can generate ideas to support the notion that slavery was not really so bad, as in *Time on the Cross*, but it is less easy to counter *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Fiction does not express ideas, rather, it portrays them in terrifying detail; the reader experiences fiction in a way that he cannot experience non-fiction. Burns further suggests that if in order to survive, it became necessary for people to chain themselves unquestioningly to their institutions, fiction would have to be utterly and absolutely rejected. These notions are tightly linked, and they are quite *à propos*. It is, after all, much easier to find a market for non-fiction today than for fiction, and more and more serious writers are turning to non-fiction. Indeed, the non-fiction novel has been with us for nearly two decades, and it would seem to be on the increase rather than decline: Mailer, Capote, Doctorow’s *Ragtime*. Were the New Critics, perhaps, a symptom rather than a cause; forerunners of a flight from experience into abstraction, from the threat of experience into the security of technique, however false that security may, in fact, be?

This book would be arresting enough were it only an account of Wayne Burns’s literary theories. But these theories, though central, are only a small portion of the whole, for Burns acted out his theories in his life. His discovery of his “heavenly city,” the university, could take its place beside the best of fiction set in academe. For Burns predictably enough discovered that this heavenly city was actually located somewhat lower than the firmament. Indeed, this is hearty fare for those who enjoy accounts—even couched in neutral prose (at times agonizingly neutral prose; one wishes for occasional flashes of anger, bitterness, pure Swiftian vituperation)—of the pettiness, vapidity, and occasional downright absurdity of academia. Consider, for example, the academic minds which shied away from the direct thesis title, *Incest In Five Victorian Novels*. A friend of Burns jokingly suggested that it be retitled *Familial Relations In Five Victorian Novels*. The acceptable title, smacking of the euphemistic evasion that English professors profess to hate, was *The Arrested Heart: Interfamilial Love in Five Mid-Victorian Novels*. Who can doubt that minds requiring “interfamilial love” rather than “incest” would adamantly reject Burns’s notion of “the rightness of the guts” and would embrace analyses of technique and symbol rather than “experience”?

Arresting, too, is the account of how the social revolution in the sixties turned Burns’s heavenly city into a hell. Ironically, he suddenly found himself opposed to almost everything the students considered liberal and radical; ironically, because Burns had, throughout his career, been viewed as extremely liberal, if not radical. Burns did not see the sexual revolution as “liberating”; he felt that most of the

movements of the sixties were as misguided as the institutions they attacked. E.g., feminists employed the organizational attitudes they professed to find so offensive in men (and the movement exacerbated an already destructive male-female antagonism); the anti-war movement's limited vision in protesting *this* war only assured that the government would make certain the next war would be "much better executed." Blacks, women, homosexuals, ecologists—all were guilty of gratuitous bullying, and to argue that the bullying was for a good cause and therefore ultimately for the individual's good was, Burns pointed out to his students, a recurring authoritarian argument. Suddenly Burns was very unpopular because of his view that organizations, whatever the nobility of their intent, are ultimately at odds with the individuals who create them; soon enough they sacrifice individuals to perpetuate themselves: the Communist state did not wither away; administration flourishes even when faculty must be cut back. One only wishes that Burns had not decided to eschew details, for when he is specific, he is especially intriguing; as, for example, when he recounts being attacked by students for using the word "homely," in a literary discussion. He was informed that no one was "homely," some were merely "less beautiful" than others. Orwell was righter than he knew.

For all its examples of academic and societal idiocy, this book does not dishearten. First, there is the heroism—or, if one prefers, the damned mule-headedness—of Wayne Burns. Second, there are Burns's exhilarating literary and aesthetic notions. And third, there is unexpected hope in the account of a man who is a genuine educational hero: Robert B. Heilman, who was Chairman of the English Department during Burns's years at the University of Washington. Heilman was a man who believed in the individual's right to dissent, who believed in freedom of speech, and who supported good teachers, whatever their approaches, in the face of administrative, legislative, and even faculty attacks. In the late forties, the Canwell hearings demoralized the University of Washington, as the regents, the administration, and much of the faculty buckled in the face of the witch-hunters. Faculty members accused of communism were dismissed. When McCarthyism began to snowball, Washington's English Department, under Heilman's leadership, refused to succumb to it and "actually took the lead in resisting it." Heilman repeatedly "challenged the University's restrictions on the hiring of visiting professors," Kenneth Burke for example (another great thinker shunned by American educational institutions, who feared his boat-rocking ideas until he was clearly established as a "great man"). Heilman was obviously a brave and generous-minded man: a new critic, he stood up strongly for Burns, who was utterly opposed to his ideas. And when Theodore Roethke suffered an unfortunate bout with mental illness while at Washington, Heilman wrote an extraordinary letter to the provost of the university in support of Roethke to be used in answer to a legislator who had complained about Roethke's sick leave. Allan Seager, in his biography of Roethke, *The Glass House*, called Heilman's letter "the strongest, and, in humane terms, the finest support of a staff member I have ever heard of any university department making anywhere." (The letter is reproduced in its entirety in Seager's excellent *The Glass House*.) Heilman's support of Roethke is in vivid contrast to the absolute abandonment of Roethke during a similar crisis by Michigan State's administrators years before, and it demonstrates that the courage to defend good teachers can make an appreciable difference in the quality of education at a university.

If there were more Robert Heilmans, *Journey Through the Dark Woods* might be a more optimistic, even joyful, book. Unfortunately, the marcescent teacher is ubiquitous; the best professors often wither eventually, because neglect is the optimum condition they can expect. Hardy individuals, such as Wayne Burns, manage

to survive when they are left alone, but such people are exceptions, and as Burns points out early in his book, he probably could not repeat his career if he were to start over today: "There are too many brilliant young Ph.D.'s panting to do just what is being demanded of them." Too many who are willing not to grow, but to be grown. Thus it is increasingly easier for administrators to weed out the dissenters, the good teachers with the conviction to do things their way.

Still, Burns is optimistic to an extent. He has again found his place in the classroom—after a disastrous decade which prompted early retirement—and he declares that the militant ideas and beliefs of the sixties and seventies have eroded sufficiently that many students of the humanities "are once again willing to go all the way with any teacher who will brave the dark woods with them." This, of course, assumes the willingness of administrators of the heavenly cities to allow students and professors to journey beyond the safe boundaries of the confining city walls and into the woods. It also assumes the growing unlikelihood that good teachers such as Wayne Burns will be there to lead them.



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