

Postmodern Pooh

by Federick Crews

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Reviewed by Paul Devlin

Postmodern Pooh is a hilarious, lighthearted, and at times uproarious and scathing satire of contemporary literary criticism. It is a fictional series of papers, all fictitiously delivered at the December 2000 MLA convention, each with a different critical take on *Winnie the Pooh*. Frederick Crews, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of California, Berkeley, has written eleven parody-papers (each position is supported by citations from real books; a truly scary prospect), each in the style of a current critical idiom (i.e., Marxist, post-colonialist, Feminist, etc.) and has clearly had a grand old time in doing so. Crews is also the author of the 1963 parody of the New Criticism, *The Pooh Perplex*, but *Postmodern Pooh* is exponentially funnier and conceived on a larger scale than *The Pooh Perplex*. *The Pooh Perplex* was written by a young professor unsure of his future, and *Postmodern Pooh* was written by a retired professor after a successful career.

Each paper is a chapter in the book, and each begins with a side-splitting biography of the fictional author. We learn from the preface that drafts of the papers were circulated beforehand, so most of the papers take into account others in the book. Of course, most of the authors think they personally are correct, that their position is the vanguard position, and each of the other presenters are idiots. For example, Derridean deconstructionist Felicia Marronez, whose dissertation was titled, "Heidegger Reading *Pooh* Reading Hegel Reading Husserl: Or, Isn't it Punny How a Hun Likes Beary?", and her first book was titled (*P*)*ohh La La!: Kiddy Lit Gets the Jacques of Its Life!*, let's us know that "[W]e Derridaists are behind the wheel now, swerving to avoid the pedestrain". The Marxist Carla Gulag lets us know that "in a certain broad sense, we are all Marxists now". Some of the authors of course, do not claim to be the wave of the future, but know their positions are sidelined and looked down upon.

Crews satirical laser beam sweeps the contemporary academy. Among the characters we meet in addition to Gulag are N. Mack Hobbs (an exaggerated version of Stanley Fish), Orpheus Bruno (quite obviously Harold Bloom), Das Nuffa Dat (a postcolonialist), Dudley Cravat III (without a doubt, Bill Bennett), and Sisera Catheter (an arch-Feminist), and Biggloria3 (some sort of cybercritic, whose paper is titled "Virtual Bear") among others.

Crews is certainly having fun throughout the book, and so is the reader. One especially sharp parody is Carla Gulag's paper titled *The Fissured Subtext: Historical Problematics, the Absolute Cause, Transcoded Contradictions, and Late-Capitalist Metanarrative (in Pooh)*. Gulag, Joe Camel Professor of Early Childhood Development at Duke (she also teaches "Critical Criticism"), who studied under Althusser and Jameson (who she sees as some sort of Messiah figure), looks extremely ridiculous. And so does Das Nuffa Dat, Classic Coke Professor of Subaltern Studies at Emory University, whose (real!) citations from Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak are so bizarre that the smiles become head shaking grimaces. Also Dudley Cravat III's paper, *Twilight of the Dogs*, makes Bill Bennett's neconservative stance(s) look quite clownish.

Which voice belongs to Crews himself? It seems to me as if N. Mack Hobbs (the Stanley Fish character) and Orpheus Bruno (the Harold Bloom character) speak as the "voices of reason" and are possibly the least harshly drawn. Crews also seems to have sympathy for Renee Francis, a student of Joseph Carroll's biopoetics. (I must say Bloom/Bruno sounds like the voice of reason in many ways. I personally prefer the positions of the real life Bloom over the collected viewpoints here, and from a little background research, I believe Crews does as well.)

Among the most lighthearted sketches is the Bloom parody, in the paper *The Importance of Being Portly* by Orpheus Bruno (Hasty Pudding Professor of English at Harvard), who, we are told, is the author of *Just*

Read These Books, What You Don't Know Hurts Me, Writing is Backbiting and *The Savage Sublime: One Upmanship at the Muses' Gate*. (Bruno reads *Winnie the Pooh* as A.A. Milne responding to Wordsworth.) Having avoided the MLA convention for years, Bruno compares himself to Rip Van Winkle returning to his village after sleeping through the American Revolution, but he adds, "of course, I know all about *your* literary-critical revolution – or should I say, with Jimmy Durante, your revoltin' development". After describing the character of Winnie the Pooh standing on a chair to reach a honey pot, Bruno asks his MLA colleagues:

What do you think you are seeing? If you were an earnest high school senior in AP English, you might translate this image into a kitschy allegory; it's a figure, say, of Aspiration. Being modish academics, though, you doubtless prefer an allegory drawn from your own sewing circle: the picture really bespeaks Commodity Fetishism, or Depletion of Natural Resources, or the Recycling of Social Energy, or best of all, Male Rapacity. Your symbol hunting, don't you see, differs only trivially from that of the innocents who doze through your required courses and whom you despise without good reason.

From the tone of the preface, I think the satirical aims of the book are on pause here, and this is where Crews has some serious points to make.

N. Mack Hobbs, Trustees Portfolio Tracking Stock Professor of English at Princeton, in his paper, *You Don't Know what Pooh Studies Are About, Do You, and Even If You Did, Do You Think Anybody Would Be Impressed?* also offers some pearls of wisdom which are probably meant to be taken seriously. Besides reading Pooh as a "hall of mirrors whose intricacy bears comparison to the best of Conrad, Kafka, Borges, and Pynchon", he also lets us know:

[I]deologizing is always dumb. It cramps your style, foreclosing the behind-the-back dribbles, the no-look passes, and the alley-oop reverse jams that could put some soul in your critical game. Every time you make a contribution, however 'radical', to academic chatter, you're playing the established tenure-and-promotion game and thereby strengthening the status quo. That's perfectly fine by me; it's just too bad that I'm the only critic who's frank enough to face it.

This is Fish all the way. Stanley Fish "revolutionized" Duke's English department in the 1980's and is currently trying to do the same at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Hobbs, who fictionally did for Princeton what Fish did for Duke, lets us know that:

right off the bat, I cold-shouldered the department's old-line humanists...hired specialists in every current fad, and allowed the curriculum to bloat until it included soap operas, Looney Tunes, muscle magazines, bubble-gum cards, and graffiti. Do you think those predilections were my own? The bumper sticker on one of my Porsches says 'I'd rather be teaching Hamlet'. But you gotta do what you gotta do if you want your academic unit to be everybody's buzz.

Postmodern Pooh is a comedic tour-de-force, really good fun, mixed with thoughtful critiques of the academy. Crews certainly laments what has happened to the study of literature in certain colleges and by certain critics, but his tone is usually closer to "ha ha ha, isn't this all so delightfully absurd?" rather than an angry tirade or some sort of "in my day we did things better" declaration. I concur with the blurbs on the front and back covers, especially with the one from *The Washington Post*: "these are pitch-perfect lampoons...incisive and hilarious". I'm sure someone somewhere was and will be offended by this book, but in the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, "true seriousness is the unmasking of all false seriousness".