

The Great Language Panic and Other Essays in Cultural History



This book questions some well-known labels and names whose places in Western usgae are generally taken for granted. Probing our current myopia through his humerous and provocative reflections, the author stresses his concern for the decline of words into mere social noises, Like gestalt drawings in which light areas and dark areas alternate as foreground and background language, the author shows, is embedded in culture just as culture is embedded in language. Each essay in the book focuses on words or emblematic names that are learned and passed along as rhetoric, without regard for their historical significance. The resulting trivialization reflects what Erwin calls temporal provincialism. the hick outlook that comes from living perpetually in a little crossroads called the present. By removing words from their historical contexts-as in the fate of the word liberal during George Bushs presidential campaign-our culture habitually eviscerates them of meaning. Erwin also takes a second look at illustrious figures who have come to represent exemplary lives in Yes and No he exposes a Socrates who faked integrity, and in The Village Apollo presents a Thoreau who was an egomaniacal freeloader. No mere de-bunker, Erwin examines as well the various forces that have prevented a generation of feminists from acknowledgedging the model of the independent, self-determined Edna St. Vincent Millay. Selective indifference to tradition-the plundering of history and language for political and other ideological purposes-has long been a Western trait, Erwin insists. The notorious modern theme of rootlessness has less to do, he says, with historical continuity or discontinuity than with the concenience of thinking one owes nothing to the past. In the title essay, Erwin traces the panic that set in when Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and their followers unmasked language without offering a

workable substitute. The subsequent dread of being trapped by ideology, syntax, and relativity was bound to pass, however, since language possesses transcendent as well as limiting qualities. Taken as a whole, The Great Language Panic anticipates a recovery of nerve in the wake of postmodernism. Language Erwin concludes, is the only way to get around the obstacle of language.

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