

The Last Call

Julia Friedman

Camille Paglia, *Provocations: Collected Essays on Art, Feminism, Politics, Sex, and Education*. Pantheon, 736pp., \$40 cloth.

CAMILLE PAGLIA'S LATEST BOOK is the very definition of protean. The eight sections of this seven-hundred-page volume, fittingly titled *Provocations*, cover popular culture, film, sex/gender/women, literature, art, education, politics and religion. Paglia, who calls herself "pro-pop and pro-sex," has also proven a fierce advocate of the canon, which for her encompasses the best of civilization. Those familiar with her writings will know that this breadth is not an indication of some egomaniacal attempt at a "theory of everything," but a sensible shortcut to sorting out decades of writing on an expansive range of subjects. After all, the author's scholarly maiden voyage—*Sexual Personae* (1990)—was another seven-hundred-page tome that addressed the continuity of Western culture through an analysis of sexuality and eroticism in art. Intellectual ambition is still Camille Paglia's middle name.

The unifying agent of the six dozen texts that comprise *Provocations* is their author—a lover of the arts, a dedicated teacher and an outspoken dissident (she often refers to

herself as a "dissident feminist," but for over forty years she has also carried the cross—or the laurels—of being a dissident academic). Despite a number of erudite, encyclopedic chapters whose topics range from portrayals of Middle Eastern women in Western culture, through love poetry, to cults and religious vision in 1960s America, *Provocations* is the printed equivalent of a cattle prod. Much like Nabokov's *Strong Opinions* (1973), and Robert Hughes' *Nothing if Not Critical* (1992), *Provocations* stems from a cultivated personal taste and adamant convictions. As with Hughes, the words "waning" and "decline" appear in more than one title of this volume. And like both Hughes and Nabokov, Paglia does not mince her words, as she calls out the "ruthless, soulless careerism" of elite academics with their "self-interested [slippery] scholarship, where propaganda and casuistry impede the objective search for truth." What are her demands? To rejoin the mainstream; to rely on facts rather than propaganda; to replace identity politics with rigorous scholarly standards; to accord high value to erudition.

But of course it is not 1973, and not even 1992, when opinionated and critical writing could still count as intrepid. In the coddled, consensus-obsessed climate of 2018 the very act of putting out a compilation of

controversial essays seems nothing short of quixotic. Paglia is aware of that. She has no illusions about saving people from the dark side, so she begins her introduction with a litany of those who *would not* make a good readership for her book: “those who believe that they... found the absolute truth; those who believe that language must be policed; those who believe that art is a servant of political agendas; those who see women as victims and men as the enemy, and those who see human behavior as wholly formed by oppressive social forces.” Not to be overly cynical, but the above list of those who cannot handle being provoked does not bode well for sales, given the current situation on college campuses and amongst the organized art establishment.

Yet, while Paglia’s potential readership is a minority, the timing of *Provocations* is perfect. Jordan Peterson and Jonathan Haidt have recently joined a sparse but stentorian chorus of voices in defense of the Western canon and against the politicization of higher education, reviving debates that raged decades ago, when Paglia’s dissertation advisor Harold Bloom had to forego a customary Q & A after a public lecture on Shakespeare to avoid being mobbed by Wellesley College faculty eager to attack the patriarchy he allegedly represented. A small number of the intellectual catacomb dwellers can certainly enjoy Paglia’s epigrammatic sermons: “Beautiful women are a fascinating conflation of nature and art.”

For the sake of disclosure, I count myself among these catacomb dwellers. I have had a two-and-a-half decade-long intellectual crush on the author of *Provocations*, ever since I discovered her writings in the mid-1990s, while in graduate school at Brown. The elegant erudition of *Sexual Personae* (never mind the fact that it took Paglia a decade to get it published) reaffirmed my faith that, contrary to all appearances, scholarship was not yet dead. There was still room for

clearly-worded, evidence-supported arguments that incorporated aesthetic judgment. *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (1992), Paglia’s first collection of essays, with its reprint of “Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders: Academe in the Hour of the Wolf,” was revelatory. Having completed my primary schooling in a society steeped in ideology and propagandistic lies (the USSR), I instinctively saw through the false idols worshipped by many of the faculty at Brown. Now, thanks to Paglia, I had an explanation for why the indiscriminate use of French theory to the detriment of other approaches was indeed as toxic as I had always suspected. Her debunking of the “four legs good, two legs bad” mentality that ostracized people seen reading *The New Criterion*, or using formal analysis, or citing Walter Pater, was a breath of fresh air. Her “street-smart feminism” seemed similarly logical to me: in the early 90s, as college co-eds were bombarded with warnings about date-rape, I could not wrap my mind around the idea that a scantily-dressed young woman could enter what Paglia called the “testosterone flat” of a frat house, get smashed, and then expect equally smashed brothers to remember that she is a lady. Paglia’s second collection of essays, *Vamps & Tramps* (1994), cleared that issue up. I was so taken by her common sense (both scholarly and mundane) that I acted like a Jehovah’s Witness in proselytizing her writings to anyone who would listen. I even briefly considered asking her to be an external reader on my dissertation committee, until I came to my senses. It was 1998, and Camille Paglia was emitting a steady radioactive glow. It was impossible to imagine completing my doctorate with this academic *enfant terrible* overseeing my efforts.

Provocations is Paglia’s third collection of essays on a broad range of topics. Last year she came out with a more focused volume titled *Free Women, Free Men*, which addressed sex, gender and feminism. Some of the

entries on these subjects reappear in *Provocations*. Between *Vamps & Tramps* and *Provocations* she published *The Birds* (1998), a monograph on the eponymous movie, *Break, Blow, Burn* (2005), an analysis of forty-three poems, and *Glittering Images* (2012), another collection of analyses, this time of twenty-nine visual images.

As does Nabokov's *Strong Opinions*, *Provocations* contains essays, lectures, short articles, and interviews. Some, like "Dance of the Senses: Natural Vision and Psychotic Mysticism in Theodore Roethke," and "'Stay, Illusion': Ambiguity in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*" are original scholarly articles. Others, like "Cults and Cosmic Consciousness: Religious Vision in the American 1960s," "Free Speech and the Modern Campus," and "The North American Intellectual Tradition" are well-researched, comprehensive historical surveys. One of the most brilliant essays in the volume is "Theater of Gender: David Bowie at the Climax of the Sexual Revolution," which was Paglia's hefty contribution to the catalogue for a retrospective exhibit of Bowie's costumes at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 2013. Her erudite contextual analysis traces the genesis of Bowie's hybrid, eclectic persona to nineteenth-century Romanticism, and epitomizes what she calls the "respectful illumination" of the artist and the artwork. In these longer essays (some of which originated as lectures) the language is flowing, lucid, and jargon-free, and Paglia's authorial voice retains the appropriate scholarly detachment. Her tone changes in the pieces written for digital consumption. In her online *Salon* articles, as Paglia notes, it becomes "punchy, scrappy, take-no-prisoners," a suitable mode for a "myth-critic and pagan cultist." Paglia's embrace of popular culture made her a pioneer of Internet writing by academics, while her seamless sashay between print op-eds on current issues and digital columns for *Salon* proves that she is

a good student of Marshall McLuhan. For Paglia the Internet has a double allure. It provides the opportunity to create hybrid text incorporating both word and image, while serving as an uncensored communication platform for "an invisible, subterranean resistance movement."

It is under the "Ask Camille" rubric for the *Salon* that Paglia succumbs to solipsism, which in turn results in some slips of judgment. Her attempt to draw a parallel between herself and Ayn Rand, the subject of her eponymous article whom she praises as "a bold female thinker who should immediately have been a centerpiece of women's studies programs" leads Paglia astray. Her gratuitously generous evaluation of Rand is at odds with historical evidence that reveals the Russian-born writer as a power-hungry, sadistic, manipulative vamp whose ideas about rational egoism were entirely derived from the most unpalatable characters of Russian imperial history, including Dmitry Karakozov, Sergei Nechaev and Vladimir Ulianov (Lenin). Rand's actual legacy, as far as American history is concerned, is the "subprime crisis" of 2008, which sprang from the Federal Reserve's failure to regulate the derivatives market. How was this Rand's fault? At the time of the crisis, the Federal Reserve was headed by Alan Greenspan, Ayn Rand's favorite disciple, groomed and ideologically reprogrammed in her New York salon. To be sure, Rand subsequently accompanied Greenspan to the White House, where he was sworn in as the chief economist to the president. After her death, Greenspan became head of the Federal Reserve, where he conducted real-life experiments with the US economy in an attempt to build Rand's objectivist paradise. Rand was not "the Camille Paglia of the 1960s," and the difference between them is not rationalism (Rand) vs. mysticism (Paglia), as Paglia informs her *Salon* readers. Rand was a derivative sociopath whose

legacy was a staggering economic calamity, while Paglia is an oppositional intellectual, dedicated to elevating “free thought and free speech over all other values,” who sees “art and the contemplation of art as a medium of intuition and revelation.”

By Paglia’s own admission, her *Salon* column takes on “the hectoring personae of old-time radio and TV: the host, the standup comic, and the pitchman, a descendant of the carnival barker,” so perhaps inaccuracies are inevitable. When her attention is directed outward, Paglia’s erudition and common sense produce staggeringly acute evaluations of the art world, politics, education and religion. Her pithy analysis of the NEA’s debacles during the 1990s culture wars is as riveting as her evaluation of the problems with American higher education. In the first instance she nails the problem by pointing out the “degeneration of standards in our Playskool model of primary education, in which everyone is an artist, without the discipline of technical mastery” and the prevalent “feel-good relativism.” Her diagnosis that in the United States “the Left as well as the Right—Stalinism as well as Puritanism—has abused art” is the best explanation I have heard for the current state of grants and museums, most of which are now overseen by liberal-leaning administrators. Paglia argues that, in order to function properly, and to avoid becoming “political penny arcade[s],” both art and education need to be depoliticized. An expert provocateur herself, she is against “pointless provocation” of the kind that takes place when publically funded institutions engage in scandalizing the public to prove their open-mindedness, correctly describing that strategy as “adolescent wallowing in slack ‘oppositional’ art.”

Paglia’s expertise in combining images and text drives one of her keenest insights. In a television-dominated environment, where young people are bombarded with

disconnected images, there will be a particular need for what she calls “a sympathetic instrument” to analyze them. In “The Magic of Images: Word and Picture in the Media Age,” a version of a lecture at a 2002 conference on literacy, she draws a connection between the decline in the quality of primary education which, combined with the rise of personal computers, has “unmoored” the younger generation “from the mother ship of culture.” In turn, this affects their ability to concentrate or to attain the patience necessary to analyze complex texts, build organized argument, and apply deductive reasoning. Her now decade-and-a-half old observation that the Internet’s “addictive unfurling hypertext... encourages restless acceleration,” has since been confirmed by the widespread digital addiction to social media. Time has shown that Paglia was also right about the increasing balkanization and bureaucratization of American higher education, as well as about the importance of popular culture in any serious discussion of art. However, as Andre Gide once said, however, “since no one was listening, everything must be said again.” And that is the point of *Provocations*: to continue the fight for art, culture and against indoctrination. Hopefully, at some point, someone will listen.

Paglia is obsessed with fluidity. Her insistence on the superiority of the androgen/transgender model is part of this larger theme, which encompasses thought, as well as sex and gender. Just as she deplors the “therapeutic customer-service operations” that universities have become, she is proud of the “flexibility of [her] system of interpretation.” Paglia’s genuinely interdisciplinary scholarship, equally at ease with the verbal and the visual, gives her a clear strategic advantage over compartmentalized disciplines. Her decades-long crusade to give equal consideration to the gems of the canon and

popular culture makes her adept to analyze Rhianna's outfits and John Donne's poetry. Her war cry for young people questioning their sexuality is "Stay fluid!" And when she refers to herself as "transgendered," she is not talking about a physical change, which in her view cannot be subjectively mandated, but about her ability to combine the desirable features of both genders—intellectually, psychologically, and perhaps emotionally. Like Vladimir Nabokov, who prided himself that his "lucid,... balanced, mad mind" was able to rein his magical imagery into honed prose, Paglia clearly enjoys having a backstage pass to both the Dionysian and the Apollonian modalities. She is not comfortable within one norm, and prefers straddling the span of both to the limitations of the *juste milieu*.

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This insistence on flexibility and subtlety of interpretation also permeates Paglia's views on sex, gender and feminism, an area prone to declaratory statements and oversimplification. Her basic premise, meticulously developed in *Sexual Personae*, is that women fail to realize their power over men, who are biologically determined to pursue them. Her definition of the "tormented fragility of male sexual identity" recalls one of the lesser known epigrams of Oscar Wilde, printed in a Peter Pauper Press edition that she discovered while in college: "The history of woman is the history of the worst form of tyranny the world has ever known: the tyranny of the weak over the strong. It is the only tyranny that lasts." One of Paglia's pet peeves is the pervasive

(in both the second and third wave of feminism) view of women as powerless fragile victims, always under assault. She is driven apoplectic by the direction feminism took after Betty Friedan, which presented women as hapless victims of institutionalized patriarchy, in need of special, state-mandated protections. Paglia identifies the merger of post-structuralist and feminist theory, and the resulting fixation on the idea of gender as an illusion of language as a cause a yet further alienation of regular women from the feminism. What started as an inclusive equity movement, has succumbed to a "self-referential discourse" aimed at a narrow elite.

While she respects Betty Friedan, and considers Germaine Greer "a feminist colossus—bold, learned and devastatingly witty," Paglia deplors anti-pornography, men-hating feminists like Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin who, in her view, "perversely turned against the 1960s sexual revolution," forming a *de facto* reactionary movement. In an essay entitled "Women and Law," originally published as a preface to a collection of interviews with female public prosecutors in Brazil, she traces the legal status of women across millennia and through different cultures up to the birth of feminism, emphasizing the regression into puritanical mores among American feminists of the 1980s. Her conclusion comes in the form of a rhetorical question: "is woman a victim, mutilated by the horrors of history, or is she a capable and resilient agent, responsible for her own actions and desires?" Paglia clearly values capability, bravery and accomplishment— one of the most passionate pieces in *Provocations* is a paean to Helen Gurley Brown, originally published in *The Sunday Times* in the aftermath of her death in 2012. And although she does not mention her by name, Paglia must be an admirer of one of the most accomplished women of the

twentieth century: the writer, senator, and twice ambassador Clare Boothe Luce. The way Paglia sees it, the two options women have are either to seek the protection of the state, repeating the centuries-old tradition of male guardianship, or to “value freedom above all, despite its pain and risk.” Her own stance here is unequivocal: in a 2008 *Guardian* questionnaire she named her greatest fear as imprisonment. “I have to be free!” she said.

The most recent article in this volume is “Movies, Art, and Sex War,” whose original title was “MeToo and Modern Sexuality: Endless Bitter Rancor Lies Ahead.” It spells out Paglia’s opinion on the hash tag phenomenon. As might be expected from a “street-wise” feminist who acknowledges female strength and power, the victimization narrative appalls Paglia. It is clear to her that women will not gain from a movement where collateral damage potentially encompasses the other half of the population. Her “pro-sex” vision has always clashed with the views of the feminists like Kate Millett, whom Paglia labeled “a morose philistine” because of her book *Sexual Politics*

that, according to Paglia, consists largely of “trashing great male authors and artists for their hidden sexism.” #MeToo is a continuation of that male-bashing tendency, an “open sex war—a grisly death match that neither men nor women will win.” Paglia’s well-justified fear is that, far from ending predation of women in the workplace, the revival of decades-old, unsubstantiated allegations will resuscitate stereotypes of women as hysterical, vindictive and volatile. She warns that #MeToo’s legacy will be “endless sexual miscommunication and bitter rancor,”— thus circling back to the warnings of the importance of visual literacy offered in “The Magic of Images.” Paglia’s argument is that, with the waning of the projected image that magnified emotions on screen, young people (whose default mode of communication is imageless texting) will eventually lose the ability to read facial expressions and body language. In short, #MeToo threatens to discredit the essential human emotions behind the Western artistic tradition. *Provocations* is Paglia’s last call to a society that “can barely survive the anxieties of freedom.” ❧