
Does Literary Study Have a Future?

Does literary study have a future? This is a question normally asked by those who are unhappy with the present regime in literature departments. But it is a legitimate question for anyone to ask in light of the changes that have occurred in the field in recent decades. The study of the literary work has turned into the study of “the cultural text.” The new approach to literature often goes by the name of cultural studies, which in practice means the ideological interpretation of a text. Literary works are not the exclusive purview of cultural studies. Films, TV, institutions, whatever qualifies as a cultural event or fact, comes under their scrutiny. My focus is on literary study, much of which has become one or another version of ideological interpretation.

New Historicists, feminists, and multiculturalists conceive of the literary work as an ideological structure whose aesthetic appearance expresses or conceals political motives of one kind or another. Ideology critique has in effect evaporated interest in the aesthetic character of the work. (The aesthetic itself has become the object of ideological suspicion.) Here are some of the questions that exemplify literary discussion in the academy. What is the colonialist argument in *The Tempest*? Is Jane Austen complicit with patriarchy in her celebration of the marriages of her main characters? Is *Heart of Darkness* an imperialist and racist work? Is T. S. Eliot’s muse anti-Semitism? For those on the cultural left, politics is, as it were, the repressed truth of literature, which ideology critique liberates. For others, it may be cause for jeremiads if not about the death of literature, certainly about the demise of literary study.

The most serious threat to literature comes from popular or mass culture, supported by the ever increasing power of technology. If college-age students prefer watching television to reading and if, as the propagandists for new technology tell us, the computer with its exponentially increasing power to deliver information is where the educational action is, there may be little hope for the serious study of serious literature in the future. One might expect the ideology critics to resist the commercial energies that support popular culture, but in their suspicion of high culture, they have been complicit in weakening its authority.

It is hyperbole (perhaps necessary hyperbole) to speak of “the death of literature” or even of “the demise of literary study.” There will always be teachers and students with literary sensibility who will persist in reading and responding to literature. And even among those engaged in cultural studies, pleasure in the literary work is not

and will not be entirely absent. But there is little doubt that a sea change has occurred in the field at the expense of what has been understood as *literary* study. Hence the mood of despair in the recent work of Harold Bloom and Frank Kermode. In *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, Bloom begins and ends with elegiac chapters (“An Elegy for the Canon” and “Elegiac Conclusion”). Bloom’s jeremiad is fraught with paradox: a lament over the passing of what was meant for the ages.¹ Kermode, following Bernard Bergonzi, suggests a division of labor, a “split[ting] off [of] conventional literary study from the activity now known as ‘cultural studies.’”² Kermode echoes Matthew Arnold when he speaks of the literary remainder from the split as a “remnant.” (In *Culture and Anarchy* and elsewhere, Arnold spoke of individuals, alienated from their class prejudices, who might constitute a remnant of saviors of culture from the prevailing philistinism. He derived the metaphor from the Biblical tradition.) “Our remnant will not have an easy time.” As for the practitioners of cultural [read ideological] studies, Kermode’s judgment of them is severe. He quotes from Julien Benda’s famous *La Trahison des Clercs*: “Our age is indeed the age of the intellectual organization of hatred.” Kermode remarks, “Benda was of course thinking more of politics than of art, but in our present situation his sentence surely loses nothing of its force. For we all have colleagues who hate or despise literature, and institutional change has given them power.”³

Kermode has diagnosed a condition. But what to make of his prescription? As an undergraduate at Columbia College in the early fifties, I remember that literary discussion required a literary sensibility, but was unembarrassed, or should I say embarrassed, by thoughts of politics and history, though not politics and history in their current tendentious versions. (I’m sure that the our New Historicists and cultural materialists would say we had our own tendentious versions, so it may come down to the tendency one prefers.) Is it too late to retrieve cultural studies from the ideologues and perhaps to conceive an alternative version? I hope not, for that would mean conceding an activity as valuable as cultural criticism to the ideology critics. It would also mean an unnecessary contraction of literary study to an internal critique of a work with only occasional reference to history, politics, etc. As a practicing critic Kermode is among our most historically informed critics, with a keen sense of the cultural motives and implications of a work. So I have to think that his call for a division of labor reflects a despair about the present state of cultural studies. If cultural study were still in the hands of Lionel Trilling, Raymond Williams, and Richard Hoggart, I doubt that he would be recommending the insulation of literary studies from it.

John Ellis’s *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities* is written more in the mood of anger than of sorrow. His main target is the preoccupation with “race-gender-class theory” in literary study. His indictment of the literary academy is sweeping, for he finds nothing in the newest criticism to redeem it. Much of what he says are variations on the earlier criticisms of Dinesh D’Souza and Roger Kimball, though his approach to the theoretical assumptions of race-gender-class theory is more analytically rigorous than theirs. Unlike Kimball and D’Souza, Ellis has a theoretical mind.

The novel turn in Ellis's critique is his contention that the radically skeptical assault on Western values is itself an extremist extension of those values. The Enlightenment fostered the critical spirit, now its progeny has without discrimination turned upon the Enlightenment to travesty its achievement. For Ellis the European Enlightenment is the virtually exclusive source of civilized value, undeserving of most of the criticism directed against it. "The spread of Enlightenment values has led to the ending of many . . . un-Enlightened customs, such as cannibalism, human sacrifice, head-hunting—and slavery."⁴ There is truth in this statement, but Ellis's failure anywhere in the book to acknowledge the destructive imperial side of Enlightenment ambition arouses suspicion of the ideological partiality of the statement even in an admirer of Enlightenment universalism like myself. Where is Kurtz's "Exterminate all the brutes" in Ellis's understanding of what literature has to teach us about the Enlightenment?

Ellis opposes the Enlightenment to postmodern identity politics. In *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Martha Nussbaum also affirms the Enlightenment, but not at the expense of African-American studies, Women's studies, the study of human sexuality. She is careful to distinguish the subjects from the postmodern approach that disparages objectivity and reason. She has the advantage of philosophical training, so she can speak with conviction about the inability of postmodernists to "grapple with the technical issues about physics and language that any modern account of [questions about objectivity and reason] needs to confront." And she makes the sensible suggestion that "philosophy be a large part of the undergraduate curriculum,"⁵ if only as an antidote to the sophistry of postmodernism.

Literature Lost is a political book, more concerned about identity politics than about the literature whose disappearance it laments. Ellis complains that "literary critics are not trained in political analysis, and as we shall see from their attempts at it, they do it badly."⁶ For all his complaining, Ellis, himself a literary scholar, writes like a would-be political theorist and rarely addresses literature. And as a political theorist he does not always encourage confidence in his judgment. Consider his rather original definition of political correctness as "a thoroughly Western phenomenon" which he traces back to Tacitus, who "imagined noble Germany as a standard against which to judge the Romans," and more immediately and tellingly Rousseau, who

instead of being content to think that eighteenth-century French society and its institutions were corrupt and corrupting and to imagine another people that was morally superior because their natural goodness had remained intact, generalized [that] man in his natural state was naturally good, and all corruptness sprang from society and its institutions.⁷

According to Ellis, this becomes a model for a cultural relativism which exalts tribal cultures at the expense of Western civilization. His view of Rousseau's conception of nature and society is reductive and simplistic. More important, however, is his failure to see that Tacitus and Rousseau are examples of a phenomenon that goes back to the Bible—a view of man's fall from an Edenic past into civilization. To characterize the

imagination of paradise lost as political correctness is puzzling—and an unwitting irony, given Ellis’s conception of literature as lost. It is simpler and truer to say that the origin of political correctness is in the ethos of Stalinism.

Even more puzzling is Ellis’s implied solution to the problem:

In the past, a quality-control mechanism was in place to prevent the corruption and decline of teaching and research: the dean. If deans heard of a classroom where the main focus was not on teaching students how to think and learn but on making them serve—directly serve—political and social ends, they could intervene to insist that classrooms were for education, not for faculty hobbyhorses or social activism.⁸

A dean can intervene where aberrant behavior is concerned, but can hardly be expected to insist that an entire discipline revise its way of doing things. Disciplines have academic freedom to determine their own agendas, no matter how repugnant they may be to a president or a dean. If change is to occur, it must come within the discipline itself.

Not all critics of the current regime are despairing. M. H. Abrams concludes an incisive critique of the alienating effect of the current vogue of suspicious and unmasking readings of a text with a sanguine assertion that literary study will survive in the very transformation that has occurred.

Some fifty years from now the Academy of Arts and Sciences will convene a conference on the transformation of American academic culture, for which a scholar will be commissioned to review the history and condition of English and other literary studies. She will find the analysis and history of literature, both as literature and as inter-involved with other human activities and concerns, to be a prominent component of the academic curriculum. And looking back, she will conclude that literary studies, having undergone some such changes as I have sketched, are (in a favorite expression of my favorite literary theorist, S. T. Coleridge) *alter et idem*. The Latin may be translated freely as “transformed yet recognizable.”⁹

Abrams’s “prophecy” is surprising, and I must confess unconvincing. It reads more like a wish than a conclusion consistent with his argument. And yet I can sympathize with its spirit, for the alternative is a fruitless all-out culture war of the sort that we have been experiencing in recent years. Such a war benefits neither the academy nor the cultural life in general.

What’s Happened to the Humanities edited by Alvin C. Kernan is a salutary event. If the bias of most of the essays is critical of humanistic studies as practiced in the academy, the contributors prefer to engage in debate or dialogue rather than to conduct war—as in culture wars. Consider the concluding paragraph of Gertrude Himmelfarb’s contribution. She believes that a reaction to postmodernism and all its attendant isms (multiculturalism, New Historicism, radical feminism) may be setting in, but she has no illusion about a return to the status quo ante.

. . . Certainly the new subjects, which now have so much institutional as well as ideological support—African American, ethnic, cultural, multi-cultural, feminist and gender studies—will not disappear. What is not clear is whether these subjects (and the old ones as well) lend themselves to some methodological “middle ground,” or what such a methodology might look like.

In the meantime, traditionalists and postmodernists alike will have to tolerate and be civil to each other. The real challenge is to do so while understanding the full import of the scholarly revolution that has affected all the humanities.¹⁰

Himmelfarb has been a severe critic of the cultural left and a formidable polemicist. The polemicist has not disappeared in her essay, but the concluding paragraph represents a change of tone, in effect a call for negotiation. Toleration and civility, of course, will not be enough. One has to think hard about the terms of negotiation.

Critics on the right or center (I dislike employing the language of the *Assemblée Nationale* to cultural debate, because such language gives a prejudiced and misleading impression about what the issues are) are most effective in their negative criticisms. In his contribution "The Practice of Reading," Denis Donoghue says what has to be said about the current fashion of ideological reductiveness in interpreting literary works. His examples are recent feminist, New Historicist, and psychoanalytic readings of *Macbeth*. Donoghue summarizes his reading of the "new" ideological critics (no longer very new): "the gist of the consensus is that *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's fantasy of male self-begetting and immortality, without recourse to women."¹¹

How do these critics arrive at this view? The quotations Donoghue provides give the answer. According to Terry Eagleton,

The witches are the heroines of the piece, however little the play itself recognizes the fact, and however much the critics may have set out to defame them. It is they who, by releasing ambitious thoughts in *Macbeth*, expose a reverence for hierarchical social order for what it is, as the pious self-deception of a society based on routine oppression and incessant warfare.¹²

The witches are heroines after Eagleton's own ideological heart. They not only expose the social order of the play, but deny the play a right to its own understanding. The same is true for passages from other critics Donoghue adduces. The failure of these ideology critics is that they

are queering one discipline—literary criticism—with the habits of another—social science. Their metier is not verbal analysis but the deployment of themes, arguments, and diagnoses: hence the only relation they maintain to the language of *Macbeth* is a remote one. . . . These critics have no sense of the recalcitrance of language, specifically of Shakespeare's English: They think that in reading his words they are engaging with forces and properties indistinguishable from their own.¹³

Social science, of course, need not be inimical to the study of literature. It can complement it as sociology of literature. But the distinctions that used to obtain among the sociological, the historical, and the aesthetic disciplines have been lost in current practice. The sociology of literature in its aggressive, demystifying expression has become the dominant form of advanced academic study of literature.

Donoghue focuses on language, but what he says applies as well to the ideas and themes of the work. He concludes on a muted hopeful note: ". . . I have been heartened recently, reading certain critics who might be thought to be entirely 'political' and finding them coming around again to the recognition of aesthetics as a necessary

discipline of attention.”¹⁴ Perhaps the barricades are beginning to come down, Donoghue seems to be saying, and common ground is possible.

I am in sympathy with Donoghue’s view as far as it goes. The critics of the politicization of literary study need now to come forward with ideas about the role of politics and ideology in literary understanding. What to do, for instance, with the ideological aspect of a work? It cannot be ignored, if the middle ground Himmelfarb hopes for is to be found. The relationship between the aesthetic and the ideological is not addressed in Kernan’s collection, though it invites attention.

There is, of course, a tension, if not outright conflict, between aesthetics and ideology. From the third Earl of Shaftesbury, who invented the concept, to the pre-modern present, aesthetics has generally stood for the autonomy of the work of art, the disinterested contemplation of beauty; ideology denies disinterestedness and autonomy, defining, as it does, the conditions of which the creative mind is hardly aware, conditions that determine its productions. So an interest in both aesthetics and ideology requires doublemindedness. Is such doublemindedness possible to a critical reader, or is it as impossible a task as traveling simultaneously in opposite directions?

The problem is alleviated if one gives up the radical Marxist version of ideology as false consciousness, the version that Eagleton represents in his comment about *Macbeth* and elsewhere. In such a version, the text never knows itself, all the wisdom is in the demystifying modern reader. (I have criticized this view in my recent book, *The Reign of Ideology*.) On the opposite side of the spectrum is an impoverishing aestheticism which effectively denies the ideological or philosophical aspect of a work of literature—denies it by absorbing into a triumphant aesthetic form. It is not the case that the greatest literature eschews ideology. Dostoevsky’s novels contain characters possessed by ideology. Kirillov and Stavrogin in *The Possessed* are ideologues, knowingly exposed in the narrative (without the benefit of an Eagleton), and Dostoevsky himself is a profound ideological writer (with an ideology) as Joseph Frank has shown in his magisterial critical biography. But it becomes a question in considering any particular work whether the aesthetic achievement contains the ideology or whether it is determined by it—put differently, whether the ideological conditions of its making determine the character of a work or whether they remain conditions that can be transcended.

It may be that, as D. H. Lawrence would have it, the story does not give us what the writer intended. “Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.” (Surely, an hyperbole!) This concedes a place to a demystifying criticism. In any event, the critical activity that decides the relationship between aesthetics and ideology in any given work requires first a suspension of ideological commitment on the part of the reader, a responsiveness, yes, *to the work in its own terms* (that disreputable concept) and then perhaps the kind of self-assertion that the newest criticism authorizes. What I am trying to do is mark out something like a middle ground that Himmelfarb calls for. The middle ground would accept not only the new subject matter, but the questions that they provoke, for example, those that I gave as examples of the kinds of questions that figure in current academic discussion. Colonialism in Shakespeare? Complicity with patriarchy in Jane Austen? Imperialism and racism in Conrad? The significance of anti-

Semitism in Eliot? Such questions do not get raised in aesthetic criticism. But these are questions that a scholar or critic would not be required to raise as a matter of course. It is still possible to provide an interesting and persuasive reading of Shakespeare, Austen, Conrad, and Eliot without pressing these questions upon them. Nor should the questions when addressed constrict the kinds of responses one makes. For example, the answer to the question of whether Jane Austen is complicit with patriarchy in the celebration of the marriage of her heroines is not simply yes or no. We need to understand what is meant by the words “complicity” and “patriarchy” as it applies to Austen’s novels. Marriage is an institution so rich in tradition, social meaning, and personal affect that it cannot be simply reduced to masculine authority and abuse. Always fraught with risks of misunderstanding and oppression, marriage in an Austen novel nevertheless appeals to us in its *promesse de bonheur*.

History, society, politics: they are the inevitable part of literary discussion. They diminish our appreciation of the literary work only if they serve one or another ideological agenda. They need to be generously reconceived to include perspectives on the whole political and moral spectrum.

The new subject matters should also benefit from the exercise of an aesthetic discipline that discriminates between works that achieve the condition of art and those that have at best a documentary value. It does not represent progress to conflate literary criticism with an historicism that is really a sociology of literature animated by ideological motives. We need to relearn the value of distinguishing between Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Walker’s *The Color Purple*, between Roth’s *Call It Sleep* and Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky*, between *A Portrait of a Lady* and *An American Tragedy*. Is this elitism? Like domination and hegemony, the word has been charged with pejorative meaning, the effect of which is to prevent us from seeing what would be lost if the faculty of *literary* discrimination disappeared.

NOTES

1. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994).
2. Frank Kermode, “Changing Epochs” in *What’s Happened to the Humanities*, ed. Alvin Kernan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 176. See also Bernard Bergonzi, *Exploding English: Criticism, Theory, Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 100–101.
3. Kermode, 177.
4. John Ellis, *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 94.
5. Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 40–41.
6. Ellis, 65.

7. Ibid, 15.
8. Ibid., 0.
9. M. H. Abrams, "The Transformation of English Studies: 1930-1995" in *Daedalus* (Winter, 1997), 129.
10. Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Beyond Method" in *What's Happened to the Humanities*, 156-157.
11. Denis Donoghue, "The Practice of Reading," in Ibid., 130.
12. Quoted by Donoghue from Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 1-2.
13. Ibid., 131.
14. Donoghue in *What's Happened to the Humanities?*, 138.