

CRITICISM VS. IDEOLOGY

Jeffrey Folks

Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism: The Humanistic Alternative
by James Seaton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014)

James Seaton's *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism: The Humanistic Alternative* is a much-needed reassessment of the two major traditions of Western literary criticism. In the Platonic tradition, Seaton detects a pervasive impulse to arrive at controlling and authoritative ideas. Whether in Plato's condemnation of the poets in *The Republic* or in the Neoplatonic elevation of literature to an unassailable role in cultural debate, the Platonic tradition has tended to separate literature from the ordinary experience of human beings and thereby, all too often, to enlist it in the support of extremism and intolerance. By contrast, those in the Aristotelian tradition have been less willing to view literature in ideological terms. As Seaton writes, they "assume that poetry and literature in general are sources of insight into human life but have no special access to metaphysical or theological knowledge" (28). In his survey of criticism from the ancients to the postmoderns, Seaton explores the lasting significance of this distinction.

What Seaton undertakes is not, as his title might suggest, a study of the entire span of Western critical thought from Plato to the present. Rather, it is a brief review of the two traditions followed by a more detailed assessment of contemporary criticism. In what it attempts, *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism* is an incisive and original work, and while few will agree with all that Seaton has to say, the author's overriding argument is nonetheless compelling. The absolutism that he traces to Plato, and that is associated with the names of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Ezra Pound, Herbert Marcuse, Antonio Gramsci, and the throngs of contemporaries practicing cultural studies, postmodernist theory, and various categories of identity studies, has lent its support to many of the worst facets of Western culture. As Friedrich Hayek pointed out, many of these theorists evince an "atavistic longing after the life of the noble savage, [which] is the main source of the collectivist tradition" (quoted in Seaton, 49). In the modern era, the association of Neoplatonic theories with political extremism, whether on the Left or the Right, is indisputable. Cultural theorists from H.G. Wells to Terry Eagleton have enrolled literature in the cause of a radical

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transformation of capitalism. In postwar America, the influence of the Frankfurt School, and of Theodor Adorno in particular, has been especially deleterious.

By contrast, those whose criticism derives from Aristotle, including Horace, Samuel Johnson, Matthew Arnold, Henry James, Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, Cleanth Brooks, Ralph Ellison, and Marilyn Butler, share an ethos of tolerance, rationality, and realism. Seaton's focus on Wilson and Trilling, and to a lesser extent on Ralph Ellison as critic, is crucial to his argument because it is intended to prove the author's thesis that the humanistic tradition continues to serve as a viable alternative to postmodernist criticism. In Seaton's view, Trilling is one of the chief exemplars of humanistic criticism, and in this respect he is of course correct, although it is necessary to overlook a great deal about Trilling's leftist politics and Freudianism to arrive at this conclusion. The more important point, however, is that Trilling's failings, including much to regret in his late volume *Beyond Culture*, attest the "messiness" of all humanistic criticism, as opposed to the pretention to clarity and finality of critics within the Platonic tradition.

Trilling's career was indeed messy, yet Seaton is correct in insisting that "Trilling was concerned above all with what he called, following Edmund Burke, 'the moral imagination'" (113). In comparison with Trilling's refined and highly informed readings of great works of literature and his practice of what Arnold termed "disinterestedness," later theorists such as Terry Eagleton and Barbara Christian come across as at once pretentious and doctrinaire. Trilling's humanistic reading honors the work of literature by exploring nuances, approving subtleties of expression, and allowing all manner of difference. By contrast, all too often contemporary criticism celebrates what Trilling called the

"adversary culture" within which the literary work, when it receives serious consideration at all, is made to serve as mere illustration for the critic's argument against "hegemony" of various forms.

One would wish, however, that Seaton had cast his net wider than Trilling, Wilson, and Ellison. A much broader range of humanistic criticism exists, even among some whom Seaton too readily dismisses as "far right" (John Crowe Ransom, for example). Not only does humanistic reading occur outside the confines of the liberal intelligentsia; it exists there less compromised by the obligatory bows to correctness and political causes du jour. Such fine humanistic critics as R. P. Blackmur and René Wellek are largely missing from Seaton's discussion, and T. S. Eliot surfaces only in the context of an examination of his views on Christianity and literature. Absent as well are the many important humanistic critics outside Anglo-American writing.

Inevitably, Seaton's overarching scheme presents difficulties when individual cases are discussed. Wilson and Trilling are presented as major figures who adhered to Matthew Arnold's dictum of attentive reading, despite significant lapses into politics, while it would appear that Allen Tate and his fellow agrarians are held to a different standard, presumably because their lapses centered on the less fashionable politics of regionalism. Yet Tate, like Trilling and Wilson, adhered to the humanistic criterion that the critic's primary obligation is to remain attentive to the work itself, or in Arnold's memorable phrase, "to see the object as in itself it really is" (quoted in Seaton, 144). As a political thinker, Tate was flawed beyond repair, but in his close reading of literary texts he was among the most discerning of modern critics. He would no doubt have been as horrified as Seaton himself to encounter a generation of cultural

critics whose “culture” admits nothing from the classics of literature, art, music, philosophy, or any other traditional discipline of learning. However faulty his politics, Tate never failed in the task of close reading.

Unfortunately, for some time now close reading has not been the norm among Western critics, and particularly among those in academe. As Seaton asserts, “The humanistic tradition [has] become invisible to the academic powers that be” (71). Seaton proposes various explanations for the present state of affairs, from simple careerism to the aspiration for power among the intellectual elite. Whatever the cause, and it may have more to do with old-fashioned vanity—the vanity of those who pretend to possess a special access to truth beyond the capacity of ordinary readers—the harmful consequences are apparent. The Platonic tradition is replete with examples of disdain for ordinary virtue, rejection of the value of marriage and family life, and gratuitous assaults on convention of all kinds. In place of the moral consensus that once prevailed, radicals are quick to advocate what Roger Scruton has called the “antagonist culture”: a politicized culture reflexively opposed to the established order of custom and belief. Humanistic critics, on the other hand, “go to literary works for representations of human life that provide bases for qualifying, refining, and clarifying, but not overturning, traditional moral standards” (81).

Seaton’s analysis clarifies just how it is that the antagonist culture has come to rule the critical debate. In this regard, one of the most perceptive sections of *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism* is that which addresses the rhetoric associated with what is termed the “canon” of Western literature. Postmodernists would have one believe that a closed canon of literary works, exclusively the work of “dead white males,” has for

centuries dominated Western civilization to such an extent that the experience of women and minorities was excluded from serious notice. By deploying the rhetoric of the canon in this way, postmodernist critics have been able to undermine the reputation of even the greatest of literary works by charging that they have been complicit in the crimes of inequality or discrimination, and increasingly they have done so without offering a fair reading, or any reading whatsoever, of the works in question.

Yet the assumption that such a canon ever existed turns out to be false. The history of humanistic criticism is filled with examples of authors, including Shakespeare and Milton, whose works have fallen in and out of favor or at different times have attracted favor for quite different reasons. Humanistic critics had never asserted the existence of a static collection of approved texts; the very idea, in fact, is inimical to humanistic thinking. It turns out that the assumption of a fixed canon is an enormous straw man constructed by postmodernists with the object of undermining the influence of Western literature and of Western civilization altogether. Once the Western classics can be stripped of their individuality and represented as an authoritative and repressive canon, they can all the more easily be shelved on the basis of criteria that have nothing to do with literary value.

Humanistic criticism has generally been open-minded toward the consideration of lesser known works and has encouraged varying perspectives on the classics, while criticism associated with the adversary culture has not, a fact that Seaton demonstrates with a revealing analysis of recent casebook criticism of Jane Austen’s *Emma* and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*. What this analysis confirms is that the openness toward experience present among humanistic critics

is sorely lacking among those writing from the perspectives of Marxism, feminism, deconstructivism, Freudianism, and cultural criticism. Among Marxists, feminists, and cultural critics, for example, a programmatic adherence to certain social goals determines the broad terms of assessment in advance. Among deconstructivists, open-mindedness is often taken to mean an endless deferral of meaning, to the extent that one never arrives at stated convictions regarding the nature of the human condition or the purpose of existence. Seaton does an excellent job of clarifying these distinctions and supporting his analysis with convincing examples.

Another valuable contribution of *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism* is its consideration of the relationship of religion and humanistic criticism. Does the imperative of reasoned and open-minded debate rule out the possibility of religious humanism? Contemporary critics such as Anthony Kronman certainly believe so because, as they see it, the introduction of religious concerns into critical discourse would restrict thought to the confines of what one particular religious sensibility approves. "Every religion, even the most tolerant, is fundamentalist," Kronman asserts (quoted in Seaton, 191). The weakness of this argument is evident in that ideas of all kinds, not merely religious ones, are circumscribed and particular.

Those who embrace religion might reply, as did Flannery O'Connor in "The Church and the Fiction Writer," that those whose faith is strong will have no fear of "an honest fictional representation of life," since that honest representation "renews our knowledge that we live in the mystery from which we draw our abstractions." O'Connor's conception of the relationship of religion and art is, of course, a universe apart from the thinking of critics from the adversary culture who assert their own tolerance on any number of

social issues even as they disallow an entire range of spiritual and aesthetic experiences. To rule out perceptions of the most exalted nature while welcoming the influence of political, sociological, and psychological ideas of the crudest sort seems perverse and nonsensical.

To his credit, Seaton identifies the weakness of Kronman's argument against religious humanism in that critic's apparent claim of exclusivity for secular humanism. One would wish, however, that Seaton had devoted more space to the criticism of those whom he has defended in principle, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, G.K. Chesterton, Jacques Maritain, C.S. Lewis, Russell Kirk, Charles Williams, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Thomas Merton, and any number of other major figures in the Christian humanist tradition. In doing so, Seaton would have enriched his discussion considerably by examining some of humanity's most profound reflections on the meaning of life. Seaton's study of the humanistic tradition of criticism carries the reader just to the verge of this realm of ideas.

Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism is among the most thoughtful and informed recent assessments of the present state of literary criticism, and one can only express deep appreciation for the author's painstaking efforts. With the broad learning and keen insight that he brings to the subject, James Seaton has produced a superb analysis of some of the most pressing of critical issues. By locating this debate within the larger context of the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions, he has brought clarity and perspective to what is too often presented as an exclusively modern debate. *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism* is an admirable work of scholarship, all the more so for standing apart from the

divisive welter of politicized argument that now prevails. Making the case for the superiority of humanistic criticism, Seaton brings a refreshing point of view to the study of modern and contemporary literary criticism. By challenging the dominance of the adver-

sary culture and expounding the humanistic alternative, *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism* performs a most valuable service. It is a book that has much to offer to all students of the humanities. †

WASHINGTON'S HEIRS IN MIND AND SPIRIT

Bradley C. S. Watson

Sons of the Father: George Washington and His Protégés, edited by Robert M. S. McDonald (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013)

Given the sheer number of biographies and histories of George Washington and his times—including several excellent examples penned in recent years—the reader can be forgiven for wondering why this crowded field needs to be supplemented by an edited volume. The answer is simple: this book, with no fewer than thirteen contributors, in addition to editor Robert M. S. McDonald, manages to paint a surprisingly coherent portrait of our first president, and it's one we haven't seen before. As the editor notes in his preface, the contributors consider the lives, careers, and characters of younger men whom Washington influenced. The book is therefore a running, if indirect,

commentary on the life, career, and character of Washington himself.

The men portrayed range from the famous—among them Gouverneur Morris and the Marquis de Lafayette—to the obscure, including the likes of Captain Robert Kirkwood. If Americans are really to understand Washington as a model of human excellence—as patriots of various stripes have been wont to do for centuries—it's worth their while to read a series of case studies that dilate on the contemporaneous perceptions, and results, of Washington's example. Or, as McDonald wisely puts it, "Understanding the full range of Washington's leadership, which embraced all shades of persuasion and coercion as well as multiple modes of command and solicitude, requires the examination of his relationships with a particularly broad cast of characters." These examinations are mostly convincing, although they do occasionally lapse into armchair psychology, leaving the reader the

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