

In a corrupt shadow

With *Literature Lost*, John M. Ellis joins a now large group of commentators who are deeply concerned about the prominence of the radical Left in the humanities departments of American universities. The late Allan Bloom, Roger Kimball, Dinesh d'Souza, Richard Bernstein and William A. Henry III have written books on similar themes from a similar ideological standpoint. Within this broader range of conservative resistance to the academic Left, Ellis defines his own distinct niche. He is a capable literary scholar with a specialized interest in German literature, and in previous books he has established respectable credentials in literary theory. Unlike several previous commentators, he is not merely blowing the whistle on the radicals and trying to arouse indignation in the general public. He is speaking primarily to other literature professors and to university administrators. He shrewdly analyses the theoretical structures and rhetorical techniques of his opponents, and, in his own critical perspective, he seeks to exemplify the values of literary humanism, of Enlightenment rationality and of "a liberal democratic way of life".

The strongest aspects of Ellis's work are his affirmations of the normative value of Western cultural achievements and his concomitant attack on radical critiques of race, gender and class. His prose is clear, simple and direct, and he displays an integrity of intellectual character that contrasts appealingly with the sophistry and hypocrisy that so often characterize contemporary critical theory. The weakest aspect of his work is his failure to formulate an adequate alternative framework for understanding literary and cultural phenomena.

As an alternative to the radical cultural criticism he deplores, Ellis can offer nothing more inviting than a return to the way literary study was conducted in the quarter-century after the Second World War. In 1974, he published *The Theory of Literary Criticism: A logical analysis*, and in *Literature Lost* he frequently invokes this earlier work as an authoritative treatment of important theoretical issues. *The Theory of Literary Criticism*, as he himself acknowledged, was heavily dependent on René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature*, which was first published in 1942.

Wellek and Warren offered a comprehensive survey of traditional literary scholarship from a formalist perspective, and Ellis has absorbed their central formalist credo. "The object of literary criticism", he asserts in the earlier book, "is an interpretive hypothesis as to the most general principle of structure which can be abstracted from the combination of linguistic elements in a literary text." The final aim of all criticism is to affirm that the text achieves "coherence" and that it is thus "meaningful".

A critic who adopts this neutrally analytic stance might seem to have escaped from any necessity of committing himself to substantive propositions about the nature and function of literature and its relation to the personal and cultural circumstances in which it is produced and interpreted. But even a formalist must still pose questions as to which "linguistic elements" are worth considering and what relation they bear to one another within the larger system of meanings from which they are drawn. In order to make certain that literary texts are subjected to no extrinsic explanatory structures, Ellis repudiates all system in the selection and organization of formal elements. "The structural properties of highly valued texts may be many and various and must be sought empirically, not speculated about." To seek empirically is to treat each text

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LITERATURE LOST

Social agendas and the corruption of the humanities
262pp. Yale University Press. £17.50.
0 300 06920 0

as a unique set of combinations from an unlimited pool of possible elements. To speculate would be to limit and organize the elements in the pool. In *Literature Lost*, Ellis continues to affirm that "the diversity of theme, content, and viewpoint found in literature is of the essence".

As a form of resistance to the crude impositions of political preoccupations, appeals to "variety" and "diversity" have a clear corrective value. As theoretical propositions about the "essence" of literature, they are patently incoherent. They lead by logical necessity to the repudiation of all general observation, all classification and even all comparison. Ellis accordingly declares that any meaningful statement about a literary text "focuses on the particular qualities" of that text. With each text, the critic should be concerned primarily with "its unique stamp, the individual meaning that makes it unlike any other work". In practice, of course, no critic avoids all generalization and comparison, and the reality of practice in this case gives decisive evidence as to the inadequacy of the theory.

Formalists never actually succeed in avoiding all substantive propositions about the relation of literature to human nature and society. They only avoid explicitly formulating their assumptions as hypotheses and taking intellectual responsibility for them. In the place of explicit theoretical hypotheses, they deploy ad hoc notions from the field of educated commonplace – a hodge-podge of general information, common sense and odd bits of popularized science, religious beliefs, political convictions and literary or philosophical versions of sociology and psychology, versions that are often obsolete.

The targets of Ellis's antagonism are highly vulnerable to criticism based on common information and common sense. For instance, he delineates a standard feminist version of women's history as a tale of gratuitous suppression and passive endurance from which women have only recently and inexplicably awakened to a sense of their wrongs. To illustrate this version, Ellis cites a large array of feminist writings, including works by such prominent figures as Catherine MacKinnon, Peggy McIntosh, Andrea Dworkin, Sandra Harding, Catherine Stimpson and Marilyn French. Taking to heart the historicist dictum "always historicize", Ellis describes the material conditions of women's lives in earlier times, noting the constraints imposed by life expectancy, childbirth and infant mortality, nursing and other factors. Ellis's position on women's issues is moderate and progressive, and in combating the more extreme forms of feminist radicalism, he draws support from women writers who are themselves committed to a broader, more liberal vision of the relations between men and women: Christina Hoff Sommers, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge.

In a chapter devoted to the conflict between political activism and disinterested research, Ellis patiently explains the destructive consequences of erasing the boundaries between these two areas and illustrates his arguments with

instances from the history of modern totalitarianism. Commenting on the Marxist basis of radical political criticism, he incisively identifies the labour theory of value as a central feature of the Marxist conception of economic relations, and he invokes the failure of Communist economies as evidence for the fallacy of this theory. For this topic, rather than citing an array of examples, Ellis offers an intensive critique of the works of one major critic, Fredric Jameson. As Ellis explains, Jameson is "arguably the most influential of all American literary critics", and he can thus serve as a representative case.

In a chapter on the characteristic logical techniques of political correctness, Ellis lucidly analyses the sophisticated device through which various polar opposites are turned into absolutes



A figure of Commerce in the Library of Congress, Washington DC, holding a sailing ship and a steam engine, symbols of America's productivity; from *The Library of Congress: The art and architecture of the Thomas Jefferson Building*, edited by John Y. Cole and Henry Hope Reed (320pp. Norton. £45.0 393 04563 3)

and then collapsed into one another: law and force, reason and power, objectivity and subjectivity, consensual sex and rape. To illustrate these techniques, Ellis cites some of the feminists discussed in a previous chapter but devotes more concentrated attention to two major theorists, Michel Foucault and Stanley Fish.

From his broadest historical perspective, Ellis argues that radical repudiations of the Western tradition depend on utopian ideals affiliated with "Rousseau's fantasy of a blissful state of primitive innocence before the ravages of civilization". This insight provides him with an excellent analytic angle on the politics of the academic

Left, but he does not recognize that his own alternative vision of man and nature is equally partial and equally susceptible to empirical criticism. "Rousseau", he tells us, "had things backward." Man is not good and civilization bad. Quite the contrary. Man is bad and civilization good. Close your Rousseau; open your Hobbes. Or, if you would prefer more recent antecedents, go to J. S. Mill's essay "Nature", T. H. Huxley's "Evolution and Ethics", or the ethical essays of contemporary sociobiologists such as Richard Alexander, Richard Dawkins, George C. Williams, or Donald Symons. Ellis himself cites none of these antecedents, and he thus gives us to suppose that his own anthropological myth is merely the voice of educated reason.

Whenever Ellis can identify a historical antecedent and declare that radical critics are unaware of it, he seems to feel that he has made a decisive point against them. The gambit is weak, but against a theorist who disclaims all theoretical preconception, it has considerably more force. If Ellis were to acknowledge the hypothetical character of the theory of human nature and society under which he is operating, he would realize that this hypothesis has to be defended against alternative concepts, not just against Rousseau's fantasies, but also, and with more difficulty, against Darwin's argument that human beings have evolved as social animals and that their principles of morality and justice are grounded in innate psychological characteristics. (More recent expositions of this thesis include James Q. Wilson's *The Moral Sense*, Matt Ridley's *The Origins of Virtue* and Larry Arnhart's *Darwinian Natural Right*.)

Ellis treats of all contemporary criticism as exclusively or predominantly political in character. Deconstruction comes in only as a facilitator of radical politics, and Freudianism is shunted off to the side as "never more than a minority cult within the larger profession". A student who tried to take Ellis's book as an introduction to current criticism would therefore be sadly bewildered by the arcane intertwinings of these three doctrinal lines. Ellis has reduced current criticism to that aspect he can most easily comprehend and oppose, and this reduction perhaps helps to explain why he does not mention other important critics of postmodernism, such as M. H. Abrams and Frederick Crews, who are not primarily political in orientation.

Ellis does not himself recognize the need for an explanatory framework independent of any particular text, and he fails to realize that in their combined effect the three chief elements of current criticism – deconstruction, Marxism and Freudianism – constitute a comprehensive explanatory system. Freudianism provides an explanatory apparatus for individual identity and sexual and family relations, Marxism for social history, and deconstruction for the cosmic nature of things. Together, these three forms of explanation cover the whole field of human experience, and each also promises to provide a key to deep forces that have been repressed and disguised – for the sake of psychic economy, class interest, or rational order. They seem to offer access to a secret interpretative code, and they thus constitute a functional facsimile of a critical perspective.

I agree with Ellis that "what now passes for theory is a degraded and corrupt shadow of what theory should be". But if we are to move beyond this shadow, we shall have to do more than try to embarrass critics into turning back to the "cheerfully disorganized" paradise of traditional literary study. We shall instead have to provide an explanatory framework that incorporates more adequate versions of psychology, social history, epistemology and natural philosophy.

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