In a corrupt shadow

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John M. Ellis

LITERATURE LOST
Social agendas and the corruption of the humanities
250pp Yale University Press, £17.50
0 300 069520

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 present in literature is of the essence." As a form of resistance to the crude impositions of political preoccupations, appeals to "variety" and "diversity" are more realistic as a value. As theoretical propositions about the "essence" of literature, they are patently incorrect. They lead to the repudiation of all general observation, all categorization 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 generalizations and analogies, and the reality of practice in this case gives decisive evidence as to the inadequacy of the theory.

Formalism 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 boggy-god of information, common sense and odd bits of popularized science, religious beliefs, political convictions and literary or philosophical values of sociology, anthropology, and psychology, varieties that are often obsolete.

The targets of Ellis's angst 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 glorious sufferance and passive endurance from which women have only recently and irrevocably awakened to a sense of dignity and justice. To Ellis, citizenship means a large array of feminist writings, including works by such prominent figures as Catharine MacKinnon, Peggy McIntosh, Andrea Dworkin, Sandra Harding, Catherine Stein, Marilyn French. Taking to heart the historian criticum "always historicize," Ellis describes the material conditions of women's lives in earlier times, noting the constraints imposed by life expectancy, childbirth and childhood mortality, and other factors. Overall, Ellis's position on women's issues is moderate and progressive, and in combating the more extreme views, Ellis is realist radical to the true support from women writers who are themselves committed to a broader, more liberal vision of the relationship between men and women. Catherine H. Hoff Sommers, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Elise Fawcett and Nonette Keoegh are among those who are represented to the critic 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 economists 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 sociological device through which various political opponents are turned into absolutes, but he does not recognize that his own alternative vision of man and nature is equally partial and equally extreme. "Rousseau," he tells us, "had things backward." Max is not good and civilization bad. Quite the contrary, Max is unmediated 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 prejudice. Whenever Ellis can identify a historical antecent 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 hypothetico-critical 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. One can only agree with the difficulty, against Fiske's argument that human beings have evolved as social animals and that as such the logics of behavior are grounded in innate psychological characteristics. (More recent expositions of this thesis include Daniel G. Wilson's The Moral Sense, Matt Ridley's The Origins of Virtue and Larry Arnhart's Darwinian Natural Right.)

Ellis's critics dismiss his political criticism as exclusively or predominantly political in character. Deconstruction comes in only as a facilitator of radical politics, and Postmodernism is aligned 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 currently be badly 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 their combined effort of the three chief elements of current criticism—deconstruction, Marxism and Freudianism—enlarge our explanatory system. Freudianism provides an explanatory apparatus for individual identity and social history, Marxism provides a historical interpretation of social history, and deconstruction for the cosmic nature of things. Together, these three forms of explication 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 personal narrative.

I agree with Ellis that "what now passes for theory is a degraded and corrupt shadow of what theory should be" and that his critique of this shadow, we shall have to do more than try to embitter critics into turning back to the "cheerleaders" and, in order to raise the level of criticallayuiary. We shall instead have to provide an explanatory framework that incorporates more than the condition dependent on uranian ideals affiliated with "Rousseau"'s fantasy of a blissful state of primitive innocence before the ravages of civilization. This might provide 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 extreme. "Rousseau," he tells us, "had things backward." Max is not good and civilization bad. Quite the contrary, Max is unmediated 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 prejudice. Whenever Ellis can identify a historical antecent 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 hypothetico-critical 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. One can only agree with the difficulty, against Fiske's argument that human beings have evolved as social animals and that as such the logics of behavior are grounded in innate psychological characteristics. (More recent expositions of this thesis include Daniel G. Wilson's The Moral Sense, Matt Ridley's The Origins of Virtue and Larry Arnhart's Darwinian Natural Right.)

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