
Reviews

A Commonsense Approach to Literary Criticism

Eric Adler

University of Maryland

Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism: The Humanistic Alternative, by James Seaton. *New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 236 pp. \$103 cloth, \$29.99 paperback.*

Academic literary criticism has gone off the deep end, its practitioners besotted with radical politics. So contends the late James Seaton (1944-2017) in his book *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism*. As Seaton himself recognized, by no means was he alone in harboring this view. During the course of the so-called academic culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, traditionalistic critics of the humanities railed against what they perceived to be the politicization of English departments in the United States. John Ellis's polemic *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities* (1997), for example, argues that literature scholars have abandoned

earnest concern for forthright criticism in favor of untutored political grandstanding. Thus, thought Ellis, did such professors undermine the study of the humanities and endanger our cultural heritage.

But Seaton differs from other traditionalistic culture warriors in proposing a novel intellectual framework for this state of affairs. In his estimably wide-ranging study, he discerns three traditions of Western literary criticism, all inaugurated by the ancients. Seaton attributes the first to Plato, although he makes clear that this supposedly Platonic conception actually stems solely from the *Republic*, rather than Plato's more ambiguous—and incongruous—estimations of poetry's value in the *Ion* and the *Symposium*. In the *Republic*, Plato's Socrates famously banished poetry from his ideal state,

ERIC ADLER is an Associate Professor of Classics at the University of Maryland, College Park.

contending that it lies about the gods and in general purveys false notions. Seaton stresses that those who follow in this "Platonic" tradition despise and devalue literature, subordinating it to various ideological and theoretical worldviews. He numbers contemporary devotees of postmodern cultural studies among this Platonic camp, despite the hostility with which such critics would view Plato's metaphysics.

Seaton labels the second camp "Neoplatonic." To him, Neoplatonists such as Plotinus "believe that art and literature properly understood can lead adepts to spiritual heights from which the concerns of everyday life would be revealed as mere trivialities" (2). "Critical schools that are Neoplatonic in their tendency," he continues, "value great literature, especially poetry, as a vehicle for moral and/or spiritual transcendence of conventional common sense" (ibid.). Seaton includes romantics such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Ralph Waldo Emerson in this group, and perceives that such disparate figures as John Stuart Mill and Allen Tate were Neoplatonic sympathizers.

He names the third and final school of literary criticism "humanistic," and views it as the wellspring of Aristotle's *Poetics*. "The humanistic tradition," Seaton avers, "follows Aristotle in paying due respect (although not unquestioning allegiance) to common sense while turning to literature for insight into human life rather than knowledge about the gods or for access to a

higher spiritual realm" (ibid.). Seaton considers critics such as Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, and Henry James "humanists." He stresses that followers of the humanistic tradition pitch their criticism to general readers, trusting the good sense of non-experts to intuit the value of great works of literature.

As Seaton views matters, the problem with contemporary literary criticism in the United States is that "versions of the Platonic tradition have been dominant in the academy since the 1960s, whereas, in the earlier part of the twentieth century, partisans of modernism offered a secular version of the Neoplatonic tradition in defending the modern masterpieces" (3). Seaton believes that the spirit of humanistic criticism lives on in magazines such as *The New York Review of Books*, *The Weekly Standard*, and *The Nation*, but laments its near-complete disappearance in American colleges and universities. Thus his monograph plumps for the Aristotelian, humanistic view, which skirts a middle course between the "Platonic" dismissal of literature's value and the "Neoplatonic" penchant to over-promise by stressing "that great poets have privileged access to a spiritual realm unattainable by reason" (28).

In the course of seven chapters, Seaton analyzes these three approaches to literary criticism, and attempts to demonstrate the superiority of the humanistic school. To this end, for example, he expends much energy criticizing the latest iteration of *The Norton Anthology of*

Theory and Criticism, which Seaton sees as embodying an unbecoming postmodern Platonism. Seaton also includes much praise for Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, and Ralph Ellison, whom he counts among the champions of humanism. These critics, regardless of their outlook on political and social affairs, never subordinated literature to pet ideologies. *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism's* final chapter concludes with an appeal to revive the humanistic tradition. This will require, Seaton states, "an awareness that one does not already have all the answers, a Socratic awareness of ignorance very different from the dogmatic skepticism prevalent in the academy today" (197).

Even for those who disagree with Seaton's take on literary criticism, there is much to esteem in this book. Seaton calls on scholars to compose broad, accessible works that will appeal to the interested lay reader, and his book provides a dramatic and welcome illustration of this approach. *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism* wears its learning lightly, but the monograph is obviously the result of a lifetime's worth of extensive and careful reading. In an academic environment well known for producing reader-proof exegeses of minute arcana, it is refreshing to find a book that dilates on everything from Horace's *Ars poetica* to Dwight Macdonald's distinctions between "masscult" and "midcult." Much of Seaton's book also steers clear of overheated rhetoric. Traditionalistic critiques of Ameri-

can higher learning often degenerate into fire-breathing jeremiads, leaving readers troubled about the prospect of overstatement. Seaton's prose, by contrast, typically lacks the agitated verve of such tracts, and demonstrates the author's ability to criticize writers whose ideologies seem more amenable to his own.

Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism, however, suffers from some defects, which will likely hamper the book's persuasiveness. Seaton's tripartite categorization of literary criticism, though thought-provoking, has drawbacks. The very capaciousness of Seaton's categories may cause confusion. How useful a descriptor is "Neoplatonism" if it can reasonably encompass such vastly dissimilar critics as William Wordsworth, Philip Rahv, and Allan Bloom? Moreover, Seaton's designation of postmodern literary critics as "Platonic" may appear tendentious, insofar as the vast majority of such critics would undoubtedly reject the label and would dismiss the idea that their work is tantamount to the *Republic's* banishment of poets.

This hints at another problem. Throughout most of its chapters, *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism* possesses a refreshingly even tone. But certain topics appear to have gotten Seaton's dander up, and in places the monograph becomes more pugnacious. This seems most pronounced in Seaton's treatment of the *Norton Anthology*, which the author roundly pillories. Cultural studies gurus, Seaton opines, hope to "eradicate the past" in the manner of

“Mao’s cultural revolution, Cambodia under Pol Pot, and North Korea under Kim Il-Sung and his son” (71). This polemical tone undercuts the book’s reasonable criticisms of some literary critics’ political monomania. More skeptical readers may wonder whether Seaton dislikes cultural studies’ hyper-focus on the ideological aspects of literature or whether he is actually more troubled by the specific political program pushed in such works. Seaton’s intriguing explication of the Platonic branch of literary criticism ably demonstrates that subjecting literary works to *any* political litmus test is reductive and unbecoming. This point would come across more effectively without Seaton’s occasional lapses into political partisanship.

Another shortcoming of *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism* has nothing to do with ideology. In the course of his monograph, Seaton never defines what he means by “humanism.” Given the contours of his analysis of “humanistic” literary criticism, one quickly gathers that Seaton does not have in mind the intellectual and pedagogical program of the first self-proclaimed humanists—the Renaissance humanists. Seaton, after all, deems Aristotle the founder of the humanistic tradition. But the word *humanism* is of Latin—not Greek—origin, and Italian humanists such as Coluccio Salutati and Leonardo Bruni looked back to Cicero’s conception of the *studia humanitatis* when promoting their vision of an ideal pedagogical program. Although Greek views of

education obviously influenced Cicero (Aristotle’s prominently among them), it is to the ancient Romans that the original humanists directly turned.

In his Martin Classical Lectures at Oberlin College, the famous Renaissance scholar Paul Kristeller observed that the term *humanism* “has become the source of much philosophical and historical confusion.” He lamented that “In present discourse, almost any kind of concern with human values is called ‘humanistic,’ and consequently a great variety of thinkers, religious or anti-religious, scientific or antiscientific, lay claim to what has become a rather elusive label of praise.”¹ Seaton’s disinclination to define such a crucial term for his study lays him open to such a charge of imprecision.

Of course, Seaton is by no means alone in using the adjective *humanistic* more expansively, and he is in good company when he identifies a spirit of humanism in the thought of Aristotle. Irving Babbitt, who makes a few brief appearances in *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism*, similarly characterized the great philosopher from Stagira as an essential exemplar of humanism. But familiarity with Babbitt’s oeuvre demonstrates that he saw humanism *both* as a specific historical and cultural movement rooted in the Renaissance reaction to authors from Greco-Roman antiquity *and* as a broader intellectual and moral program—one

¹ Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 8.

that he went to great lengths to define and defend in his voluminous writings. Although he offers some useful correctives to widespread misunderstandings about Babbitt, Seaton would have been well served to delve more deeply into Babbitt's carefully articulated rationale for the so-called New Humanism. Instead, Seaton disparages Babbitt as a moralist who lacked interest in the aesthetical qualities of literature.²

Nor is this the lone example of Seaton's underestimation of Babbitt's work. After reflecting on *Education's End* (2007), Anthony Kronman's monograph praising the Great Books tradition, Seaton concludes that "A revival of Kronman's 'secular humanism' is perhaps only slightly more likely than a return to Babbitt's 'New Humanism'" (197). Careful consideration of the post-modern "Platonists" currently ruling the roost in American English departments suggests otherwise. In *Education's End* Kronman defends the Occidental focus of his ideal curriculum thus: "The works and ideas of the West's writers and artists are internally connected. They refer to each other, commending, correcting, disapproving, and building on

² Seaton is correct to maintain that Babbitt underplayed the aesthetical elements in literary works. But Babbitt's writings are not oblivious to such matters. See, for example, Babbitt's address "The Problem of Style in a Democracy," published in his posthumous collection *Spanish Character and Other Essays* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1940); republished as *Character and Culture: Essays on East and West*, with a new introduction by Claes G. Ryn (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1995).

the works of those who have gone before. It is this internally continuous conversation that the humanities have traditionally studied. By contrast, the works of the world's great civilizations can, with few exceptions, be gathered together only in an external fashion. Each of these civilizations has the same internal connectedness that characterizes that of the West. But the works and ideas of different civilizations can for the most part only be related externally, by setting them up as exhibits for an observer to admire."³

Babbitt, though writing around a century before Kronman, was a much more ecumenical thinker. His identification of humanism with a particular intellectual outlook compelled him to push this tradition far beyond its Western confines. In *Democracy and Leadership*, for example, Babbitt wrote: "One is tempted to say, indeed, that, if there is such a thing as the wisdom of the ages, a central core of normal human experience, this wisdom is, on the religious level, found in Buddha and Christ and, on the humanistic level, in Confucius and Aristotle. These teachers may be regarded both in themselves and in their influences as the four outstanding figures in the spiritual history of mankind."⁴ As far as Babbitt was concerned, three of the four quintessential exemplars of re-

³ Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 168.

⁴ Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), 163.

ligious and humanistic insight were of Eastern origin. Whose vision—Kronman’s or Babbitt’s—has a better chance of persuading the identity-focused denizens of the postmodern university that we have much to learn from the humanistic tradition? Babbitt’s capacious conception wins hands-down.⁵

We would be remiss, however, to harp on the (few) limitations of *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism*, given the book’s pervasive

⁵ It must also be noted that Seaton’s book, with the exception of the few ancient figures discussed, deals only with English-language literary critics. Babbitt’s work had a far wider purview.

and important virtues. In a monograph that praises a commonsense approach to literary criticism, Seaton offers a great deal of common sense of his own. Although scholars would be foolish to ignore the political and social character of works of literature, the one-sided fixation Seaton identifies undervalues humanistic study, turning English professors into political scientists *manqué*. His broad and accessible book is a model for the future: if it wins the attention it deserves, *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism* can encourage academic literary critics to follow a much more salubrious path.