

REVIEW

What Is Fiction For? Literary Humanism Restored, by Bernard Harrison. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015, 622 pp., \$85.00 hardbound, \$35.00 paperback.

The Truth of Fiction

Edward Alexander

Published online: 24 July 2015
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I once mentioned in a school-report, how a young man in one of our English training colleges having to paraphrase the passage in *Macbeth* beginning, “Can’st thou not minister to a mind diseased?” turned this line into, “Can you not wait upon the lunatic?” And I remarked what a curious state of things it would be, if every pupil of our national schools knew, let us say,

that the moon is two thousand one hundred and sixty miles in diameter, and thought at the same time that a good paraphrase for “Can’st thou not minister to a mind diseased?” was, “Can you not wait upon the lunatic?” If one is driven to choose, I think I would rather have a young person ignorant about the moon’s diameter, but aware that “Can you not wait upon the lunatic?” is bad, than a young person whose education had been such as to manage things the other way.

—Matthew Arnold
“Literature and Science”

In his combative yet sweetly reasonable new book, the English analytic philosopher and literary critic Bernard Harrison attempts to throw back the assault on literary humanism that has been underway for at least half a century. Harrison is a philosopher who described himself, in 2006, as having been trained in “habitual skepticism, bitterly close reading, and aggressive contentiousness contributed by forty years in the amiable shark pool of analytic philosophy.”¹ One of his colleagues, the philosopher Abigail Rosenthal, has said that “Bernard

Edward Alexander is professor emeritus of English at the University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98105; eaengl@u.washington.edu. He is the author of *Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill* (Columbia University Press, 1965), *Arnold, Ruskin, and the Modern Temper* (Ohio State University Press, 1973), *Irving Howe: Socialist, Critic, Jew* (Indiana University Press, 1998), and *Lionel Trilling and Irving Howe: And Other Stories of Literary Friendship* (Transaction Publishers, 2009), among other works. His most recent book is *Jews against Themselves* (Transaction Publishers, 2015).

¹Bernard Harrison, *The Resurgence of Anti-Semitism: Jews, Israel, and Liberal Opinion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 37.

Harrison is the living answer to my frequently voiced query: Why don't these brilliantly honed minds in analytic philosophy do something useful with that training?"² Harrison's is an encyclopedic mind, in the Baconian (and Newmanite) sense of "circle learning," the arts and sciences deemed essential to a liberal education. *What Is Fiction For? Literary Humanism Restored* brings the disciplines of literature and philosophy to bear on a single subject: the necessity of humane letters in education, the capacity of literature to transform and elevate the mind.

Harrison knows that in certain respects hostility to literature has a very long history. Plato banished, via Socrates, the poets from his republic because they are liars, because they outrageously stimulate the passions, and because "there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry." As Harrison observes, with characteristic verve and wit: "The common reader has at most two, at best half-filled, Molotov cocktails to toss at the Platonic tank crunching down the middle of the street. One of them is labeled 'character'; the other, 'language.'"

The book's declared purpose is to show how "literature, which consists of nothing more than the description of imaginary events and situations, offers insight into the workings of 'human reality' or 'the human

condition'; [and how] mere words illuminate something that we call 'reality.'" But to do so Harrison must identify the diverse general sources of the modern assault on humanism and also its multitudinous battery of accusations against literature. First came (or so it might seem) the assault on behalf of both the physical and social sciences, embodied in C.P. Snow's 1959 Rede lecture at Cambridge on *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, a lecture that prompted a famous and fierce reply by the cantankerous Puritan F.R. Leavis, which in turn prompted a still more famous and also more disinterested essay in 1962 by Lionel Trilling.³ As the biographer of Matthew Arnold, Trilling pointed out that the scientists' assault on literature was older than either of the English combatants seemed to know: Matthew Arnold had composed "Literature and Science" as the Rede lecture at Cambridge in 1882. (Snow's assault was recently renewed by the philosopher Gregory Currie, who argued in "Literature and the Psychology Lab" that experimental psychology, not literature, sheds light on the causality of human action.)⁴

³Lionel Trilling, "Science, Literature, and Culture: A Comment on the Leavis-Snow Controversy," *Commentary*, June 1, 1962, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/science-literature-culture-a-comment-on-the-leavis-snow-controversy/>.

⁴Gregory Currie, "Literature and the Psychology Lab," *Times Literary Supplement*, August 31, 2011, <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article765921.ec>.

²Abigail Rosenthal, letter to author, April 8, 2015.

The scientists' assault was followed by the political assault against the New Critical stress (originating with I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot, amplified by Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren) on the text itself as the sole source of insight. The reaction against "the reactionaries" came first from the Marxist Left and then from the New Historicists—postcolonialists, feminists, gay and queer theorists, etc.—and in *their* wake came the attacks from a diverse range of theorists, whom Joseph Epstein has likened to adept players of ping-pong without the ball: deconstructionists, Lacanians, Foucauldians, ad infinitum. All warriors of this battalion, according to Harrison, are currently "lumped under the enigmatic label 'postmodernism,'...particularly bewildering in its complexity and diversity to the bulk of would-be humanist readers." He also gives special, detailed attention to (non-deconstructionist) literary critics such as Stanley Fish and Frank Kermode, who allege that literature distracts us from the "real business of living" by allowing us to enjoy the phantom reassurances and resolutions of fantasy.

It should be noted that these assaults have been directed at literary humanism in general, and not only at the genre of fiction, which is Harrison's primary concern. Indeed, some of the most strenuous defenders of literature

have considered the novel a distinctly inferior form. Arnold, for example, once haughtily responded to a letter asking whether a certain novel of unknown authorship had been written by one of his relatives that, "No Arnold could write a novel." (He was proved wrong by his niece Mary Arnold Ward, who in 1888—the year of his death—published the very influential *Robert Elsmere*, which quickly sold over a million copies.)

In the epigraph to this review, Matthew Arnold's quotation from *Macbeth* made language the key to his defense of "humane letters" and rejection of his friend Thomas Huxley's call for a primarily scientific education suited to the new scientific age. In this respect, as in many others, Arnold foreshadowed Harrison's scintillating apologia for literature in general and fiction in particular. Language (on which subject he has written several books) is one of Harrison's six claims to support the conviction that literary study contributes special kinds of understanding of the human condition, distinct from those proffered by the social sciences or even other branches of the humanities. "The value of literature, whether as illuminating or as constituting or reconstituting the human world, lies in its relation to language. Literary writing of the highest order directs, upon the language in which our everyday lives are conducted, a scrutiny more

searching than is directed by any other form of writing, renewing and renovating the ‘language of the tribe’ by constantly sharpening and refining our sense of its implications and possibilities.” The humanities must also, according to Harrison, convey truths about the human condition that are independent of other branches of university study in the creation of “culture,” and carry readers into other, alien cultures, other ages, and other minds. But language remains the sole distinguishing possession of the creative writer. It is the equivalent of the successful scientist’s capacity “to invent ways of empirically investigating nature by the light of mathematics. Or the successful philosopher’s capacity to invent and evaluate abstract arguments.”

In support of this claim, Harrison invokes the authority of a writer who may now be as powerful an influence on his conception of the relation between literature and philosophy as Ludwig Wittgenstein has been. This is the novelist and essayist Cynthia Ozick, whom John Sutherland has called “the most accomplished and graceful literary stylist of our time.”⁵ Harrison quotes from her afterword to a 2004 reprint of her 1966 novel *Trust*:

When I began *Trust* close to fifty years ago, ambition meant what

⁵John Sutherland, “The Girl Who Would Be James,” review of *Quarrel and Quandary*, by Cynthia Ozick, Books, *New York Times*, October 8, 2000, <http://nyti.ms/1IvVaCS>.

James Joyce had pronounced it to be, in a mantra that has inflamed generations: *silence, exile, and cunning*. Silence and exile were self-explanatory: the novelist was to be shut away in belief—self-belief, perhaps—and also in the monkish conviction that Literature was All. But cunning implied something more than mere guile. It hinted at power, power sublime and supernal, the holy power of language and its cadences—the sentence, the phrase, and, ultimately, primordially, the word: the germ of being.⁶

This passage becomes for Harrison a touchstone for discerning literary excellence, a nodal point in illustrating his ideas through luminous readings of (among other texts) *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Our Mutual Friend*, and the “Holocaust” novels of Aharon Appelfeld, in whose works he seeks out “Ozick-friendly account[s] of meaning.”⁷

⁶Cynthia Ozick, afterword, *Trust* (New York: New American Library, 1966; New York: First Mariner Books, 2004), 645.

⁷Harrison’s magisterial essay on the perennially contested interpretations of Swift’s relation to the Houyhnhnms shows how the text requires readers to resolve a paradox: it is written by “a prose stylist of the highest order,” yet the prose in which Gulliver expresses his admiration of the super-rational horses “is systematically flawed—shot through with unresolved contradictions and aporias.” (If you thought that literary minds as brilliant as Irvin Ehrenpreis, Wayne Booth, Samuel Monk, and George Orwell had said all that needed saying about Book IV of *Gulliver’s Travels*, Harrison will prove you wrong.) His discussion of *Our Mutual Friend* locates the core of that complex novel in the way that Dickens relates the language of his characters to the underlying structures of social practice that give meaning to our words.

But one must remember that Ozick was in 2004 recalling what she had believed about literature in general and fiction in particular in the middle of the last century. Here is what she said on the same subject in 1980:

If, years ago when I was in graduate school, someone had told me that it was possible to be steeped in Joseph Conrad and at the same time be a member of the “National Council” of a world-wide terror organization [the Palestine Liberation Organization, led by Yasser Arafat] I would have doubted this with all the passion for civilization and humane letters that a naïve and literature-besotted person can evidence. I know better now. Professor Said has read *Heart of Darkness*, and it has not educated his heart.⁸

Said had published his doctoral dissertation on Conrad in 1966. By 1980 he was a member of the Palestine National Council (and in 1999 would become president of the Modern Language Association). Said adored “the microscopic grasp that Arafat has of politics, not as grand strategy, in the pompous Kissingerian

sense, but as daily, even hourly movement of people and attitudes, in the Gramscian or Foucauldian sense.”⁹ Said’s double career as literary scholar and ideologue of terrorism had become for Ozick a powerful argument against belief in the corrective power of humanistic values.

Literature has not only the power to transform and elevate the mind, but also to damage it. Readers of *Academic Questions* know better than most that the vast bedlam which the American and British universities have now become is much more the hideous progeny of literature than of science departments. The fantasy of revolution (and the hoped for dictatorial reign of Gender, Class, and Race) is in evidence at every convention of the American Studies Association or the MLA. There the tenured guerrillas who hate literature (as both product and instrument of oppression) but are too comfortable and lazy to apply for job retraining put their untidy passions on display.

But let us not despair prematurely. Arnold, for one, saw, paradoxically, reason for hope in the main doctrine of his scientific adversaries: “And so we at last find, it seems, we find flowing in favour of the humanities the natural and necessary stream of things, which seemed against them

⁸Cynthia Ozick, “A Rejoinder,” to responses, including Said’s, to her essay, “Carter and the Jews: An American Political Dilemma,” *New Leader*, September 8, 1980, 14.

⁹Edward Said, “Meeting with the Old Man: The Elusive Yasir Arafat Interviewed in Tunis,” *Interview* 18, no. 12 (December 1988): 12.

when we started. The ‘hairy quadruped furnished with a tail and pointed ears, probably arboreal in his habits’ [Darwin’s description of our original ancestor], this good fellow carried hidden in his nature, apparently,

something destined to develop into a necessity for humane letters. Nay, more; we seem finally to be even led to the further conclusion that our hairy ancestor carried in his nature, also, a necessity for Greek.”¹⁰

¹⁰Matthew Arnold, “Literature and Science,” *Discourses in America* (1882; London: Macmillan and Co., 1885), 135.