

## BOOK REVIEWS

**James Seaton, *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism : The Humanistic Alternative* , Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp.225.**

Literature is surely not science, nor is literary criticism a *scientific* inquiry into the nature and function of literature on the basis of any universally agreed standards of proofs and empirical methods. Literary value cannot be judged in terms of scientific or empirical objectivism, but in terms of human values. “Literary criticism”, the author writes, “may be seen as a continuing conversation among three traditions, two of them originating with Plato- the Platonic and the Neoplatonic – and the third, founded by Plato’s student Aristotle which may be called the Aristotelian or humanistic tradition.” (pp.1-2) Literature is surely not theology to offer any account of the divine beings or ways for any religious / spiritual devotion. Instead, it offers an insight into the states of human life itself, and again that insight is not accessible to any scientific or empirical experiment.

The humanistic tradition, as the author observes, begins with Aristotle, revived in the Renaissance, proceeding on through Pope, Johnson, Arnold, James, Edmund Wilson, Trilling and Ralph Ellison. The book contains seven chapters: The first offers an account of the origin of the two rival traditions- Plato and the Neoplatonists on one side and Aristotle on the other. The second chapter argues that the Romantics and some of the modernists followed the Neoplatonists. The third chapter is on the contemporary critical waves called “cultural studies”, “cultural theory” and “critical theory”. The author offers an original and bold account of these two wings in an excellently concise form. The fourth chapter offers an account of Aristotle and the humanist tradition—from Horace to New Criticism, and the fifth one devoted to Edmond Wilson and Leonel Trilling. The sixth chapter highlights the notion of popular culture that he traces in the Western Critical tradition much before the advent of “cultural studies” in academic circle, but of course without treating art and literature as data for sociology. The claim for “apostles of equality”, as the advocates of the post-colonial, Frankfurt school and “cultural studies” make for themselves, has been rejected by James Seaton. It Arnold pleaded for the notion of culture as the best that has been said and known, Eliot defined culture as the way of life of an entire society that “includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people”. Besides, there are Yeats, Orwell, Marsha Bayles and many others who appreciated (mass) popular culture including all forms of artistic activities. In this context Seaton discusses Ralph Ellison’s notion of democracy. The final chapter correlates literary criticism, the Humanities and liberal education, particularly in the American context.

Seaton’s critique of the contemporary cultural studies including critical theory and cultural theory that originate in New Marxism, Derridean deconstructionism and Foucauldian anthropology is very sharp and bold. The socialist base of Edward Said’s interpretation of the colonial prejudice in treating the Oriental culture exposes the political stunt of the West put under the garb of democracy. In addition, Derrida’s theory of difference, differance, deconstruction and dissemination, and Foucault’s

theory of power have given rise to several modes of literary studies such as feminism, racism, classism, gender approach, postcolonial and subaltern perspectives, almost all of them constituting the genus of cultural studies. Cultural studies, writes Hayden White, “is a neo-Marxist activity”. Seaton considers the *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* in its two editions (2010) as the canon for contemporary criticism acknowledged by the departments of English and cultural studies. This anthology sets the standard for studying literature as a cultural artifact:

Literary texts, like other art works, are neither more nor less important than any other cultural artifact or practice. Keeping the emphasis on how cultural meanings are produced, circulated and consumed the investigator will focus on art or literature insofar as such works connect with broader social factors, not because they possess some intrinsic interest or special aesthetic value. The subsumption of literature into the broader cultural field explains the wide spread perception that cultural studies poses a threat to literary criticism. (NATC, 2478)

This Marxist attitude is clearly in opposition to the humanistic view of Romanticism and that of the subsequent writers of the Victorian and post-Victorian modernist age: “Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all, and that which, if blighted, denies the fruit and the seed and withholds from the barren world the nourishment and the succession of the scions of the tree of life.” (Shelley, NATC, 135). This humanistic view was subsequently echoed by Arnold, Leavis, Pound and Read. Leavis writes, “For not only poetry, but literature and art in general, are becoming more specialized; The process is implicit in the process of modern civilization. The important works of today, unlike those of the past, tend to appeal only at the highest level of response, which only a tiny minority can reach, instead of at a number of levels...” (NATC, 213-14) Read’s opposition to industrialization is clear: “I despise this foul industrial epoch– not only the plutocracy which it has raised to power, but also the industrial proletariat which it has drained from the land and proliferated in hovels of indifferent brick” (NATC, 58-59).

Seaton’s scrutiny of the sources and nature of critical theory exposes the self-contradictory standing of this movement. Plato is condemned for his logocentrism and foundationalism, but on the same footing the cultural (critical/ Frankfurt School) critics express their strong Platonic prejudice when they prefer theory to literature; while building up an utopia of republic they “seek a society in which theoretical reasons will rule, unconstrained by the customs or ‘prejudices’ of the past conveyed so seductively by novels, plays and poem. Many see their theorizing as part of ‘a movement to eradicate gender, race, class and sexual prejudice’...” (Seaton, 54) Such a movement does not allow any room for Homer, Dante, Keats, Austin and James. The self-contradiction involved is only self-evident when the critical theorist is skeptical about

“norms” (a postmodernist view), but at the same time is “ethical”, i.e. some norms must be affirmed, without answering which norms. Seaton refers to Barbara Christian’s critique of the critical theorists who are no more concerned with literature but with their critics’ tests, with linguistic jargons, mechanical analyses of language, graphs, algebraic equations and gross generalizations about culture.

The ‘Theorists’ “are contemptuous of common sense, derive radical cultural and political change, and are confident that theory rather than literature provides the key to understanding human life”. (Seaton, 59) Although this statement sounds an echo of the Platonic preference to “theory” in the sense of philosophy of Idea, The prophets of post-modernism such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and Rorty target him as the founder of foundationalism, logocentrism and essentialism. When one questions the “theorists” which theory, the answer is any theory – political, social, economic- particularly, a critique of the American late capitalism responsible for the rise of new categories of literary criticism such as Marxist, psychoanalytical, New Historicism, Feminist, gender criticism and Black criticism that mark their difference from humanistic criticism and acknowledge their respectability in the postmodernist era. In this context Seaton cites respectfully the theoretical works of Rene Wellek and his coauthor Austin Warren in *Theory of Literature*. It is not any theory or any idea that is relevant in case of literary theory, but theories and ideas *about literature* that should be the concern of a true literary theorist. That is what Wellek has done in his eight-volume *History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950*, and together with Warren compared the leading ideas of English and American critics with the most significant developments in European thought about literature, shaping several generations of critics.” (Seaton, 62)

Wellek has rightly judged that the contemporary zest for ‘Theory’, is virtually destruction of or “attack on literature”. In his sincere efforts for reviving the humanistic tradition Seaton remembers Kermode, Abrams, Leavis, Trilling, Chicago Critics and others along that line. His bold remarks that the hegemony of “Theory” adopted by the disciples of Marx and New Marxists and of the psychoanalytic criticism of Lacan founded on Freud is on the wane as is Marx’s prediction about the future of capitalism and socialism discarded by the history of the last century. Likewise, a reader of the psychoanalysis section of the NATC should realize that the scientific standing of Freud’s theory is today almost as low among psychiatrists as Marx’s among economists.

We must agree with Seaton that the contemporary literary theorists and critics have lost their ways for assessment of the central point of literature, i.e., human value, and instead chase the ghost of ‘Theory’ that always evades them, and perhaps will do so till its final evaporation.

**John V. Kulvicki, *On Images: Their Structure and Content*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp.258.**

While proposing to amend Goodman’s account of representation, an account modeled on linguistic frame work, the present author forwards an account of representation on Saussurean structuralist linguistics: a representation is an image

not by virtue of its perceptual character, but by its relation to other members in the non-linguistic system of representations – a parallel to Saussure’s signifieds as concepts: “The concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not.” *Course*, 117. The sub-title of the book thus clarifies the structuralist approach to images. The author is certainly justified that the influential theories of representation during the twentieth century were mostly dominated by the perceptualist accounts of Gombrich, Wollheim, Goodman and the host of their followers.

The book contains five chapters under the section of Image structure, five chapters under the section of image content and two chapters under the last section he titles Realism and Variety.

By “image” the author means pictorial representation: “The goal of this book is to explain just ‘what’. That means with a focus on what makes pictorial representations special is that they seem to occupy a corner of a continuum of representational kinds. Descriptions and other linguistic kinds of representation seem to occupy the opposite corner with diagrams and graphs being the mongrels in the middle? (p.1). But again, he writes, “What makes a representation pictorial or diagrammatic is not how we perceive it, but how it relates to others, syntactically and semantically within a system of representation. ... What it is to be pictorial is to be a representation that relates to other representations within a system in the right way.” (p.6) Clearly, on the very axis of Saussurean structuralist, semantics that an acoustic image is meaningful not by virtue of any inherent natural property but by virtue of its difference from other such images, the author is unwilling to accept the perceptual theories of pictorial representation offered by critics such as Ernst Gombrich, Nelson Goodman and Arthur Danto. In the five chapters of the first part the author discusses Goodman’s theory reflecting upon both its merit and lapses that set the stage for presenting four structural conditions including transparency that constitute an account of representational kinds, drawing out the consequences of this account that accommodates, the vast variety of representational kinds including auditory and tactile representations. He claims that this part offers a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for a representational system to be pictorial.

The second part shows that a working account of representational systems can inform an account of why the perception of some is special. The author shows that the transparent representations are interesting because they are instances of their own bare bone contents – i.e., pictures manifest the very properties that their bare bone contents attribute to their objects, and here is the difference between the perception of pictures or pictorial representations and other kinds of representations such as diagrams and descriptions. This observation might be confused with the sense data theory of perception, which may be a bad theory of perception itself, but very useful for distinguishing between the bare bones and fleshed out contents of a pictorial representation. In fact this was the concern of the modernist painting, i.e., the central

concern of painting is the art of painting itself and not the representation of other things. In other words, this move leads to a total rejection of the Aristotelian theory of *mimesis*. Contemporary theory of realism is related to informativeness the amount of information a picture conveys about its object. But in the 3<sup>rd</sup> part the author argues that neither verity or truthfulness nor informativeness— says anything about the picture itself: “It is misleading to call verity and informativeness two dimensions of realism since, strictly speaking, they apply to different things: individual representations and systems thereof. Whether we compare individual representations as members of a system or as standing for systems themselves varies quite a bit, however, and this is why verity and informativeness often seem to be merely dimensions along which individual representations are compared.” (p.9)

Although representation has been basically an ocular concept, Kulvicki observes that its area of denotation has been extended too far around in the current critical thinking (see also Ananta Sukla, *Art and Representation*, 2001). Understanding representation as a phenomenon of stand-for or aboutness directs our notice to a number of artifacts such as linguistic expressions, gestures, sounds, maps, diagrams, graphics, pictures, photographs so on and so forth. Representations are then multi-perceptual, not only visual. The author then classifies the whole range of representations into three categories, linguistic, pictorial, and in between them the mixed ones i.e., graphs and diagrams. These three kinds differ in their contents according to the sense-modality of their representative properties- auditory, visual, audio-visual, and these representative properties are not determined in terms of their perceptibility, but in terms their syntactical and semantic relationship with each other.

All images are representations and all pictures are representations. But all representations/ images are not pictorial. A system is imagistic, if it is relatively replete, syntactically sensitive, semantically rich, and mimetic though not necessarily transparent, whereas picture or pictorial images are necessarily transparent. The mimetic representations relate to the more general class of isomorphic representations. The author replaces Goodman’s “Characteristic Constitutive Aspects” (CCP) by “Syntactically Relevant Projectiles” (SRP), and holds that a representational System (S) is mimetic with respect to a set of properties (C) if and only if the following four conditions hold. (p.83)

- 1) All the members of C are SRPs of S
- 2) All the members, P of C are such that representations in S can determinately represent their objects as being P.
- 3) All representations in S that determinately represent their objects as being a member, P of C are themselves P.
- 4) All representations in S that are P determinately represent their objects as being P.

Then concludes (p.85), “These four conditions are necessary and jointly sufficient for mimesis with respect to a set of properties in a representational system”. Mimesis entails similarity and the similarity entailed is semantically significant:

“transparent representations are all mimetic.” An important and quite valid point that the author puts up is that all pictorial representations need not be visual or even perceptible in general. Many non-visual systems that are apparently non-pictorial turn out to be pictorial – even an auditory representation may be pictorial. Thus the author demonstrates that a pictorial representation can also be inter-medial. This inter-medial perspective of mimetic images are then merely rhetorical. This ekphrastic approach to pictorial representation now alters the century-old aesthetic hegemony of visual and auditory perceptual experiences as expressed in the axioms *ut pictora poesis* and *ut musica poesis* during the Classical and Romantic eras. If auditory images can be pictorial and pictorial images tactile (justifying Keats’s hyper-sensuous image-making and image-experiencing power broadening the human value of fictionality in general) then the aesthetic power of man supersedes his scientific cognitive power. As a specialist in philosophy of perception Kulvicki is aware of the limits of empirical realism, and in his discussion he deviates from the analytical methodology of the linguistic philosophy, and approaches the issue of image from the interperceptual (and, therefore inter-medial) perspectives. In sidetracking the earlier linguistic approach to image such as that of W.J.T. Mitchell, (and, therefore the Wittgensteinian perspectives that have remained the foundational model so far) Kulvicki wants to say that pictorial image need not be (and cannot be) interpreted in terms of the linguistic paradigm. The issue is preeminently a perceptual one involving all our sense organs not merely eyes (agreeing with Gombrich that there is no innocent eye, implying thereby that there is no innocent sense organ in general). Realism, verity and transparency are compared by the author. Realism refers to informativeness whereas verity refers to representations within a system. Informativeness applies inter-systemically, and verity intra-systemically. They are not two dimensions of realism. Cartoons, for example are realistic in terms of informativeness, but in terms of cartoonish system they are realistic. Kendall not Walton’s account of pictorial realism, an amalgam of verity, informativeness and a third ingredient related to the first two might be called “mimicry”, i.e. pictorial realism varies in degree in terms of our perceptual engagement with the picture and that with the perception of the object the picture depicts. In other words, realism in a picture varies in degree according to our perception of the picture as a mimicry of the perception of the object. But Walton’s theory of mimicry fails when our perception of the mythical pictures are taken into account.

Kulvicki’s subtlety of observation, critical judgment and original approaches to the structural analyses of the images draw our attention to a new horizon of aesthetics of pictorial art. He is bold, sufficiently learned, and very well informed of the critical appliances necessary in calling the doyens of pictorial aesthetics to questions and amending their flaws.

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