
On the Future of the Humanistic Tradition in Literary Criticism

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Until recently, the humanistic impulse has been central to literary criticism in the West. The works of twentieth-century American critics like Irving Babbitt, Edmund Wilson and Ralph Ellison, for example, are part of a conversation about literature that starts for the modern world with the revival of ancient learning in Italy in the fourteenth century. The humanistic tradition has demonstrated its ability to accommodate a variety of tastes, political inclinations and philosophical doctrines. Through all the debates over the beautiful versus the sublime, romanticism versus classicism or even political right versus left, the conversation has continued. Eleven years ago, however, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* warned that our culture, which boasted of its unprecedented "openness," was in danger of closing off the debate over philosophical alternatives that begins for us with the Greeks. The trends that Bloom described then have only accelerated in the decade since the book appeared. Today it appears that not only the philosophical tradition, which was Bloom's main concern, is in danger, but the humanistic tradition of literary criticism is also threatened, sometimes by people who, like Richard Rorty, insist that their goal is to replace philosophy with literary criticism.

The attack is carried on in the name sometimes of "cultural studies," sometimes "postmodernism," sometimes "anti-foundationalism," or simply the array of tendencies one may call the "cultural left." Mainstream cultural studies celebrates a world in which "the lightness of being" is taken for granted, where sex is only gender, morality is only lifestyle, and novels, plays and poems are merely texts. Richard

Rorty's representative version of utopia is a "poeticized culture," whose only goal is "the creation of ever more various and multicolored artifacts."¹ In this new landscape, radicalism becomes indistinguishable from adjustment to the status quo. It is a world that "has no purpose except to make life easier for poets and revolutionaries"—since romantic poetry and revolutionary visions have become the primary sources of entertainment and distraction.² Christopher Lasch has noted that the new "multiculturalism," conjuring up "the agreeable image of a global bazaar in which exotic cuisines, exotic styles of dress, exotic music, exotic tribal customs can be savored indiscriminately, with no questions asked and no commitments required," is an ideal ideology for the managers of the multinational corporations.³

Can the humanistic tradition survive cultural studies and post-modernism? In *The Closing of the American Mind* Allan Bloom formulated an intellectually serious and emotionally powerful critique of the trends that have culminated for the moment in the movement to replace the humanities with "cultural studies." Although his bestseller is most obviously an eloquent warning against the forces militating against a contemporary expression of Matthew Arnold's "high seriousness" in philosophy or literature, *The Closing of the American Mind* reaffirms the significance of the humanist tradition in two somewhat contradictory ways. On the one hand, the book is itself an impressive example of humanistic criticism. Contemptuously debunking the intellectual pretensions of "nihilism, American style," Bloom demonstrates the necessity of confronting directly the masterpieces of literature and philosophy in undertaking any serious exploration of what it means to be human. On the other hand, the affinity of Bloom's intellectual romanticism with the very spirit of the time that he is questioning suggests that some seemingly outdated aspects of that tradition may be worth reviving. If so trenchant a critique as the one formulated in *The Closing of the American Mind* can be sharpened by reference to literary humanists like Ralph Ellison and Irving Babbitt, then that is additional evidence that the humanistic tradition remains worth preserving.

¹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 53, 54.

² *Ibid.*, 60-61.

³ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: Norton, 1995), 7.

In *The Closing of the American Mind* Bloom adopts phrases ordinarily associated with the cultural left to describe his own educational ideals. The university, he says, should encourage the “awareness of other possibilities” and cultivate “alternative thoughts,” thereby promoting an “awareness of difference” in order “to liberate reason.”⁴ Only in such a “countervailing atmosphere” will it be possible to conceive “alternative goals.”⁵ The particular alternative Bloom has in mind, however, is not radical feminism or multiculturalism but rather a commitment to “intransigently high standards.”⁶ According to Bloom the humanities are inevitably at odds with democratic culture since

the professors of humanities . . . are essentially involved with interpreting and transmitting old books, preserving what we call tradition, in a democratic order where tradition is not privileged.”⁷

Bloom’s description of the ideal university as “an unpopular institution in our midst that sets clarity above well-being or compassion, that resists our powerful urges and temptations, that is free of all snobism but has standards” is attractive in its eloquent refusal to indulge the democratic impulse to be all things to all people.⁸

If the chief obligation of a university, and especially of the humanities, could be summed up as the stimulation of the “awareness of other possibilities,” “alternative thoughts,” and an “awareness of difference” in order “to liberate reason,” then Bloom’s critique would be entirely convincing.⁹ But the notion that the highest praise one can bestow on an idea is conveyed by the adjective “alternative” should not be accepted too easily, even when it is asserted by Allan Bloom. The notion that the attainment of the highest and best and most vital, whatever it may be, at all events requires that one reject the morality and way of life of one’s own society is one of the most long-lasting and influential themes of the Romantic movement. Those who do not accept that assumption should not be too quick to assume that humanists and philosophers can erect “intransigently high standards” only

⁴ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 249, 253.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 339, 341.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 249, 253.

by rejecting the ideals that most other Americans hold dear. Matthew Arnold thought that “the men of culture are the true apostles of equality,” since culture “seeks to do away with classes” so that all may “live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light.”¹⁰ It is at least worth exploring the possibility that high literary and artistic standards, though indeed incompatible with the radical egalitarianisms so fashionable on campus, are not necessarily at odds with American democracy.¹¹

High standards potentially compatible with American democracy.

Ralph Ellison has argued persuasively for an affinity between American democratic culture and literary and artistic standards. He points out that in the United States, to an extent much greater than in other countries, “refinement of sensibility” is not confined to those favored by “family background, formal education, or social status.”¹² Ellison asserts that “the American artist will do his best” because he entertains the possibility that, however far out in the boondocks one might be, “any American audience will conceal at least one individual whose knowledge and taste will complement, or surpass, his [the artist’s] own.”¹³ There is, that is, “no necessary contradiction between our vernacular style and the pursuit of excellence.” Practitioners of jazz, the best-known example of American vernacular art, are, according to Ellison, “unreconstructed elitists when it comes to maintaining the highest standards of the music which expresses their sense of the American experience.”¹⁴

Allan Bloom is surely right to argue that the university in general and the humanities in particular have a special obligation to question and challenge those assumptions in contemporary culture that would otherwise go unquestioned. The example of Ralph Ellison suggests, in addition, that the principles behind such questioning need not be derived from the special concerns of academics but from the highest ideals of American culture itself. If Allan Bloom is right, then, in arguing that the vitality of the liberal arts derives from their capacity to question the dominant trends, then the continuing relevance of humanistic

¹⁰ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 70.

¹¹ Claes Ryn has pointed out that Bloom ignores the possibility that a “constitutional democracy . . . might actually maintain an ethos not entirely subversive of discriminating norms and tastes.” Claes Ryn, “Universality or Uniformity?” *Modern Age* 32.1 (Winter, 1988), 50.

¹² Ralph Ellison, “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random, 1986), 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴ Ralph Ellison, “Going to the Territory,” *Going to the Territory*, 140.

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literary criticism seems assured. This argument, however, raises questions about Bloom's own perspective. Bloom's passionate enthusiasms account for much of the literary power of *The Closing of the American Mind*, and thus for much of the popular appeal of Bloom's bestseller. These enthusiasms, however, indicate implicit agreement with some of the most questionable trends of contemporary culture, trends that the book elsewhere explicitly and persuasively critiques.

One of the central themes of *Closing*, the reality and the significance of the difference between "the philosophers" and ordinary people, parallels the characteristically Romantic notion of a gulf between the genius and everybody else. Allan Bloom asserts that, between true philosophers and the rest of us, "the gulf is unbridgeable," since "the philosophers . . . have entirely different ends than the rest of mankind."¹⁵ Bloom's view of the philosophers may be compared to the narrator's declaration at the beginning of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Rich Boy" that "the very rich . . . are different from you and me."¹⁶ The presentation of the rich boy, Anson Hunter, in that story and of Tom and Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*—"careless people" who smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness . . . and let other people clean up the mess they had made"—demonstrate that Fitzgerald himself saw beyond the romantic fantasies that declaration seems to express.¹⁷ Allan Bloom, however, never changed his mind about the philosophers, never grew disillusioned; at least there is no evidence of any such change in *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bloom, indeed, describes his entire book as "a plea" for "authentic liberation," thus choosing two of the most notable cant-words of contemporary romanticism to characterize his entire project.¹⁸ For Bloom "the theoretical experience is one of liberation." This "experience of liberation" marks "conversion" to philosophy as a way of life that is different from ordinary, everyday existence.¹⁹

Nick Carraway, the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, found a great deal to criticize about Jay Gatsby; nevertheless, even thinking over all that had happened a year later, he could not help admiring Gatsby for his "romantic readiness," for his "heightened sensitivity to the promises

¹⁵ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 290, 291.

¹⁶ F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Rich Boy," *Babylon Revisited and Other Stories*, (New York: Scribner's, 1960), 152.

¹⁷ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner's, 1925), 180-81.

¹⁸ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 271, 333, 369.

of life.”²⁰ Even in retrospect and although he had “disapproved” of Gatsby “from beginning to end,” he stands by the affirmation he had shouted across the lawn when he left Gatsby for the last time: “They’re a rotten crowd You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together.”²¹ Those of us who appreciate Allan Bloom’s own “romantic readiness” to appreciate the greatness of literature and philosophy may well find that Nick Carraway’s comment that “They’re a rotten crowd You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together” makes the appropriate comparison between the critics who denounced *The Closing of the American Mind* and Allan Bloom himself. Bloom’s “romantic readiness,” dramatized by his teenage wonder at the “fake Gothic” buildings of the University of Chicago, allows him to sense and to communicate to his readers much that is truly wonderful.²²

The promise of exemption from the frustrations and difficulties of the common human lot is immensely seductive, as Bloom himself occasionally recognizes. In criticizing “the alleged superior moral ‘concern’ of the students” of the sixties, he pays tribute to a very different version of morality:

There is a perennial and unobtrusive view that morality consists in such things as telling the truth, paying one’s debts, respecting one’s parents and doing no voluntary harm to anyone. Those are all things easy to say and hard to do; they do not attract much attention, and win little honor in the world.²³

It is to Bloom’s credit that he articulates this prosaic morality so sympathetically, since it seems at odds not only with the “histrionic version of moral conduct” of the protesting students but also with his own intimations that life lived without the illumination of a philosophic conversion or authentic liberation is a second-rate affair at best.²⁴ When Bloom speculates that “men may live more truly and fully in reading Plato and Shakespeare than at any other time, because then they are participating in essential being and forgetting their accidental lives,” one can appreciate his passion for the great authors and still feel that the dismissal of family, work and love as “accidental” is a romantic error akin to the one enacted by those students who reject the claims of family and everyday obligations in the name of some “au-

²⁰ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

²² *The Closing of the American Mind*, 243.

²³ *Ibid.*, 325.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

thentic" moral gesture.²⁵ Bloom's romanticism plays into the hands of contemporary culture, inevitably assimilating philosophy and literature to the other kinds of "liberation" hawked by spiritual hucksters who share nothing else with Bloom. His critique of contemporary culture, attractive though it is—and its power of attraction is derived in large part from its very romanticism—requires a corrective emphasis available from Irving Babbitt, who like Allan Bloom earned the enmity of "progressive" thinkers for his attempt to measure the sentimentalisms of his time against the standards of literature and philosophy.

*Literature
and real life
intimately
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Babbitt's own masters are those thinkers who have turned to literature as a source of insight about human life and who, in turn, have proposed grounds for judging literature itself—Aristotle, first and foremost, Boileau, Samuel Johnson, Lessing, Saint-Beuve and Matthew Arnold, among others. Unlike Bloom, Babbitt does not set his heroes apart from other human beings. Literature is at least as important as philosophy because men and women, including even the greatest philosophers, cannot apprehend reality "directly but only through imaginative symbols."²⁶ Skepticism about the possibility of achieving truth through reason alone leads Babbitt to turn to literary fictions for insight into the human condition.

Whereas Bloom seeks a "primary natural experience" that can bring about a "liberation" or a "conversion" separating the philosopher from other human beings, Babbitt finds in literature an affirmation of "a general nature, a core of normal experience," that most human beings, those who are not saints, descend below when they attempt to rise above.²⁷ This "normal experience" should not be confused with mediocrity or mere conformity to the status quo; Babbitt contrasts the romantic imagination of a Shelley, with its "straining toward the unlimited," to "the ethical imagination—the imagination that has accepted the veto power" as embodied in Sophocles or Dante.²⁸

Babbitt reaffirms the centrality of the unromantic virtues of "moderation, common sense, and common decency" while acknowledging that "the uncultivated human imagination in all times and places is romantic."²⁹ The case for humanistic cultivation depends in large part

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 380.

²⁶ Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New York: Meridian, 1955), 280.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 274, 279.

²⁹ *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 18-19.

on the evidence literature provides that romantic exaltation “is found finally not to make for the happiness of the individual.” The romantic, Babbitt points out, “seeks happiness and yet on his own showing, his mode of seeking it results, not in happiness but in wretchedness.”³⁰

Despite his searching critique of romantic pretensions, however, Babbitt is unwilling to frame the question as a choice of one “ism” over another—classicism over romanticism. Taking issue with both neoclassicists and romantics for separating judgment from imagination, Babbitt insists on the romantic notion that the imagination is the source of the most important truths for human beings. The neoclassicists valued judgment over imagination, the romantics imagination over judgment, and neither camp was interested in finding a way to integrate the two concepts. Babbitt, however, believes that the humanist should not be “satisfied with opposing cool reason or judgment to imagination but rather one quality of imagination to another.”³¹ Babbitt always refused to identify the New Humanism with any particular philosophic system or, as he might have called it, a dogma. He believed that

Imagination is source of most important truths.

our most urgent problem just now is how to preserve in a positive and critical form the soul of truth in the two great traditions, classical and Christian, that are crumbling as mere dogma³²

and had no intention of merely producing another dogma that would soon crumble as well.

Irving Babbitt’s critique of the romantic impulse now seems a permanently valuable part of the humanistic tradition. During Babbitt’s own lifetime, however, he was vehemently attacked by champions of modern literature and radical politics like the young Edmund Wilson. Wilson objected to Babbitt’s repeated emphasis on the “veto power” or the “will to refrain” on the grounds that humanity was “now as always as much in need of being exhorted against coldness and indifference and routine as against irresponsible exuberance—especially Anglo-Saxon humanity.” Wilson intimated that only stuffy pedants would worry that

Babbitt’s critique of romantic impulse permanently valuable.

³⁰ Irving Babbitt, “What I Believe,” *Irving Babbitt: Representative Writings*, Ed. with an Introduction by George A. Panichas (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 13; *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 18-19.

³¹ Irving Babbitt, “The Problem of the Imagination: Dr. Johnson,” *On Being Creative and Other Essays* (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1968), 92.

³² Irving Babbitt, “English and the Discipline of Ideas,” *Irving Babbitt: Representative Writings*, 69.

Edmund
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our clerks, our factory workers and our respectable professional and business classes were all in danger of falling victims to the rhapsodical enthusiasm and the lawless individualism of romanticism!

In Wilson's view, the great social problem was simply that such people had "been compelled by society to refrain" from living a fully human life, so that "if it is merely a question of refraining, these people are all good humanists."³³ Babbitt could have replied that Wilson willfully misunderstood the New Humanism he and Paul Elmer More affirmed in assuming that it equated mere passivity with the good life. He could also have pointed out that the kind of enthusiasms he most feared were the mass enthusiasms mobilized by the state to enforce morality through Prohibition, or to make the world safe for democracy through world war. Wilson was more convincing when he criticized the New Humanists for their failure to appreciate contemporary writers or even nineteenth-century authors like Baudelaire and Flaubert. Employing Babbitt's own terms of praise, Wilson argued that the French writers exercised "in their novels and poems, the most exacting kind of self-discipline, exerted, in dealing with the materials supplied them by their imaginations, a rigorous will to refrain," and added that the poems of Baudelaire and the novels of Flaubert "fortify their readers as well as entertain them."³⁴

Today, in the era of postmodernism, the political and cultural differences between Irving Babbitt and critics like Edmund Wilson or Ralph Ellison take on the appearance of family quarrels. Whatever their political and cultural differences, the New Humanists shared with Edmund Wilson and Ralph Ellison the faith that great literature provides both aesthetic pleasure and moral insight. Wilson and Ellison did not attempt to revive and redefine the meaning of humanism and rarely even referred to themselves as humanists; like Babbitt, however, Wilson and Ellison insisted on aesthetic standards inferred from an inductive survey of literary works and on moral standards derived from experience, especially the experience made available in literature. None of the three attempted to deduce moral or metaphysical certainties from literature. Indeed, for humanistic critics the greatest value literary study may have is the critical filter it provides for the social, political and artistic nostrums of one's own time. One is less likely to believe that a currently fashionable philosophy is the summation of

³³ Edmund Wilson, "Notes on Babbitt and More," *The Shores of Light* (New York: Random, 1952), 457.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 461.

human wisdom if one is able to measure the current fashion not only by one's own experience or even the spirit of the age but by the experience embodied in *The Iliad*, *The Divine Comedy*, and *Pride and Prejudice*. This critical perspective may seem to be a small thing, but so much "common sense," to use Babbitt's term, is surely no less valuable because it is unpretentious. Those who reject past culture as irrelevant because it is not "postmodern" or because it is tainted with sexism or racism or logocentrism deprive themselves of such guidance.

As a professor of literature, I believe I have an obligation to acquaint students with guides like Homer, Dante and Jane Austen. This is harder than it sounds. The would-be humanist must reject the temptation to substitute the teaching of a ready-made doctrine, even, say, the New Humanism of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, for the much more difficult task of introducing students to *The Iliad*, *The Divine Comedy* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Even teaching two or three competing doctrines, as in Gerald Graff's "teach the conflicts" model, is much easier but much less rewarding than turning attention to what Homer said about war, Dante about God, Jane Austen about marriage and all three about the human condition. One cannot teach without making theoretical assumptions, but one can attempt to use theory not as an end in itself but as a means to come to terms with the works themselves. For the future of humanistic literary criticism is finally one with the future of literature. If poems, plays, novels and even intellectual autobiographies like *The Closing of the American Mind* continue to exercise their hold on us, as I believe they will through the postmodernist era and beyond, then the future of the humanistic tradition of literary criticism is assured, since its only necessary ground is the significance and authority of literature.