

## Literature and Its Discontents

**THE DEATH OF LITERATURE.** By Alvin Kernan. Yale. 230 pp. \$22.50

**BEFORE NOVELS:** The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction. By J. Paul Hunter. Norton. 421 pp. \$25

Two books, both by distinguished critics and both published in the apocalyptic-sounding year of 1990, make fascinating if contradictory reading for anybody concerned about the current state (read: disarray) of literary study in America. That should include anybody currently footing the king's ransom of a child's college tuition. When English departments offer courses in Science Fiction and Comic Books for full credit, isn't something wrong? And when they offer courses in "deconstruction"—a convoluted approach to reading that doesn't even consider the text primary—isn't something wronger?

As we approach the end of the second millennium, we expect a tendency to look for the end-of-civilization-as-we-know-it-now, the turning-around of all certainties. Chaos theory in physics, genetic engineering in biology, d-con in literature, "post-modern" as a justification for any degree of silliness in the arts or in human behavior: William Butler Yeats was evidently right when he wrote, "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold." Or as Alvin Kernan, Avalon Professor of Humanities Emeritus at Princeton University, writes with a *Götterdämmerung*-lighting effect in his adjectives:

Humanism's long dream of learning, of arriving at some final truth by enough reading and writing, is breaking up in our time. . . . the possibility of knowing the individual and the social world that has driven the humanities and the social sciences since the late Middle Ages is dissipating.

Doomsayers as articulate as Kernan always jazz up the scene. *The Death of Litera-*

*ture* delivers the dire, dark, we-happy-few-against-the-barbarians analysis implied in its title, although with a lot more wit, erudition, and sense of fun than E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* (1987) or Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1988).

Kernan's earlier work, including *Samuel Johnson and the Impact of Print* (1987), was in 18th-century studies, and he is one of the indispensable critics of the Age of Satire. That apprenticeship serves him



well in *The Death of Literature*, where he discusses the obscenity trial of *Lady Chatterly's Lover* and the controversy surrounding the exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's photos. In both cases, by quoting—with appropriate commentary—the confused and contradictory testimony of artists and critics, he shows how they make fools of themselves in defense of "art" without being able to say what they think "art" is.

And that is the gravamen of Kernan's wonderfully lucid and grumpy argument against the modern world. It is bad enough that the modern world with its new information technologies—"television, computer database, Xerox, word processor, tape, and VCR"—bypasses the printed word altogether. But even worse: Literature, that "great tradition" of writers and critics which began with 18th-century print, is now being dismantled by the very myth of the defiant artist it created.

Kernan is more original than Bloom or Hirsch. He blames the fall of culture on the poets and critics who should be its guardians. If we are collapsing into a new barbarism, Kernan says it is in no small measure due to the asocial artist whose every utterance, however outrageous, can be justified just because he calls himself that, an artist. And the part of the literary tradition that the "artist" leaves unharmed, the critic finishes off.

"Literary criticism," Kernan writes, "Byzantine in its complexity, mountainous in its bulk, and incredible in its totality, has turned on literature and deconstructed its basic principles, declaring literature an illusory category, the poet dead, the work of art only a floating 'text,' language indeterminate and incapable of meaning. . . . Rather than being near-sacred myths of human experience of the world and the self. . . literature is increasingly treated as authoritarian and destructive of human freedom, the ideology of the patriarchy devised to instrument male, white hegemony over the female and the 'lesser breeds.'"

Like Kernan, Paul Hunter, Tripp Professor of the Humanities at the University of Chicago, is a distinguished 18th-century scholar. Hunter's subject, however, is not the Tory satirists of the age but the (largely) Whig novelists, including Defoe and Fielding. He shows that at the moment grand "Literature" was being invented, these writers were finding ways for it to go beyond its aristocratic limitations.

Next to the fin-de-millennium drama of *The Death of Literature*, Hunter's *Before Novels* can sound stodgy and taxider-

mic. Yet Hunter, who has spent more than a decade preparing this book, is concerned with finding out how that outrageous but holy monstrosity, the English novel, came to be born. The time was well spent. This may be the best book on the origins of the novel, simply because it is the best treatment of the relationship between fiction and all those vulgar and journalistic sources the academy refuses to dignify with the name of literature.

Most histories of the novel—including Ian Watt's magisterial *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), to which Hunter pays due homage—assume an "evolutionary" development, as if 17th-century religious confessions, diaries, and journalism were larval forms of what would grow into *Pamela* and *Tom Jones*. Hunter takes these "proto-novels" seriously in their own right. He does not ask how such simple life-forms evolved into high art but, rather, how the great early novels used and elaborated "the new sense of life implied in the print-culture explosion of the late 1600s?" The answers he provides to this question enrich our understanding of Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne. More significantly, they subtly dismantle the myth, underwritten by the Tory Kernan, that there ever *was* a pristine, context-free "Literature" that was later subjected to the depredations of time and democracy.

Of the age that produced the novel, Hunter writes: "It was a time when new needs were being defined and others were developing, perhaps the first time in Western history when a distinctive youth culture was beginning to have an effect on the marketplace, including the intellectual marketplace and the world of booksellers and print." He argues that the new novelistic fiction was a force for altering social norms no less strong than our own electronic media are today: "We may never know," he writes, "how much of modern human history has gone the way it has because people at crucial moments have said or done a certain thing in imitation of some character in a novel who had acted that way, on the assumption that that was the way it was to be done." Hunter

describes the "needs of the audience to feel 'in,' up-to-date, aware of the latest facts, and current in the intellectual, cultural, and social trends of the moment."

The more things change, the more they remain the same? Perhaps. Hunter's depiction of the newly enfranchised 18th-century audiences would not make a bad description of the novelty-mad, tradition-ignoring, postmodern television mutants whom Kernan *et al.* regard as the pallbearers of "humanism's long dream of learning." It is ironic that Hunter, by far the more donnish of the two critics, should be the one to remind us that the barbarians at the gates are really only our children.

Hunter concludes that "the novel does not exist for the novel's sake but human culture is for human culture's sake, and the rest is implication and detail." He thus indicts those who mourn the "death of literature" because they have first constructed a mandarin and nostalgic idea of

Literature that not only excludes all the vitality of film, TV, comic book art, and rock and roll, but also ignores the fact that fiction sells better now than ever before. And if contemporary mandarins denounce the low quality of that popular fiction, they only echo the Tories who in the 1700s snorted at books that are now part of our revered canon. "The Kids Are All Right," sang Pete Townshend, the leading genius of The Who, two decades ago. A serious look at the cantankerousness and generosity of our real literary tradition helps us see how all right—and how true to the humanist tradition—the "kids" and their entertainments have always been.

—Frank McConnell, '78, is professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the author of *Storytelling and Mythmaking: Images from Film and Literature* (1979).

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## NEW TITLES

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### Arts & Letters

**THE ILIAD.** By Homer. Trans. by Robert Fagles, with introduction and notes by Bernard Knox. Viking. 683 pp. \$35

Homer's *Iliad* seems as permanent as Western culture. Composed around the seventh century B.C., the poem circulated only in hand-copied form until 1488, when the first printed version appeared in Florence. Since then, the tale of war between invading Greeks and the defenders of the city of Troy has informed our notions of heroism and tragedy. Its adaptation into blank-verse couplets by the poet Alexander Pope (1688–1744) is only one early, famous attempt to make *The Iliad* not only a Greek but an English poem as well. Our century has seen

two notable translations, Richmond Lattimore's in 1951 and Robert Fitzgerald's in 1974. Now Fagles, a poet and classicist (like his most recent predecessors), attempts to make the poem's ancient formulas and archaic magic accessible to this generation of readers.

*The Iliad's* plot revolves around the rage of Achilles, the Greek champion who is so skilled at war as to be almost godlike. Slighted by Agamemnon, his king, Achilles refuses to take part in any fighting. His absence brings disaster for the Greeks, as Hector, the Trojan champion, drives the invaders back to their ships. Only when Hector slays Achilles's friend Patroclus does Achilles's rage change from injured pride to murderous vengeance.

As Bernard Knox suggests in his introduction, Achilles's wrathful return to battle also