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Scholarly Book Review

Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities

By John M. Lewis. (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1997, 262pp)

Words and symbols compiled into articles, books, conferences, manifestos, speeches, and works in the arts media are the armaments of present culture wars. Although no one professionally engaged in cultural matters can stand aside completely as the battle rages, it is possible to obtain an overview by disengaging from rhetoric and focusing on basic ideas. Ellis looks with chagrin on what he sees as virulent trashing of the Western tradition by a new orthodoxy that has installed highly restrictive political definitions of race, gender, and class as the only valid subject matter for the humanities. His analysis, however, goes beyond polemics and seeks historical perspective.

Ellis demonstrates that the impulses driving this new orthodoxy are not new in the Western world, and that narrowness of vision has failed before. He argues that fundamentalism of any kind makes a crude instrument for effective intellectual and political action in a complex society. He contrasts present emphasis on diversity with rising inability to respect a broad range of great achievement, and expresses concern about current unwillingness to accept and enjoy works from different times and places, each on its own terms. Ellis's clear, direct analysis makes one realize anew that many of the issues facing our society, including those concerned

with race, gender, economics, and power, are too complex and too important for a catechism of simple answers to suffice, no matter what side is speaking. (Joseph Carroll)

The review written by Joseph Carroll upon his review on *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities* by John M. Ellis open an insight into the polarizing view of the ideas the John Ellis puts forth within his work that seeks to expand upon the idea that the humanities as being taught at the collegiate level in today's society have been corrupted by an onslaught of cultural and political correctness that seek to erase the true meaning and purpose of the classics of literature.

A name like John M. Ellis almost without effort conjures forth images of great literary figures such as T.S. Elliot and C.S. Lewis, literary critics, educators and authors who hold great esteem within the cultural world of art, literature and the humanities. As such, it's only fitting that John M. Ellis would be a notable literary critic and esteemed lecturer in his own right, serving as both secretary and treasurer of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, an organization founded in 1994 in order to reverse the direction literary studies have taken on college campuses in recent decades. Ellis, whose published works include nine books and hundreds of articles and reviews on German literature and the theory of language and literature, is well versed on the topic of multiculturalism and the present state of academic learning. As editor of *Heterodoxy*, a publication in the late 90's that was devoted to fighting political correctness, Ellis became a voice at the forefront of the war on political correctness and it's perceived insinuation into the academic system of college campuses.

In his book, *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of The Humanities*, Ellis states his belief that “in the span of less than a generation, university humanities departments have experience an almost unbelievable reversal of attitudes, now attacking and undermining what has previously been considered best and most worthy in the Western tradition.” Ellis scrutinizes the new regime in humanities studies by offering an in-depth analysis that shows the weaknesses of notions that are considered fashionable in humanities today. Speaking out against that which has sought to make gender, class and race perspectives the center of university humanities curriculum, Ellis believes that political correctness is to blame, and that our societies descent into it has come at the expense of honoring history.

Ellis states that his book is about the “great changes that have taken place—and are still proceeding—in humanistic education and learning throughout the English-speaking world.” This belief that the effect of a change in the way subjects are taught and in what teachers are trying to achieve in teaching them is far from trivial, according to Ellis, considering that the purpose of the change is to transform student’s attitudes toward the society in which they live. Ellis seeks to further expand on this notion by suggesting that university instructors now find themselves in a predicament of having to be “overtly political” as a means of survival in this new collegiate landscape that they have found themselves in. Where in decades prior the teaching of the humanities was all for the enrichment of the student and exposure to a subject that to this point they may have been unaware, instructors now argue that universities should serve a political function, working directly for social and political change, and in effect, indoctrinate their students toward a particular political viewpoint. The unfortunate question that is forced to be asked of this however is, *Is that not a good thing?*

While Ellis maintains that the purpose is not to establish the advent of political correctness in the literary realm, but instead to examine the forces behind such changes and the arguments that are made to persuade others to accept them, he hopes to give readers an analysis of the coherence of the arguments that are used to justify the installation of race, gender and class perspectives at the center of modern day college curriculum so that they will be in a better position to decide whether they are sound, and if not, to understand what is wrong with them.

Literature Lost was written in 1997, and as such, is a definitive product of it's time. At the time of it's publication we were at the cusp of a great change in the world and in society at hand. The internet was a thing that had only been available to the masses for a few short years and was nowhere close to being the part of everyday life that it has become today. Social media was still nearly a decade away from becoming the cultural firestorm that would truly become responsible for the total reconstruction of everyday life. More so, we as a society, had not yet descended down the rabbit hole of political correctness and it's subsequent politically incorrect backlash that has seemingly become a part of society as a whole, no matter the walk of life that you live. While reading *Literature Lost*, I couldn't help but ask myself the questions. *Is the material dated? Is the author simply looking for a time of day's past, instead of looking to the future and the limitless possibilities of it?*

In defense of the humanities, many scholars and educators argue that they provide enrichment in our leisure through great literature and the arts. There is an implied belief that the humanities enable us to see ourselves in perspective, to become more enlightened and to think more deeply about important issues in our lives. Ellis states that the body of enduring

literary and philosophical works of authors such as Shakespeare, Plato and Dante are “not a collection of ideas demanding to be believed,” but a “remarkable set of fascinating struggles with problems and issues.” Today there does in fact exist an attack on the humanities, but not though political correctness, as Ellis would have us believe. Instead, this attack is from technology and a society that is looking to advance forward at the expense of forgetting the past.

Throughout the book, Ellis lays out his argument at the beginning of the chapter, such as in the first chapter where he states “In this chapter I shall look at some prior episodes to show more clearly what kind of thing this impulse is, and what it’s dangers are,” when describing the fact that political correctness, while viewed as a modern day fad, is in fact a “basic impulse that recurs regularly in the history of Western society.” Such simplistic and direct relay of information to his reader, while making the material accessible, also manages to come across in an almost condescending manner, leaving to interpretation the idea that the average reader must have things laid out in such a manner that could only be understood so simplistically.

This haughty attitude continues by Ellis, such as when he explains how “those who study German culture, as I do, usually get their account of the early Germanic peoples from the Roman historian Tacitus, who wrote a short treatise entitled *Germania* in the first century A.D.” This is truly great information, and food for thought, for the reader that doesn’t need to be spoken down to them by the author’s interjection of his own German studies. While certainly not perceived to be an intended task by the author, such conceived acts have the unintended possibility of alienating the very minds that he is trying to sway toward his side of the argument.

Ellis lays blame at gender, race and class scholars in general, including those who are in culture-specific departments like African American studies or Latin studies, seeking to discredit them as a whole, which in my opinion continues his narrow, almost elitist view on the state of humanities and literature. Such condemnation may have played differently during the time in which *Literature Lost* was written but is perceived in a completely different vein in today's hyper-sensitive mindset. This fact almost proves the very point that Ellis spends the entire book arguing against, that there is no room for political correctness in the arts and humanities. According to Ellis, while traditionally literature was viewed to have an educative social function with the intention of developing a richer understanding of human life and subsequently train the mind, the preoccupation with oppressiveness in regard to race, gender and class has overwhelmed the field. The argument is made that this narrows the field of all literature to one specific issue. By challenging race-gender-class critics who "often try to evade the issue of receptivity to a text, but never with any real success," Ellis continues his formulaic attack against those who view literature differently than he, or *institution literature* as he comes to label it. Those who do not subscribe to the notion of literature as purely an aesthetic pleasure and an escape from serious matters are believed to be an example of how the literature genre is in a state of decline, as overly politically correct writings cause an intellectual death due to lack of an ability to excite or inspire.

When Ellis chooses to confront race head on, *Literature Lost* seemingly walks a fine line between outright stating that race has no place in the cultural interpretation of literary works, and that today's thoughts toward it should not come into play at all. Ellis feels that race is a central ingredient in the new-style campus studies in humanities, with a common thread being

“an insistence on the white European’s mistreatment of other races,” namely the enslavement of black Africans in North America, the plight of the American Indians and the colonizing of Third World countries. Ellis goes on to state that such portrayals “seek to uncover the racism that underlies even benign looking texts by famous white American writers or the imperialist arrogance and chauvinism beneath the surface of classic European writers,” citing Shakespeare as an example of one such author whose works have been found to be complicit in the alleged “white moral sickness”.

Ellis seems intent on casting a blight on those who perceive these works in this way, failing to comprehend where their perception stems, instead once more speaking to the apprehension toward change that is at the heart of *Literature Lost*. Cultural evolution does require that thoughts and attitudes evolve over time, and in doing so, the perspective lens in which things such as literature and the arts are seen continue to evolve as well. Ellis seems content trying to be the rock trying to hold back a tidal wave, the tidal wave being change itself. While one can see merit in the fight against wiping away all of the original intent of historical literary works, the only problem is that this change in people’s thoughts and perceptions is absolutely inevitable. The wave of change will continue to rush, much like water around the rock, to the point that the rock is left floating in a sea of water, providing a figurative dam to nothing, as the dam is burst and has been flooded by change.

Without previous cultural waves such as the Enlightenment and the Renaissance, we wouldn’t be privy to many of the great works of art and literature that we are, many of which are the very works that Ellis fights so stringently to preserve. Because the rest of the world has not yet fully embraced the cultural revolution brought about by the Enlightenment, citing

Third World ethnic strife, civil wars in far off countries and tribal massacres in recent decades as examples of the resistance to this revolution, that is no reason to set forth a false notion that the changes that are taking place are somehow less than, or not necessary. It seems to contradict the very argument that these historical cultural authors such as Shakespeare, Milton and Donne intended to make when they created their works in the first place, and certainly seems to hold no place when discussing literature and education.

While slavery may have been widespread prior to the Enlightenment, is it truly the right position to take that North American slave owners are themselves viewed as “heroes” due to their participation in the American Civil War, even though they stood on the wrong side of it? While the war itself helped define the cultural landscape of the country today, not all involved in it should be rewarded for steering the world away from this pattern of behavior anymore than the Nazi’s should be praised for the change in perception of Jewish culture throughout the world. This continued defense of acts widely condemned as simply being *acts of the time* stands in stark contrast to the evolving of minds of the politically correct mindset that Ellis stands against. This only further pushes away a casual reader of his work that could have possibly been swayed toward the author’s side. It is evident throughout *Literature Lost* that Ellis is writing to a particular group of individuals who see the state of the humanities in the same manner that he does. Those who undoubtedly share in Ellis’ viewpoint do not by any effort of persuasion by Ellis himself, but because they are already firmly entrenched within the same mindset.

Moving his attack against political correctness toward class and gender by utilizing the argument that race, gender and class critics use the concept of human life as being a “complex

and diverse phenomenon” that is boiled down to the concept of oppression as a focal point is a broad reach that continues Ellis’ attack on the advancement of cultural norms. Class is viewed as an opportunistic means of allowing race, gender and class scholars to classify things within literary works as being simply about a victim and victimizer, using such modern day examples as economic growth and the inequalities of those faced with less than ideal circumstances.

Turning a blind eye to the state of actual class systems in America today, Ellis seemingly misses the mark in his belief that gender and class would play no role in the interpretation of classic works from years past, especially at the collegiate level.

Literature Lost utilizes a vast range of secondary material to convey the thought that Ellis places on the page with varied degrees of success. Mentions of critical pieces by Frederic Jameson, feminist takes from Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, as well as (as of the writing of *Literature Lost*) reflections by Philip Davis are all spread throughout *Literature Lost*, helping Ellis to map out the state of the humanities that he would have the reader believe has saturated the collegiate level beyond repair.

Ellis seems quite stringent in his viewpoint on the state of being in the humanities and literature within the collegiate curriculum, unwavering his stance that political correctness is creating more damage to the field than intended good. While Ellis, who is obviously quite passionate about his topic, is a very capable writer that provides ample arguments for the points that he makes in *Literature Lost*, the isolationist viewpoints that he harbors lead the reader toward a very dark reflection on the state of things today. Ellis offers very little hope for future peaks of renaissance or enlightenment, which may truly be the greatest affront to the humanities today.

While Ellis does provide readers a great deal to think about regarding the overall state of literature today, his book seems to have the opposite of it's intended effect. Instead of being convincing of how awful political correctness is, and how it has ruined the humanities at the collegiate level, it seems to instead reinforce the need for political correctness, and even goes so far as to make you appreciate the very works that Ellis insists are on the verge of being eradicated. *Literature Lost* is worth the read, if for no reason other than to possibly challenge the beliefs that you hold, or if you are in agreement of Ellis' viewpoints, prove you correct in your interpretation of the current literary landscape and provide a skilled and qualified ally in the pursuit to return things to a time of day's long past in the university arena of literature.