# Introduction

## *The Three Traditions*

Literary criticism is surely not a science. Unlike practitioners of the natural sciences, literary critics so far have been unable to agree about standards of proof and methods of inquiry. The doubts Plato raised in his dialogue *Ion* persist today; not only is literary criticism not a science, it is not certain that it deserves to be considered an art or craft either (what the ancient Greeks called a *techne*), like cookery, fishing, or carpentry, where the criteria for evaluation are relatively clear and the methods for procedure, even if rule-of-thumb, can be explained and taught. In the twenty-first century, roughly 2,500 years since Plato wrote his dialogues, there are more schools of criticism than ever, although in some of the most influential academic centers literary criticism has been replaced by cultural studies. How can one make sense of the history of this would-be discipline from Plato through the twenty-first century?

A survey of literary criticism from Plato and Aristotle through the cultural studies of the twenty-first century suggests that the history of literary criticism should not be seen either as a long progress toward a culmination in which literary criticism eventually becomes a science or as a mere chaos of opinions whose only ordering principle is chronology. Literary criticism 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. In his *Republic*, Plato condemned poetry not only because it told lies about the gods but also because it expressed and reinforced ideas and attitudes that he considered irrational, although accepted by most of his fellow citizens. Critical schools suspicious of poems, plays, and fiction because they reinforce the prejudices and false consciousness of the unenlightened majority are Platonic in their literary criticism even if they have nothing else in common with Plato. Neoplatonists like Plotinus have agreed that ordinary people were hopelessly mired in illusion, but these critics believe that art and literature properly understood can lead adepts to spiritual heights from which the concerns of everyday life would be revealed as mere trivialities. Critical schools that are Neoplatonic in their tendency value great literature, especially poetry, as a vehicle for moral and/or spiritual transcendence of conventional common sense. The humanistic tradition, in contrast, follows Aristotle in paying due respect (although not unquestioning allegiance) to common sense while turning to literature for insight into human life rather than for knowledge about the gods or for access to a higher spiritual realm.

The notion of "tradition" is loose and capacious; membership in a tradition is a matter of affinity and tendency rather than explicit philosophy or theory. A Marxist critic, for example, would belong to the Platonic tradition if he or she judges literary works primarily or entirely by the degree to which they affirm Marxist ideas. On the other hand, a critic could be influenced by Marxism and yet insist, like Edmund Wilson even during the height of his Marxism, on judging literary works by literary criteria. Believers in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or any other religion may be Platonic or humanistic in their literary criticism. The techniques of the New Criticism, for example, have been used on occasion by some critics to claim in Neoplatonic fashion that modernist literature provides a vehicle for moral and spiritual transcendence of modern civilization. Other New Critics – or the same critics on other occasions – have used similar techniques to reaffirm the humanistic tradition's contention that literature provides valuable insight into human life in all its

variety. In the United States, versions of the Platonic tradition have been dominant in the academy since the 1960s, whereas, in the earlier part of the twentieth century, partisans of modernism offered a secular version of the Neoplatonic tradition in defending the modern masterpieces. This book makes a case for the continuing relevance of the third tradition, the humanistic.

The humanistic view of literature may be seen as a middle way between the Platonic condemnation of art and literature and the Neoplatonic elevation. The humanistic tradition begins with Aristotle, was revived in the Renaissance, and includes such figures as Alexander Pope ("An Essay on Criticism") and Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century, Matthew Arnold and Henry James in the nineteenth, and Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, and Ralph Ellison in the twentieth. Although scarcely recognized in the academy, it continues in the twenty-first century in the essays and reviews of journals of opinion both left and right. The case for the humanistic alternative does not require that one agree with all the opinions of all the critics who might be considered participants in the tradition. That would be impossible in any case, since humanistic critics have disagreed among themselves about particular writers and literary works, as well as about politics, economics, social questions, and religion. They do share, however, some common ideas about literature and its relation to human life. Critics in the humanistic tradition do not share the disdain of both Platonists and Neoplatonists for the attitudes and beliefs of most human beings. Humanistic critics turn to literature for insight into human life, not knowledge about or access to ultimate reality; nor do they make extreme claims for the good or ill effects of literature's moral impact. From Aristotle on, critics in the humanistic tradition have held that literary works may arouse strong emotions but, if they are well-made, also allow for the resolution of those emotions. They contend that the influence of literature, especially in the best works, is indeed real and valuable, but usually indirect, difficult if not impossible to prove, and always subject to debate. Humanistic critics share Horace's belief that literature at its best both teaches and delights and, furthermore, that the teaching and

the delighting are intertwined, so much so that one cannot be separated from the other.

The first chapter discusses the two rival traditions originating with Aristotle's great teacher Plato. The first, which received its classic formulation in Plato's *Republic*, looks at literature with suspicion, certain that almost all literary works misinform about the nature of the universe, promote false views about human life, and inflame antisocial emotions. Those who may be considered part of the Platonist tradition in literary criticism (including those who disagree entirely with Plato's metaphysics) acknowledge literature's power to influence emotions but hold that even the best-known literary works have nothing worthwhile to teach about either the universe or human life. Critics in this tradition have embraced many different theories, philosophies, and religions; their literary criticism is "Platonic" not so much because of the specific metaphysical or political doctrine they profess but because they use adherence to that doctrine as a basis for judging literary works. Participants in this tradition may share little with Plato beyond the certainty that works of literature have nothing to teach them. The second tradition, derived from the Neoplatonic interpretation of dialogues like the *Ion* and the *Symposium*, argues for the spiritual value of art and literature. Neoplatonists, beginning with Plotinus, argue that beautiful things, including beautiful works of literature, can induce a love of beauty for its own sake that leads one to lose interest in earthly desires and instead move to a contemplation of beauty in the abstract and finally to a contemplation and love of the source of all beauty, the divine. Although the two traditions originating with Plato disagree in their judgment about literature, they agree that the key issues about literature are whether it induces moral or immoral emotions and whether it teaches truths or falsehoods about the nature of the universe. Both Platonists and Neoplatonists share a tendency to believe that most human beings are ignorant, foolish, and selfish, whereas they themselves possess the moral and intellectual high ground, possessing as they do truths beyond the capacity of the rest of mankind to attain and unselfishly concerned as they are with the good of all.

The second chapter argues that many of the most influential Romantic and modernist critics, reacting to apparently widespread indifference and even hostility to literature, went too far in the claims they made for literature and especially for poetry. The Romantics and also some modernists followed the Neoplatonists in arguing that literary merit derived from, and was an expression of, the ascent of the writer to a realm of the spirit far above the everyday world bounded by common sense. Romantics such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Ralph Waldo Emerson made grandiose claims for poetry and for poets as explorers of a spiritual realm unknown to common sense. Their claims were endorsed by Victorians like John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold, even as the latter rejected the philosophical idealism that seemed to provide a theoretical basis for Romantic intuitions about ultimate reality. Proponents of modernism, such as F. R. Leavis, Herbert Read, Allen Tate, and Philip Rahv were not philosophical Neoplatonists, but they all felt that literature, especially modernist literature, affirmed a view of life entirely at odds with ordinary (bourgeois) attitudes. Leavis, Read, Tate, and Rahv differed from each other in many respects, but the criticism of all four intimated that one could not be thought to really grasp the modernist masterpieces unless one was ready to condemn bourgeois values and customs – that is, the way of life of almost all one's fellow citizens – with something of the same thorough-going intensity the works themselves were held to express. Literature alone affirmed truly humane values, values hopelessly compromised and betrayed by business, politics, and middle-class family life. Literary intellectuals could thus at least congratulate themselves, amid the general catastrophe, on their moral and even spiritual superiority to the bourgeoisie that surrounded them.

Now that modernism has given way to postmodernism in departments of English, middle-class morality is still disdained, but it is no longer the modernist masterpieces or, for that matter, any literary works at all, that authorize the wholesale rejection of attitudes and ways of life embraced by the unenlightened. English departments once had a specific subject matter that could be

broadly defined as fiction, poetry, and drama written in English, but under postmodernism the conception of a specific subject matter for a discipline no longer applies. In the new superdiscipline of "cultural studies" there are no boundaries at all about areas of study. It is theory rather than subject matter that determines whether one is doing "cultural studies" or not. The third chapter takes account of the role of the Frankfurt School's "critical theory" in preparing the way for contemporary postmodernism both by its advocacy of the Platonist supremacy of "Theory" and by its assumption that "late capitalism" in the United States and the other liberal democracies deserved to be overthrown. Although revolution does not seem to be on the horizon for the United States so far in the twenty-first century, English studies have certainly undergone a transformation.

One illustration is the version of literary study encouraged by the "casebooks" designed for classroom study of novels like *Emma* and *The House of Mirth*. These casebooks are designed to introduce students to a variety of contemporary critical approaches, but whether the school of the critic is feminist, Marxist, New Historical, or something else, the tradition of literary criticism it exemplifies is likely to be Platonist, if the essays in the volume on Jane Austen's *Emma* in the Bedford/St. Martin's series of "Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism" are representative. The notion that theories might be judged by the extent to which they make room for the insights and perspectives Jane Austen makes available in her great novel is left for critics belonging to no school recognized in the casebooks, such as Lionel Trilling and Marilyn Butler (whose fine essay is happily included in the *Emma* casebook despite not being identified with any school), to develop.

The humanistic tradition in literary criticism surveyed in the fourth chapter begins with Aristotle and survives today in journals of opinion from a variety of political viewpoints that address readers on and off the campus who are assumed to be interested in both culture and politics, literature as well as foreign policy, ideas as well as elections – journals such as *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Republic*, *The Weekly Standard*, *The Claremont Review of Books*, *National Review*, and *The Nation*. From the viewpoint,

however, of influential English graduate programs, prestigious academic journals, authoritative anthologies of criticism, and the most prominent academic theorists, the humanistic tradition in literary criticism seems to be invisible. The *Poetics* has not been a major factor in critical debates since the ill-fated attempt of the "Chicago School" to re-establish the authority of Aristotle in the middle years of the twentieth century. Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson are all too easily classified as neoclassical figures whose criticism has only a historical interest. Matthew Arnold's attempt to connect literary criticism with cultural criticism might seem to make him an early exponent of cultural studies, but today Arnold usually appears as a spokesman for a kind of genteel humanism whose irrelevance to contemporary discussions is taken for granted. Although the critical attention devoted to Henry James's fiction has, if anything, increased in recent years, James's criticism has not been given its due, perhaps because of its conversational style and partly, one suspects, because James was unwilling to link the cause of art to a denunciation of bourgeois values. New Critics like Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Cleanth Brooks, so influential only a few decades ago, are scarcely mentioned, unless on occasion they are summoned up to condemn the New Criticism as the product of hopeless reactionaries and racists. Yet it is possible to take full account of the individual flaws and limitations of these critics and still recognize the continuing relevance of the tradition extending from Aristotle through the essays and reviews in contemporary journals of opinion that, in different ways and to different degrees, they all exemplify.

The literary and cultural criticism of such prominent twentieth-century figures as Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling, discussed in the fifth chapter, is virtually unknown to twenty-first century graduate students in departments of English literature and either unknown or disregarded by most of their professors. The criticism of Wilson and his peers, like that of Matthew Arnold, was driven by two seemingly contradictory notions, that "nothing was quite so important as literature and that literature was never to be treated as an end in itself," as Joseph Epstein puts it ("Matthew Arnold and the Resistance" 22). This dual commitment has been

one of the defining qualities of humanistic literary criticism at least since Horace wrote that the best works both delight and instruct. The tension between the two perhaps accounts for the unsystematic quality of most humanistic criticism, whereas the ability to remain true to both commitments may be one reason why the essays of the best humanistic critics remain compelling even though the critic's specific opinions on metaphysical, political, or other issues possess only a historical interest. Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling were both deeply influenced by Marx and Freud, but it is not their Marxism or Freudianism that draws readers to their essays. Wilson and Trilling were undoubtedly wrong about many things, but they had enough intellectual modesty to believe that they had something to learn from literature, and it is their repeated willingness to discover new insights and appreciate newly dramatized old truths that give continuing life to their essays.

One of the strengths of cultural studies over the traditional humanities is supposed to be its willingness to treat works of popular culture with the seriousness demanded by their social and cultural importance. The sixth chapter acknowledges the limitations of makeshift classifications like "highbrow" and "lowbrow" but observes that thoughtful, unpatronizing criticism of popular songs, films, and other artifacts of popular culture began long before cultural studies and continues today. Conversely, the theory guiding cultural studies precludes treating the best works of popular culture with the seriousness they deserve because it insists on treating them only as sociological data, to be judged only in terms of their political effect, rather than as works of art in their own right. The refusal to consider works of popular culture as works of art is justified on the grounds that aesthetic judgments are inherently antidemocratic and because artistic assessments are, it is argued, inevitably subjective, apparently unlike political opinions. The essays of Ralph Ellison, however, make a convincing case that democracy does not call for the renunciation of standards but instead for a willingness to seek out excellence wherever it may be found. Cultural democracy, Ellison suggests persuasively, insists that excellence may be discerned in works

outside the traditional "highbrow" genres and should be insisted on in the most unlikely places, including a small train station near Tuskegee, Alabama.

The seventh chapter takes up the ideas of Irving Babbitt and John Dewey, as well as of contemporaries like Anthony Kronman and Stanley Fish, about the proper role of the humanities, among whose disciplines humanistic literary studies is, as this book argues, central but not supreme. The case for literary study is ultimately weakened rather than strengthened by suggesting, like many of the partisans of Romanticism, that literary critics, because of their understanding of the works of Blake or Wordsworth or Shelley, can provide authoritative answers to questions about the nature of the universe, or, like many of the partisans of modernism, that literary critics, because of their knowledge of the works of Eliot, Flaubert, and Joyce, can provide authoritative answers to political and social questions. Scholars in the humanities should always be prepared to challenge natural scientists who feel qualified because of their knowledge about physics or biology to make authoritative judgments about moral, cultural, and political questions. Although the evidence for evolution through natural selection is a scientific question to be settled through scientific inquiry, the question of the implications of "Darwinism" for human life is not, nor can it be resolved by the methods of natural science. In "Literature and Science" Matthew Arnold wisely made no attempt to debate Thomas Huxley – "Darwin's bulldog" – on the scientific evidence for evolution through natural selection even as he firmly rejected Huxley's notion that "training in natural science" should replace the humanities as "the main part of education, for the great majority of mankind" (61). One way in which cultural studies differs from traditional humanistic inquiry is that the former recognizes no boundaries to the reach of its guiding theories, just as dialectical materialism once claimed the right to oversee and correct both the physical sciences and the humanistic disciplines. The humanities, as traditionally understood, make no claim to special knowledge about the physical universe, but they do assert the ability to illuminate human life in ways that the physical and even the social sciences cannot.

The humanistic tradition from Aristotle on has turned to literature to clarify, deepen, and question without entirely rejecting the confused but capacious set of ideas and attitudes that make up the common sense of an era or a society. Humanistic criticism, even when considering the most ambitious works of the imagination, avoids the jargon of the schools. Some have contended that a specialized vocabulary is necessary to transcend the categories and attitudes associated with ordinary common sense. The willingness of humanistic critics to use the language of public discourse suggests that they see no need for such "transcendence." Although few humanistic critics could be considered disciples of George Santayana, their implicit appeal to the common reader over the would-be theorist betrays the same respect for common sense over the theories of the schools that Santayana affirmed explicitly in the introduction to *Scepticism and Animal Faith*: "I think that common sense, in a rough dogged way, is technically sounder than the special schools of philosophy, each of which squints and overlooks half the facts and half the difficulties in its eagerness to find in some detail the key to the whole" (3). The obligation of literary criticism to make the great works of literature more consequentially available not only to academics but to general readers without any special intellectual equipment beyond the educated good sense of their time has been shirked in recent decades by some of the most acclaimed academic critics. It is an obligation that the humanistic tradition, from Aristotle to Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson through Matthew Arnold and Henry James, to Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, Ralph Ellison, and beyond, has repeatedly recognized and met.