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978-0-521-48532-6 - Literature against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defence of Poetry

Mark Edmundson

Frontmatter

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This timely book challenges theory's critique of literary art. It argues that the institutionalization of theory, particularly in North American universities over the last quarter century, has led to a pervasive intellectual sterility. Theory's institutional triumph induces critics to offer categorical explanations and demystifying analyses that ignore the actual power and scope of literature. Mark Edmundson traces this tendency to systematize and sterilize literature to Plato's famous quarrel, on behalf of philosophy, against the poets. Edmundson goes on to show how contemporary theorists like de Man, Derrida and Bloom have renewed the philosophical drive to demean poetic art, or to subsume it into some "higher" form of thought. This is not an anti-theoretical book: it acknowledges the value of theory and the intellectual prowess of the theorists it treats. But it is also concerned to recognize theory's limits and to establish the responsibility of literary criticism to do more than theorize: to identify those points at which literature *resists* being explained away. This book comes to the defence of poetry – and of literary art overall – at a time when its cultural status is in doubt. Challenging, clear, and controversial, Mark Edmundson's work should be read by all teachers of literature and theory, and by anyone concerned with the future of literary studies.

"By focusing on the condescension with which philosophy has, since Plato, treated poetry, Edmundson has given us a remarkably successful and genuinely original treatment of the relation between contemporary European philosophy and American literary criticism. Though he writes in a spirit of reconciliation, his view is bound to be controversial. Many literary theorists have no wish to be reconciled with the poets." Richard Rorty

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For Matthew and William

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