BOOK REVIEW: *LITERATURE AND LIBERTY: ESSAYS IN LIBERTARIAN LITERARY CRITICISM*

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Allen Mendenhall: *Literature and Liberty: Essays in Libertarian Literary Criticism*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-7391-8633-6, 161 pages.

By subtitling his book "Essays in Libertarian Literary Criticism," Allen Mendenhall situates his work within an exciting methodological approach that is still off the radar screen of most academicians. Not since the appearance of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) has a new literary approach invited us to read texts from a vantage point that jolts us into recognition of deep-seated ideological undercurrents that had previously remained unnoticed, or were simply passed over in silence. Yet whereas Said alerted readers to a literary misrepresentation of "the Orient" implicitly supporting European colonialism in the early modern and modern periods, libertarian literary criticism offers a more sweeping analysis of political power structures, aimed at understanding literature and society in any time period and at any point on the globe.

This interdisciplinary approach also shares with Marxist criticism the belief that politics and economics are relevant to an understanding of literary texts—as well as an underlying desire to improve the human condition—yet it offers a vastly different theoretical grounding. The fact that Marxism

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continues, under various guises, to have a stronghold in academic literary and cultural studies even though it has been largely discredited as economic theory and practice leads me to suspect that many mainstream academicians are blind to its inherent totalitarian apologetics and are unaware of a viable alternative approach. A strong remedy for the first condition is Dario Fernández-Morera's *American Academia and the Survival of Marxist Ideas* (1996), while the essays by Hans-Hermann Hoppe, David Osterfeld, and Ralph Raico in Yuri Maltsev's *Requiem for Marx* (1993) provide a useful discussion of the economic principles of the Austrian school in relation to Marxism. The above should be required reading in any university course devoted to methodological approaches to literature and culture.

Nonetheless, as Mendenhall points out, "even the latest anthologies of literary theory and criticism have sections devoted principally if not exclusively to Marxism, but nothing at all to capitalism, an assumed evil" (144). To my students and colleagues unfamiliar with libertarian literary criticism, I like to recommend Paul Cantor's introduction to *Literature and the Economics of Liberty: Spontaneous Order in Culture* (2009)—the groundbreaking volume he co-edited with Stephen Cox—which reads like a manifesto of this critical approach. Since the essays in this volume focus on canonical European and early American authors (Cervantes, Jonson, Shelley, Whitman, H.G. Wells, Cather), I generally also mention (when I have the occasion) that libertarian analysis works equally well outside the parameters of the Western literary canon, yielding new insights in fields as diverse as ancient Chinese moral philosophy (Long, 2003) and modern American popular culture (Cantor, 2003, 2012; McMaken, 2012). And since articles on a wide range of topics can be found in the interdisclipinary *Journal of Libertarian Studies* (1977-2008), and, beginning in 2009, in *Libertarian Papers* (both of which are available as free pdfs through the Ludwig von Mises Institute), there is really no excuse for scholars in the humanities to remain ignorant of this burgeoning field of study.

It is a pleasure to now add Mendenhall's deftly argued and passionately engaged volume to my list of recommended readings in libertarian scholarship. The introduction, entitled "The Basis for Liberty," and the conclusion, "Toward a Libertarian Literary Theory," argue from a theoretical standpoint for privileging individualist methodology over collectivist doctrine in the interpretation of texts. Although, as the author acknowledges, the volume lacks an overall unity of focus, each individual essay offers a practical 'case study' of a topic or direction within the purview of libertarian literary criticism. The first six chapters address a range of authors, namely, Emerson, Shakespeare, E.M. Forster, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Henry Hazlitt, and Mark Twain. The seventh chapter traces the emergence of the concept of

transnationalism over and against nationalism and addresses the implications of this development for literary criticism as well as for the world we inhabit.

The author's field of expertise encompasses not only libertarianism and literature, but Austrian economics, history, and law as well. An attorney who is currently following up his various law and literature degrees with a Ph.D. in English, Mendenhall also provides a medium of intellectual exchange on topics related to law and the humanities through his website, "The Literary Lawyer: A Forum for the Legal and Literary Communities." This multifaceted background gives him a keen ability to explore the intersection of law and literature, which is perhaps most apparent in his chapters on Geoffrey of Monmouth, Shakespeare, and E.M. Forster.

In "A Tale of the Rise of Law: Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain*," Mendenhall draws from John Austin's propositions on jurisprudence and Murray Rothbard's theory of state formation to argue that Geoffrey's history of kingship in Britain makes use of customary law and myth in order to "legitimize the official narrative of nationhood," thus championing a centralized state in a period of conflict over law and monarchical government (87).

The chapter on "Liberty and Shakespeare," while reflecting on the increasing inclusion of Shakespeare and other literary texts in law school curricula, also outlines the limitations of previous critics who—often without a background in law, legal history, or the common-law tradition—sought to document and interpret the Bard's use of legal concepts in his literary opus. Mendenhall concludes, however, that today "law-and-literature" may be "the most promising field" for an economic approach to imaginative literature if literary scholars can move beyond the Marxian (or quasi-Marxian) economic paradigms that stifle the profession (45-6).

The chapter on "Law and Liberty in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*" argues that Forster celebrates "Brahman Hinduism as an alternative to British rule of law and to the reforming utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham" (52), thus working against the prejudiced 'orientalist' perspective attributed to Western authors by Edward Said. According to Mendenhall, Foster's idealized vision of Brahman Hinduism allows him to validate the variety of human experience and the concept of a "spontaneous order" over "the centralized, artificial construct of British rule of law" (52), which was simply an ideological strategy to enforce their oppressive colonial empire (54).

The chapters on Emerson, Twain, and Hazlitt address three separate issues. In "Emersonian Individualism," Mendenhall situates Emerson's Transcendentalism vis-à-vis Ayn Rand's Objectivism, and then positions both Emerson and Rand against Walt Whitman's "presentist and value-free"

poetics (25-30). In "Bowdlerizing Huck," he regrets that a new edition of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by bowing to political correctness and eliminating offensive words related to race, actually undercuts Twain's critique of Southern race relations (113) and manipulates "the past to suit current ideological aims, transforming time-contingent literary texts into political vehicles or propaganda for the present" (117). The chapter "Henry Hazlitt, Literary Critic" examines Hazlitt's overlooked writing in literary criticism, in particular, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1933), which, although lacking the rigorous Austrian perspective embodied in his economic works, nevertheless deserves attention for "its ability to circumvent totalizing labels and to defy reductive classification" (107) in a field then dominated by formalism and Marxism.

In the final chapter, "Literature, Transnational Law, and the Decline of the Nation-State," Mendenhall first expounds the absurdity of nationalism in line with Orwell and Said, and then goes on to offer an overview of the history and status of the field of "transnationalism," beginning with Randolph Bourne's prescient essay "Trans-National America" (126). Dismantling "the homogeneity and coerciveness of nationalist rules and regulations" (129), Mendenhall describes transnational law as "the pluralistic order of various principles and rules from divergent customs, cultures, and communities that draws its lexicon from competing philosophical discourses and not from top-down, coercive commands of states or sovereigns" (131). "The beauty of transnational law," according to Mendenhall, "is that it serves the putatively 'liberal' interest of pluralism while serving the putatively 'conservative' interest of minimizing and circumventing government bureaucracy" (131). He then draws out the potential influence of transnational law on literary-political theory: whereas "Western theorists relying on Marxism reinforce Western power structures that exploit the third world, [...] transnational law subverts Western dominance [...] and carves out a space for third-world agency" (131). He concludes the chapter with a section on "Capitalism and Transnationalism," defining capitalism as "a system of voluntary economic exchanges between parties without government interest or intervention" (133). In this final section, Mendenhall reflects on the basic confusion regarding the term: "Some hear capitalism and think 'oppression' and 'exploitation'; others hear capitalism and think 'free-market' and 'prosperity'" (137).

The confusion over the term 'capitalism,' which Mendenhall attempts to dispel in both the final chapter and the introduction, is, in my view, one of the greatest stumbling blocks to understanding the difference between free-market exchange and collusion between economics and politics. I too "have heard professors [and, I would add, students] in the classroom present

critiques of capitalism that have no basis in economic research or reality" (6). As Mendenhall says:

> Much of what they criticize is a vulgar caricature of capitalism that does not represent the things that capitalism represents to me or other serious capitalists: freedom, liberty, mobility, voluntarism, peace, originality, exchange, creativity, cooperation, prosperity, happiness, health, trade, production, beauty, collaboration, ingenuity, variation, diversity, mutuality, agency, and independence. It seems that when these critics of capitalism talk about capitalism, they have in mind a concept of evil and oppression, not a freewheeling system that over the course of human history has eliminated more generic bads than any other system. (6)

Yet Mendenhall is perhaps not quite fair to literary scholars by pitting them against "their economic critics" (144) as though they were singularly misguided in their reliance on "prefabricated categories of capitalism" (135). It is enough to turn to Wikipedia's exposition of "different models of capitalism," comprised of free-market, mixed-economy, and state-planned varieties, in order to see that there is widespread mayhem regarding the term in public usage. Nor do most mainstream academic economists deserve a gold star for their knowledge of the Austrian school since, even if they readily dismiss Marxism, they nevertheless often embrace economic theories that turn them into apologists for government interventions of all kinds—leading us on a parallel path down the same 'road to serfdom.'

Perhaps adding to the confusion is the fact that the term 'crony capitalism'—referring to a quintessentially anti-capitalist practice entailing collusion between government, banks, and big business—is commonly employed as though the adjective were a defining characteristic (as in 'sour lemon') rather than an aberration (as in 'poisoned apple'). As Mendenhall states, "we will continue to suffer from confusion and anger until literary Marxists and free-market economists become conscious of these contradictory meanings" (137).

If, on the one hand, this volume's varied topics lack the guiding thread of a monograph, on the other, the individual essays eloquently demonstrate how libertarian literary criticism can be applied to a range of concerns. The approach is consistently libertarian, but the arguments are hardly redundant and the conclusions are anything but reductive. On the contrary, the emphasis on human action almost prevents us a priori from falling into the trap of forcing every text to conform to a pre-set critical mold. Mendenhall's stated goal, moreover, is not simply to shed light on the various topics he covers, but to "offer a range of options for what libertarian literary theory and criticism might look like" (4).

While offering a persuasive case for a libertarian approach in the humanities, this book should also be of interest to Austrian or libertarian scholars who have not ventured out of the social sciences into imaginative literature and literary studies. As Mendenhall states: "Of one thing I am sure: this book shows libertarians that the humanities in general and literature in particular can serve as useful, illuminating sources for studying economics and human action" (22). Countering an academic environment in which Marxism and its variants are still being fed to students, this volume of essays offers nutritious food for thought to scholars across the humanistic and social science disciplines—whether they are already conversant with libertarian literary criticism or have never heard of it.

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