

**William Marx.** *The Hatred of Literature.* Trans. Nicholas Elliott. Harvard University Press 2018. 240 pp. \$29.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674976122).

Although a book depicting revulsion, venom and spittle against literature, William Marx's account is replete with funny anecdotes, witty comments, and a lively, firecracker-style. Here is a sample of chapter headings, in no particular order of gravitas: 'Hector emerges from a hat' (23), 'Is it better to burn heretics or grammarians?' (23), 'Literature leads straight to Auschwitz' (57), 'Cup of coffee versus cup of tea' (57), 'Against the castration of writers' (103), 'A very smelly cheese' (103), 'Rousseau, the burner of libraries' (103), and 'Five Unhappy Proustians sitting at a table' (155).

You get the idea. The style is playful and learned, often a potent combination, though here I need to question a potential charge of frivolity. For example, why resurrect many long forgotten (I should add 'legitimately forgotten') voices who have railed against literature? Is the book, then, more surface than depth, even if that surface is also stimulating and refreshing? Yes, we all remember how Plato called to banish poets, but so much of the history that follows is recast and remodelled with only a hint of Plato's grandeur and immortality. What is the value of tracing such hatred (let alone, perhaps, any hatred), giving illumination to what has mostly remained crepuscular and shadowed, again, rightfully so? One answer is that such voices remain with us today.

The book is divided into four main chapters, serving as trials, namely four main accusations historically levelled against literature. Chapter 1 highlights how the initial attack on literature, especially of poetry in the ancient world, was on account of power. Poetry had power and that is why Plato has Socrates attack the poets in *The Republic*, and later echoes those comments in *The Laws* through the Athenian Stranger. Poets were deemed a real potential threat to order, stability, and morals.

From Plato, the authority of later Christendom carries out similar accusations and decrees—think of burning heretics or the Index of Forbidden books, for example. Marx calls Christianity 'the first of the universal totalitarianisms that aimed to rule over every aspect of humans, both internal and external, as well as over society' (43). He calls it 'inevitable' that Christianity would conflict with literature because of Jesus' preference for the ignorant. Alas, Marx is evidently not an astute reader of the Gospels with Jesus' use of parables, not to mention his out-riddling various Scribes and Pharisees. This faux pas is salvaged, however, when Marx cites Paul's discourse as skilful (though I am also reminded of Harold Bloom's critique of Paul's Greek as poor). Regardless, to say this 'only show(s) that Christianity has an ambiguous relationship with literature' (44) is a banal, but true point. It also comes back to what literature is, especially if crouched in a literary style which nevertheless attacks literature's value or merits. Marx's initial argument is that slowly, the established authority of literature is questioned, dismissed of little substance, unless some poetry is 'authorized by the States.' The substance or purpose of literature becomes externally bound.

The next few trials have been more damning towards literature. Chapter 2 focuses on Truth. Such a conflict is born from a certain vantage point of reason and science, in a world that claims truth only exists by what is provable, quantifiable, and tested. This is an old argument, and sadly, an ongoing one, as humanities departments struggle for funding and increasingly numbers in a world that 'is forced to relinquish truth to the power of science' (74). I can laugh at the claims of Wordsworth as a new priest, his poetry as a new religion, also echoed by Whitman. But there are layers, sides, and reflections addressed through literature that all the controlled testing in the world cannot capture. Notice there is also a touch of the spiritual and theological in such claims, though Marx provides little room for such turns. But with the question of literature's misplaced veracity, comes perhaps its

biggest trial and challenge: morality. Here presumably, is where religion and literature inevitably clash again.

The trial from morality, thus, is the focus in Chapter 3, a wide-ranging and lively account, bursting in humour and choice examples, the singing and repetition of literature as immoral, needing to be restricted, banned, censored, banished, or burned. How far is too far, in either direction? Should a book like Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* be banned? Should free speech include the right to challenge or even mock any belief or allegiance? Does some literature go too far and need restraining? Can an unhampered, morally unbound text lead to widespread societal degradation? Marx praises literature for its ability to shock (134). He advocates a literature that has the power to 'destabilize every value and every certainty' and challenges any attempt to impose 'on all works of literature to rub their readers the right way and espouse empathy' and to demand of our students 'to agree with works as if they were sacred texts' (134). He believes that behind such acts of censorship, there exists a pervasive anti-literature force challenging literature's basic right to exist. Are these claims misguided? Do they go too far?

The fourth and final trial concerns society. Emasculated of any apparent authority, questioned and challenged by its spurious claims to truth, and identified and rebuked for its shaky, unreliable, or heretical morality, literature, and its writers, are deemed to have no lasting say in political society, or of any practical necessary use for the majority of a society's inhabitants. Ultimately, of course, in such narratives, seemingly predisposed against literature, and its challenges and refusal to stay within the lines, easy excuses are given for its untrustworthiness. If a society is democratic, then literature is elitist and causes inequality; if the society is aristocratic, then literature is not elite and potent enough. We also know what happens to writers and poets of a certain ilk in totalitarian contexts. Marx argues that literature becomes the 'ideal scapegoat' (181) and that 'literature is the ultimate illegitimate discourse' (189). Do these claims hold?

Note that I have purposefully not recounted and re-narrated the various minor figures who stand on their soap boxes and rebel against literature or write mighty tomes, whether C.P. Snow or Tanneguy the younger, for example, or those unfortunate enough to have read such accounts and so written refutations like Friedrich Wilhelm Schültz's, *The Cremation of Heretical Books*. Such are texts one reads about, perhaps stores away to use at a dinner party, but are seemingly of little import to demand knowing in full. The value, if any, is in the opportunity such texts give for someone like Marx to show his urbanity. Of Schültz's text above on cremation of heretical books, Marx can't help writing that 'one dare not say [it was] a *fiery* disputation, given the subject matter' (118). I smiled; you may chuckle when you read it, but most of us will rightly forget about such authors in a few hours or minutes' time.

The deeper issue, perhaps one not really given secure footing in the book, is whether there could be some merit of truth in anti-literature's arsenal. If literature's overriding value is to shock, I can see the merit in some cases in challenging such attempts. Against Marx, I believe the real power of literature is in its ability to enlighten, challenge, and yes, arouse empathy. It is why totalitarian regimes ban certain writers: because they challenge claims that some Other is vile, a roach, vermin, meat. More fruitfully, Marx could have considered the attacks on literature with a growing resurgence in some of those same circles against religion, or examine how an excess of either religion or literature often leads to a disparaging of the other. The aim, of course, would then be to find a middle way, advocating the strengths and challenges of each. In a text where literature is depicted as alone and isolated, the world seemingly against it, the narrative would have been interesting to show some of literature's potential allies, especially religious voices who are persecuted. Of course, this alliance would perhaps limit literature's ability to shock (there would be some moral limits like the dignity

of the human person), but then, isn't shock a temporary, fleeting sensation, overcome by repetition, much like the rhetoric of anti-literature recounted in Marx's book?

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