

# ALSC NEWSLETTER

The Association of Literary Scholars and Critics

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## *From the Editor:*

This issue of the newsletter brings an intriguing argument by Paul Cantor on the relation of political to literary analysis. Many of us think that politics is central to what has gone wrong in literary studies, but while some see the cause of the trouble in the overemphasis on political concerns, for others the problem lies rather in the nature of the politics that is brought to bear. Paul Cantor shifts the grounds of the argument and makes distinctions that result both in a different view of what went wrong and some constructive suggestions on how to use politics to literary advantage.

Preparations for the first national conference take up much of the rest of this issue. The full conference program can be found on page 7, and the call to the business meeting on page 8. An important item on the business meeting agenda is the ratification of the ALSC By-Laws. Accordingly, the text of those By-Laws is given on pages 9 and 10. By circulating the text in this newsletter we are giving the membership the required period of notice for the proposed action.

Finally, there are some news items on page

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## LITERATURE AND POLITICS: UNDERSTANDING THE REGIME

By Paul A. Cantor

Over the years I have found one concept from political theory especially useful in analyzing literature: the idea of the regime developed in classical political philosophy, especially by Plato and Aristotle. The choice of the word regime to translate the Greek term in question (politeia) is debatable, but it helps highlight what Plato and Aristotle mean by the term. A regime is a government, a specific form of government, and the word calls attention to the actual person or group in power, the one or ones who in fact rule. Thus we name regimes after particular rulers--the Franco Regime, Brezhnev Regime, or Castro Regime--or after ruling parties--the Communist Regime, Nazi Regime, or Sandinista Regime. But the word regime also has the sense of a regimen, a way of doing things, a way of life. The way the English word regime encompasses this range of meanings from public to private life reflects the semantic range of the Greek word politeia and thereby points to a fundamental principle of the political science of Plato and Aristotle. Their key question of a political community is always: who rules? And with this concentration on forms of government goes the idea that these forms are formative: they shape the way of life of the citizens living under them. Thus, if the many rule, we are dealing with a democracy, and this distinctive form of government will produce

*(Continued on p. 3)*

*Paul Cantor is Professor of English  
at the University of Virginia*

## The President's Column

Age and experience have done their best to render me a strong admirer of realization. Given the natural tendency of things to vaporize, when ideas that have been only projects become realities, this strikes me as bordering on the miraculous.

Who, among the stalwart group of concerned colleagues who first gathered at the end of February in 1994 to form the nucleus of the ALSC, could have foretold that we would be in the process of holding our first national conference, that advance registrations would be around 200, and that membership would be in the neighbourhood of 1300--all this occurring in a little more than a year?

Clearly the ALSC is filling a national need, and, even more clearly, we are holding to our early promises: Our keynote speaker is a classicist; writers and critics are present in abundance; and we have reached out to junior faculty and awarded travel stipends to nine younger colleagues to attend the Minneapolis conference.

But more importantly, in our first conference program we have--as we said we would--reasserted the validity of the literary imagination, and the value of literary study. And in so doing we have indeed moved beyond narrowly conceived

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The opinions expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the editor or of the ALSC.

ideologies.

As one of the founding officers, I am gratified by the success of our venture, one that required the cooperation of scores of people to get us off to a running start. As reassured colleagues now join in to bolster our membership rolls, it appears that better things are still to come. To our new leadership and to our growing membership, I wish all the best for the ALSC.

*Ricardo Quinones*

### An Announcement from the Program Committee

To our great regret, Saul Bellow recently wrote that when his internist "learned that I had accepted an invitation to Minneapolis in September he jumped all over me--softly, owing to the state of my health, but he did jump and told me in no uncertain terms that I would not be ready for plane travel for months to come." "With considerable regret" he had to withdraw. When asked whom he would like to take his place, he replied at once: Stanley Crouch. Mr. Crouch enthusiastically accepted our invitation without a moment's hesitation. As the author of fiction, essays, jazz criticism, biography and social commentary, he is one of the most important writers in contemporary literature. His most recent book is Notes of a Hanging Judge: Essays and Reviews, 1979-89 (Oxford UP, 1990). Soon to appear is The All American Skin-Game, or the Decoy of Race: The Long and Short of It, 1990-94 (Pantheon Books).

When he agreed to speak at our meeting, Mr. Crouch said at once that he wanted to begin by talking about Saul Bellow's Mr. Sammler's Planet. So we shall, in any event, have an evening with Saul Bellow, by way of Stanley Crouch.

We hope to see Mr. Bellow walk over from his residence to our 1996 meeting at Boston, and we wish him a full recovery.

*Jay Martin*

*(Continued from p. 1)*

a characteristically democratic way of life in its citizens. In Plato's classic formulation in Book VIII of the Republic (563c-d), with the premium on freedom in a democracy, even the domestic animals in the city lose their sense of obedience and wander uncontrolled in the streets.

Given the comprehensiveness of the politeia, Plato and Aristotle see literature and more generally the fine arts as part of the regime, which is why poets, for example, come under such careful scrutiny in Plato's Republic and why Aristotle surprisingly discusses poetry and music toward the end of his Politics. In the classical view, literature tends to reflect the spirit of the regime under which it is written, the dominant opinions and constitutive political principles. Living under a tyrant, poets will sing the praises of tyranny and above all the specific despot in power. Even under a democracy, poets will cater to and reinforce the democratic prejudices of their audience. This phenomenon is the deepest source of Plato's quarrel with the poets. He finds something profoundly unphilosophical in the way poets are generally compelled to operate within the horizons defined for them by a given regime. In their need to reach and please an audience, tragedians, for example, are usually forced to rely on a community's conventional sense of what constitutes a transgression against custom or law, while comedians are forced to rely on what a community conventionally takes to be ridiculous and hence laughable. In general, Plato criticizes poets for giving their audiences only what they want to hear. Poetry celebrates those human beings who indulge in the grand passions audiences find exciting, while neglecting the higher case of the man, like Socrates, who has mastered his passions. This is the basis of Plato's implicit claim that his form of mimesis, the philosophical dialogue, is superior to conventional poetry, since it can imitate the highest human type, the philosopher, in a way that ordinary epic and tragedy cannot, confined as they are to forms of heroism the average citizen readily understands and appreciates.

All that I have said thus far will sound familiar to my colleagues in political theory, but it should also have a familiar ring to my colleagues in literary study. I may in fact seem to have been formulating the view of literature that currently holds sway in my profession, that literature offers us nothing but what are called socially constructed fictions. Study after study attempts to demonstrate how authors reflect and embody the prejudices of race, class, and gender they inherit from their society, only occasionally granting them a small role in helping in turn to shape those prejudices. Often calling itself the New Historicism, this critical movement is a species of a broader historicism that has long been prevalent in literary study, the view that literature is the product of a specific historical period or Zeitgeist. A careful reading of Plato's critique of the poets in the Republic might leave one wondering how any such historicism has the audacity to call itself "New." In fact, historicism has produced few valid insights into the way authors are bound by the horizons of their communities that are not already somehow anticipated in the analyses of literature in Plato and Aristotle.

In short, what modern historicist philosophy understands as the Zeitgeist, Plato and Aristotle understand as the regime. It is important to recognize this similarity in order to deflate historicism's claims to novelty, but it is equally important to understand the vast differences between the two approaches. As a political concept, the regime points to conscious deliberation as a human phenomenon, and it leaves open the possibility of human beings deciding rationally what is good for them. As a historicist concept, the Zeitgeist constantly points to underlying subconscious factors that determine human thought, thereby foreclosing the possibility of human beings consciously guiding their efforts.

To reduce a complicated matter to a formula, the ancient approach tends to explain lower phenomena in terms of higher; the modern approach explains higher phenomena in terms of lower. The concept of the regime begins from the fact of a

consciously chosen form of government and uses that to explain the form that a host of related phenomena in the community take, including the fine arts. By contrast, the historicist concept of the Zeitgeist starts from a somewhat vaguely but comprehensively defined historical moment, and uses that to explain a whole series of phenomena, including cultural and political forms. To formulate the contrast as sharply as possible for heuristic purposes, in the classical understanding, the United States has a democratic culture because it has a democratic form of government; in the historicist view, the United States has a democratic form of government because it has a democratic culture, and that democratic culture can in turn ultimately be traced to more basic material factors, a mixture of economic and social forces.

As I have stated it, this controversy has something of a "chicken versus egg" ring to it. One may feel tempted to split the difference and say that a democratic polity and a democratic culture mutually interact and reinforce each other. Still, it is worth examining the two positions in their stark opposition because they point to an important controversy concerning the motive forces of human history. In the view of Plato and Aristotle, human beings can consciously and effectively deliberate about what is good for the community and how it should be constituted. They may well be wrong in the conclusions they draw, and influenced by prejudices and material interests in the process; nevertheless, their deliberative thought plays a major role in the form their communities take and thus their way of life. In the view of the various schools of historicism, by contrast, all political thought is merely ideology, a smokescreen for more basic material interests and nothing more. In the most highly developed form of historicism--Marxism--both political and cultural phenomena are regarded as ultimately epiphenomena. They are treated as a kind of superstructure that merely reflects a base of economic factors that provide the true motive force of history and thus the true explanation for what happens in society.

Here the case of literature can help us to see that the classical position is more balanced and comprehensive. It recognizes and embraces all the phenomena the historicist position points to, but it does not stop there--it allows for other human possibilities, refusing to eliminate a role for conscious human agency in history. Here one must be careful, though, not to draw too sharply the distinction between classical political philosophy and historicism. In some formulations, it may seem that in opposition to the determinism of historicism, the classical position maintains that all human thought and expression are free of all constraints, material or otherwise. A reading of the critique of the poets in the Republic, or in other dialogues such as the Ion, will show that this formulation is not Plato's position. He is just as capable as Marx of viewing authors as the lackeys of one force or another; but while Marx sees authors serving the interests of economic classes, Plato sees them as catering to different political regimes. Still, for Plato the majority of poets are in one way or another timeservers, writing to flatter the prejudices of the audience they depend on, and hence bound by the horizons of their regimes.

The classical idea of the regime helps reveal what is going on in a great deal of literature, which in turn offers striking confirmation of the idea of the regime. For example, the history of literature in the past three centuries reveals an attempt to find democratic forms of poetry, fiction, and drama in response to the rise and spread of democratic regimes since the American and French Revolutions. In particular, authors have searched for new and distinctively democratic forms of heroism, breaking with traditional forms, which seemed aristocratic in nature and hence inappropriate to the modern democratic world. One can see this democratic spirit in George Eliot, who argues passionately that her middle-class characters are as worthy of serious literary treatment as the noble figures of classical tragedy. By recording the bourgeois tragedies of her characters, Eliot hopes to bring about a revolution in literary representation fully in accord with the spirit

of the French Revolution and the later democratic movements of the nineteenth century. Guided by the idea of the regime, one can thus find political meaning, or at least political implications, in works that at first sight may appear to be apolitical.

Many nineteenth-century novels, in both Britain and the United States, seem to avoid political subjects and deal instead with private life. They portray characters evidently uninterested in public concerns and wrapped up in purely private matters such as making a living, falling in love, and founding a family. But like a Marxist analysis, a classical political analysis of such novels reveals that they do in effect have a political axe to grind--they reflect a specific regime, namely that of bourgeois democracy, and their concentration on private life is in accord with a particular political program. The middle-class heroes of nineteenth-century novels are in fact the fulfillment of the political program promoted by thinkers like Hobbes and Locke in the hope of bringing peace to European society. These philosophers sought to divert people from public to private concerns, in particular from the belligerent and divisive concern with public honor characteristic of aristocratic man to the peaceful and unifying concern with private economic betterment characteristic of bourgeois man. Hence the absence of overtly political subject matter from many nineteenth-century British and American novels actually reveals something about the politics of these nations. The way these novelists focus on private life to the exclusion of public life indicates that they are writing under the influence of the liberal-democratic regimes that prevailed in their nations in the nineteenth century. These writers concentrate on certain provocative issues of private life only because they take it for granted that more fundamental issues of political life have been settled, that is, they think within a political context defined for them by their regimes. In short, it is precisely because these novelists take for granted the rightness of the democratic regime and its concomitant bourgeois way of life that they devote themselves to exploring the complexities of

life under that regime.

I stress the similarities between classical political analysis and Marxist/historicist analysis in order to counter the common claim that thinkers like Plato and Aristotle were naively idealistic in their understanding of literature. But once again the differences are at least as important as the similarities, and analysis in terms of the regime parts company with analysis in terms of the *Zeitgeist* on the issue of whether all authors are completely bound by the horizons of the communities or eras in which they live. Historicism typically treats all authors as the same, that is, equally bound by the horizons of their era. This claim is in fact what truly distinguishes historicism as a philosophical position. Virtually everyone who has thought about the issue, including Plato and Aristotle, would acknowledge that people are influenced by their historical circumstances, but only historicism argues that those circumstances fully determine the way all authors think.

The position of classical political philosophy allows for a more discriminating and nuanced examination of authors. Because Plato and Aristotle take people's political opinions seriously and do not regard them as nothing more than ideological reflections of underlying material interests, they remain open to the possibility that some people, including even authors, may work their way free of conventional opinion and achieve genuine knowledge. Such philosophical souls, like Socrates, break free of the horizons defined for them by a particular regime, in part by means of a process of comparing one regime with another to determine the good and the bad points of each. With its focus on being in time, historicism tends to conceive of communities as hermetically sealed off from each other, each locked within its own historical horizon. By contrast, the classical idea of the regime allows for a variety of competing regimes, existing simultaneously and thus making comparisons possible, comparisons that undermine the intellectual hegemony of any given regime.

Thus for all his criticism of the poets, Plato

raises the possibility of a truly philosophical poetry, one that instead of being the product of a particular regime might itself offer insights into that regime or even a variety of them. In a brief essay, I can only cite Shakespeare as an example of such a truly philosophical poet. Indeed an awareness of the phenomenon Plato and Aristotle call the regime appears to be one of the keys to the extraordinary range and complexity of Shakespeare's achievement. The wealth of human types he portrays is profoundly related to the variety of regimes he portrays in his plays, regimes that range across the map of Europe and throughout the pages of history. His ancient Romans lead lives radically distinguished from those of his modern Englishmen, not because of what we today would call personality differences, but because they live under radically different regimes. Shakespeare shows that living in a pagan republic is very different from living in a Christian monarchy; it gives people fundamentally different views of the cosmos and thus leads to diametrically opposed responses to such fundamental issues as suicide. Perhaps no line in Shakespeare shows his understanding of the regime better than Horatio's famous response to Hamlet's request that he forego suicide: "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane." This line has become so familiar to us that we normally let it go right by, but what can Horatio mean by it? Was he cryogenically frozen and providentially thawed out at just the right moment to add some much needed Stoicism to the court of Denmark? This is of course a comical suggestion. We all know that this line is Horatio's way of telling Hamlet that he wants to join him in death by killing himself. But he does so by formulating the point not in personal terms but in terms of contrasting regimes, focusing on how a man's response to the question of suicide will depend on whether he was raised under a Christian or a pagan regime.

But Horatio's statement implies more. Though pointing to the power of the regime to shape human character, it also raises the possibility that some men may not be captive of the era, the

community, or the regime that tried to form them. Horatio was presumably raised under a Christian regime, and yet he claims that his thinking about a fundamental question is Roman in nature. This reveals the complexity of Shakespeare's attitude toward the regime. He understood its power but also explored the limits of that power, limits nowhere better illustrated than in his own abilities as a playwright and thinker. Indeed, the fact that Shakespeare was aware of the importance of differing regimes shows that he was not the captive of any particular regime.

Historicists treat Shakespeare as the creature of a particular historical moment and view his plays as locked into a set of concerns peculiar to a man of the English Renaissance. But a careful reading of his plays demonstrates that, with the exception of minor anachronisms and other mistakes of detail, he generally and genuinely knew what he was doing when he set his plays in remote times and places.

That is why a careful reading of Shakespeare's plays amounts to a political education, as one learns to follow his profound reflections on the interplay of the community and the individual, of public and private life. Shakespeare is to be sure a rare case, but he is not unique. His example suggests that one of the chief tasks of literary criticism is to distinguish between the majority of authors, who are in fact bound by the horizons of the regimes under which they live, and those exceptional few who have at least glimpses beyond the limits of their communities. In pursuing this kind of question, the study of literature can indeed teach us a great deal about politics--about both the power of the regime to shape human thought and expression, and the power of individual minds to see beyond its limits and transcend them. ■

*This is an abridged version of a paper which appeared earlier this year in PS: Political Science and Politics, 28: 192-5.*

# The Minneapolis Conference Program

Radisson Hotel Metrodome, Minneapolis  
September 22-24, 1995

## Friday, September 22

3:00-5:00 p.m. Panel: *A Remarkable Flowering: The University of Minnesota Humanities Program, 1950-65*. Discussion, talks and readings will feature some of the original participants in the program, including former director Ralph Ross and former faculty and students. Moderator: Norman Fruman (Minnesota).

7:30 p.m. Welcoming remarks by President Ricardo Quinones. Introduction of the keynote speaker by Thomas Clayton (Minnesota).

"Author! Author!" -- Keynote address by Bernard Knox, Director Emeritus of the Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard.

A reception will follow.

## Saturday, September 23

9:00-11:50 a.m. Panel: *Intellectual Craftsmanship: How to Read a Book*. Introduction by Marsha S. Collins (North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

Roger Shattuck (Boston Univ.): "A Reciprocating Engine--like Proust."

Rosanna Warren (Boston Univ.): "Alcaics in Exile: Auden's 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud'."

Sven Birkerts (poet and critic): "Reading and Depth of Field."

Robert Alter (UC, Berkeley): "Reading for Style in Dickens."

12:00 noon. Buffet Luncheon

1:30-4:20 p.m. Panel: *Dante and the Western Canon*. Introduction by Patricia Sloane (CUNY).

Ricardo Quinones (Claremont McKenna): "The 'Scandal of the *Inferno*' in an Age of Atrocity."

Paul Cantor (Virginia): "The Uncanonical Dante: *The Divine Comedy* and Islamic Philosophy."

Steven Botterill (UC, Berkeley): "Dante's Poetics of the Sacred Word."

Robert Pinsky (Boston Univ.): "A Contemporary Translation of Dante's *Inferno*."

4:30-6:00 p.m. General membership meeting: plans, strategies, organization.

6:30 p.m. Reception

7:30 p.m. Banquet

Stanley Crouch: "Mr Bellow, Mr Sammler, and Mr Crouch. Art and Society on our Planet."

Introduction by Avrom Fleishman (Johns Hopkins).

## Sunday, September 24

9:00-11:15 a.m. Panel: *Poet and Critic*. Introduction by Frank R. Cunningham (South Dakota).

Poems read by poets John Hollander (Yale) and Mark Strand (Johns Hopkins); criticism by Charles Berger (Utah) and Eleanor Cook (Toronto); responses by the poets.

11:20 a.m.-12:20 p.m. *Reflections on the Convention*. Introduction by Helen Killoran (Ohio Univ., Lancaster). Commentaries by Lee Rust Brown (Utah) and John Ellis (UC, Santa Cruz).

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3. The chairmen and members of all Standing and Special Committees except the Nominations Committee are appointed by the Nominations Committee. Standing Committees shall consist of four members serving staggered two-year terms.

4. The Nominations Committee shall consist of the three Council members who are in the third year of their term.

#### **Article VII: Elections**

1. Each spring, the Vice-President and three members of the Council are elected by the general membership of the Association. The Nominations Committee shall nominate candidates for each position, and additional nominations may be made through a petition signed by any fifteen members in good standing of the Association.

2. If no candidate for Vice-President receives at least 50% of the votes cast, a run-off shall be held between the two candidates receiving the most votes.

3. Vacancies on the Council occurring through failure to complete a regular term of office shall be filled by the Council.

4. All terms of office shall begin on the second day of the annual convention or, when the annual convention is not held in September or October, on September 1.

#### **Article VIII: Meetings**

1. A general meeting of the membership shall be held at the annual conference of the Association.

2. Meetings of the Council shall be called by the Secretary when requested to do so by a majority of the members of the Council.

3. The Secretary shall ensure that seven days notice is given for all meetings, and that an agenda for the meeting is included with the call.

4. A quorum for a general meeting shall be fifty members. A quorum for a Council meeting shall be two thirds of the Council.

5. The Council may transact business by mail, including electronic mail, provided that any member may require that action on any decision be postponed for one week to allow further discussion.

#### **Article IX: Amendments to the By-Laws**

These By-Laws may be amended either by a two-thirds vote at a general meeting of the membership or by a mail ballot.

#### **Article X: Mail Balloting**

Any action taken at a general members' meeting or by the Council may be put to a mail ballot on receipt by the Secretary of a petition signed by thirty members in good standing.

#### **Article XI: Transition**

Following adoption of these By-Laws, the Council is authorized to make whatever transitional arrangements it deems necessary to implement their provisions.



# ASSOCIATION OF LITERARY SCHOLARS AND CRITICS

The Association of Literary Scholars and Critics is a new organization that has been formed because of a deep and widespread concern about the present state of literary studies. Its purpose is to foster appreciation of the literary imagination, of the value of literary study, and of a shared literary culture. It will hold to broad conceptions of literature rather than the narrow, highly politicized ones often encountered today. It will serve as a forum for anyone with a serious scholarly or critical interest in literature, and it welcomes both classicists and modernists, independent and academic literary critics, as well as creative writers and publishers.

The Association now has over thirteen hundred members, and they include distinguished literary scholars and prominent writers such as Robert Alter, Joseph Brodsky, Robert Greer Cohn, Denis Donoghue, Victor Erlich, Karl S. Guthke, Donald Hall, E.D. Hirsch, Jr., John Hollander, Alfred Kazin, Edith Kern, Mary Lefkowitz, Richard Poirier, Ralph Rader, Christopher Ricks, Roger Shattuck, Walter Sokel, Theodore Ziolkowski, and many others.

The first national conference will take place in Minneapolis, September 22-24, 1995.

The Steering Committee includes Felicia Bonaparte (CUNY), Paul Cantor (University of Virginia), Lorraine Clark (Trent University), John M. Ellis (University of California, Santa Cruz), James Engell (Harvard University), David Hertz (Indiana University), John Hollander (Yale University), Richard Lehan (UCLA), Ricardo Quinones (Claremont McKenna College), Roger Shattuck (Boston University) and Rosanna Warren (Boston University).

We invite you to join us by completing the membership application below and returning it to: The Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, Crown College, University of California, Santa Cruz, California, 95064.

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I would like to become a member of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics and enclose a check for \$25 to cover membership dues.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail \_\_\_\_\_

*Editor (continued from page 1)*

8, and on page 11 a statement about the ALSC including a membership application, with our usual request that you post the whole page on your departmental bulletin board.

Since the appearance of the first issue of the newsletter many members have written to us. We still intend to devote a section of the newsletter to such letters, especially those that carry forward the discussion about the plans and purposes of the Association, and to include also the most interesting messages posted on the forthcoming ALSC electronic net (see page 8). But in this issue the upcoming conference demanded all the available space. And maybe that is just as well; virtually all of the letters were warmly supportive, and we should have laid ourselves open to the charge of self-congratulation had we printed even a few of them. The policy discussion will begin with the next issue's letters column, so please write.

Another item of Association news on page 8

raises the question: does anyone read academic publications any more? It has been suggested that the ALSC might help to separate books and essays that are of genuine interest to our members from those that deserve their obscurity. If members will send us a note of anything they think especially worthy of attention--whether by themselves or others--we will try to print a list in each issue of the newsletter.

One last point about the conference: would all those who have special dietary needs send me a note of their requirements right away?

\* \* \*

*We are immensely saddened to learn of the death of Peter Shaw. Peter was one of our earliest members, and his two recent books (Recovering American Literature and The War Against the Intellect) showed him to be a highly skillful and courageous defender of literary values. We shall miss him.*

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