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Review of Thomas Docherty, *Criticism and Modernity: Aesthetics, Literature, and Nations in Europe and Its Academies.*

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Thomas Docherty, *Criticism and Modernity: Aesthetics, Literature, and Nations in Europe and Its Academies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 248 pp. ISBN 0198185014.

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Best known on this side of the Atlantic for his most popular title, the impressive and helpful *Postmodernism: A Reader* (Columbia, 1993)—which is still in print in paperback a decade later, and of which he was the editor—Thomas Docherty, Professor of English Literature at the University of Kent, Canterbury, is likely known in the United Kingdom more for helping to bring Continental literary theory into an academy that resisted theory somewhat longer than was the case in the United States. Docherty is the author of several books that combine contemporary literary theory, comparative literature, and more or less literary historical approaches. With *Criticism and Modernity*, Docherty brings together themes and concerns that can be seen across his earlier work. In this, *On Modern Authority: The Theory and Condition of Writing, 1500 to the Present Day* (1987) and *Alterities* (1996) are probably the most relevant earlier titles. For example, in *On Modern Authority*, Docherty (building on an interest in the reader seen in his 1983 book, *Reading [Absent] Character*) offers "some theoretical clarification of the relation between author and reader in the modern era of print culture" (9). In *Alterities*, Docherty argues "modern criticism is that which deliberately absents the Other from history in an effort to legitimize the critic as an autonomous subject of consciousness" (6-7). In *Criticism and Modernity* (1999), Docherty combines these two positions. What *Criticism and Modernity* calls the "prehistory" of English studies emerges in the early modern print culture described in *On Modern Authority* and also "conspires to elide alterity—the Other as such" (*Criticism and Modernity* 11), as Docherty predicted in *Alterities*. Using the terms of the earlier books, we could say that Docherty argues in *Criticism and Modernity* that the relation between the reader and the book in the modern era of print absents the Other.

Yet *Criticism and Modernity* does more than simply combine Docherty's earlier positions; it is also more comparative than the other, earlier titles. Careful to distinguish his version of English studies' prehistory from both the development of 'the aesthetic' in German philosophy and the development of the English literature curriculum in the nineteenth-century university, Docherty instead considers the eighteenth-century development of English aesthetics in an international context: Dryden, Corneille and (absent) Africa; Hume and Rousseau; and Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Molière. Docherty's method is scrupulously dialectical, with absences indicating presences throughout. In Chapter One, for example, Docherty considers Dryden's writing in the 1660s, focusing on what he calls its "swerve" away from mentioning Africa. Docherty believes that Dryden thus "directs attention away from Africa, and allows for the formulation of an argument whose constituents are all immediately recognizable as European" (30). Although there may be some who would argue that Dryden might actually be talking about Europe directly, and that even with the best of well-chosen metaphors talking about one thing unfortunately means not talking about another, one gets the sense as Docherty pulls together in alternate sentences Corneille, Dryden, Todorov, and "Gellner, Hobsbawm, Said, Bhabha and others" (29), that these chapters have roots in the lecture hall. If so, hearing Docherty present these connections would be exciting and daunting stuff indeed.

Criticism and Modernity should be of particular interest to eighteenth-century specialists, and not simply because of the time period Docherty covers in his narrative. Rather, I would argue that *Criticism and Modernity* makes an important, and unfairly overlooked, contribution to the current, revisionist debate about the early history of English literary criticism. With chapters featuring such major figures in early criticism as Dryden, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Blair, this book stands with Clifford Siskin's *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700-1830* (published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1999, the same year as *Criticism and Modernity*) as one of the most important attempts to redirect the history of literary criticism away from what Siskin called the "Romantic" history, and also away from what we might call the "public-sphere" model of a Whiggish rise of democratic openness. Siskin's story of "*The Great Forgetting*" (27) in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century criticism is matched by Docherty's analogous story of a Great Elision, according to which textual difficulty is minimized by the major figures of early literary criticism. To be fair, though, it is not clear that Docherty sees himself as contributing to this discussion. Although Docherty's objectives overlap with this debate, they are also larger. At the outset, Docherty states that he is interested in "the relation of aesthetics to politics in the formation of the modern autonomous human subject in the period of the emergence of a 'democratic' Europe and its institutions" (1). That is, Docherty aspires to write a history that simultaneously considers what he sees as a related emergence of modern subjectivity, democracy, and academia, by tracing connections between aesthetics and politics in early literary criticism. Such an objective testifies to Docherty's extraordinary ambition in *Criticism and Modernity*; it also hints at the demands the book places on its readers.

In the "Introduction," Docherty situates his book in relation to the unfortunate contemporary expectation that each aspect of higher education justify itself solely in terms of an economic contribution, the more immediate (and therefore, implicitly, the less "academic") the better. As Docherty points out, "For many—especially for many in government today—the question posed to the university and most pointedly to its humanities disciplines is simple and crude: how can you justify your existence?" (2) For Docherty, this question cannot be answered without first explaining the complex history and disciplinary requirements of literary and cultural analysis to those who ask the crude questions. *Criticism and Modernity*, then, is Docherty's defense of the humanities. The topic is particularly vital and important; the study of literature needs every defense and every defender it can find these days, perhaps especially at state-supported universities. Docherty's attempt is therefore to be applauded. For this aspect of Docherty's project, however, at least a question of basic rhetorical efficacy is at issue. The people who ask for literature (and every other academic discipline, as they patronizingly try to reassure us) to defend itself are not concerned about literature's defining role in shaping the modern autonomous subject. For them, any defense that requires recounting such an argument would only beg the question: they would likely wonder why the defense of literary study requires so much literary study.

At the same time, those skeptical administrators and legislators who might be able to follow Docherty's version of criticism's complexities, and its relation to modern democracy, might respond by claiming that we have over the last thirty years seen a new development in the history of democracy, that we are now beyond that autonomous subject developed in the age of criticism (i.e., precisely the "postmodern" position about which political conservatives complain today), or that the market provides a better way to understand democracy and the voter/consumer in it (i.e.,

what is likely seen as the Washington vision of democracy today). Both visions of democracy are, as Docherty might point out, fatally flawed, dominant now for contingent reasons, and thus 'haunted by the specter' of their alternatives in a way that they could not have been when Marx first coined that phrase. But it is particularly important to be able to make the case for literary and cultural studies (and also for 'scholarship' in general, as A.D. Nuttall has recently reminded us; see *Dead from the Waist Down*, Yale 2003) in terms that its opponents can understand. To some involved in literary studies, making the argument in terms that the opposition can recognize might seem like pandering, but the process also follows from the poststructural insights that factor so prominently in Docherty's work. After all, discourse is of the Other.

It is difficult to know whether the book is intended for the skeptical administrator, the talented graduate student, the *dix-huitièmiste*, the comparatist, or those who combine philosophy and literature. The book cannot be expected to reach each group equally well, but it will likely reach the last three best. To Docherty's credit, *Criticism and Modernity* is a comparative study in several overlapping ways; it combines an older, more European sense of comparative literature, a contemporary postcolonial or transatlantic sense of the field, and a consistent concern with debates in theory. This comparative project calls for a delicate balancing act. When Docherty tries to do it all at once, the question of the intended audience is brought to the fore. Consider, for example, the following selection from Chapter Three:

When Molière presents a version of a foreign policy based upon a proto-orientalist exclusion of Turkey from the mutual benevolence or hospitalities in which France, Italy, and Spain can occupy the same cultural terrain, he is demonstrating a philosophical issue that was to be worked through in more explicitly philosophical detail by Shaftesbury in England broadly in the period between the 1688 Revolution and the 1707 Act of Union with Scotland. Where, for Derrida, especially in *L'Autre Cap*, one of the presiding questions confronting and constituting 'Europe' is to be formulated in the question of 'responsibility', for Shaftesbury at the turn of the eighteenth century, this question was to be raised in the form of a contest between, on the one hand, the powers and political attractions of a Hobbesian/Mandevillian egocentricity in which self-regard or self-love is the motor of history and, on the other hand, what Shaftesbury saw as the necessity of the social as a precondition of the very existence of the self and thus the consequent attractions of a culture based on attitudes of mutual benevolence among subjects or citizens in a polity. (73).

The first sentence combines the traditional European concerns of comparative literature (e.g., Molière and Shaftesbury) with a postcolonial approach (e.g., the proto-orientalist exclusion of Turkey). The second sentence, however, contrasts Shaftesbury with Derrida's *L'Autre Cap*, which had been introduced a page or two earlier in the book. Docherty's argument will work best for those readers who arrive with strong training in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature, understood comparatively, and who have also been following not only the debate about European union, but also Derrida's important reflections on that debate. For that group, *Criticism and Modernity* will be very rewarding reading.

Except for administrators skeptical of the value of the humanities, *dix-huitièmists* are probably the group least likely to read the book. This is particularly unfortunate as they could benefit the most from it. Docherty's materials are culled from the intellectual history of the long eighteenth

century, and so will be familiar to eighteenth-century specialists. More than that, though, these familiar texts are being considered in a new way in *Criticism and Modernity*. Central to this development is Docherty's repeated insistence that "Modern criticism . . . works to reduce that part of the object constituted by a radical alterity (*l'autre*) to a mere otherness (*autrui*)" (37-38). That is, for Docherty, criticism as it develops in the eighteenth century downplays, among other things, the "difficulty" (see Docherty's "Theory and Difficulty") and the related potential of the text. This claim runs counter to the heroic public-sphere model of criticism, according to which figures such as Addison and Steele struggle to create a space in which policy issues can be debated openly, contributing in the process to the development of modern democracy and its right of free expression. For Docherty, criticism attempts to determine what cannot be discussed, rather than how much can be. This is a particularly important point, both for literary studies after theory, and for our response to skeptical administrators. In *Criticism and Modernity*, Docherty contends that "'English' literature, 'French' theory, 'American' criticism, and so on all depend upon this tragic structure in which the Others of 'England,' 'France,' 'America,' are constructed precisely in order to be elided or absented from history" (38). This is probably the book's central claim, and neither its importance nor its novelty can be overstated. To my knowledge, few have proposed (and fewer attempted) a history of criticism after theory that considers the possibility that the institutional history of criticism was designed to elide history. With *Criticism and Modernity*, Docherty joins those few.

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