Review Of "Myth, Truth And Literature: Towards A True Post-Modernism" By C. Falck

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Myth, Truth and Literature: Towards a True Post-Modernism (review)

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To teachers of Shakespeare, this book will stimulate new ideas for introducing the plays, and it will facilitate an understanding of New Historicism. It is scholarly and demanding; but the author’s frequent restatement of his thesis at crucial points in the text is a useful aid to the reader.

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Recent literary theory has been dominated by an opposition between both intentionalism and New Criticism, on the one hand, where the effort is to get at some really existing stable thing—an intended meaning or an aesthetic object—and poststructuralism and New Historicism on the other, where criticism calls our attention only to the sectarian and ungeneralizable character of all works as constructs. Both styles of literary study have clear liabilities. Intentionalism tends to cast literary work as gratuitously personal or autobiographical, while New Criticism tends to cast it as gratuitously aesthetic, detaching the aesthetic from the moral, the political, the scientific, and the social. Poststructuralism and New Historicism tend to deny the existence of either human or natural reality and as a result to leave us adrift in moral and political nihilism. In order to overcome the failings of each of these schools, what is needed is a rethinking of the nature of the human subject and its place in the world.

It is this necessary rethinking that Colin Falck offers us in Myth, Truth and Literature. Drawing self-consciously on the Romantic literary tradition, and on related ideas in twentieth-century philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Collingwood, Falck proposes that both discursive language and individual human consciousness are emergent from natural, preconscious expressions that arise prior to the separation of subject and object. Our preconscious life is practical, in that our expressions arise in the course of our involvement with the world, without being instrumental, for there are not yet distinctive subjects with specific purposes in mind. Truth is primordially a matter of glimpsing new possibilities for furthering our involvement with the world in the direction of freedom. Pursuing truth requires a stance of concern for the glimpsing of new and freer possibilities of involvement. Though art and literature are themselves partly conventionalized and constituted within already existent particularized social structures, they are nonetheless, as efforts in expressiveness, the principal and most satisfactory vehicles for glimpsing new possibilities of in-
volvement. "The poem or fiction . . . gives us the truth of, or the truth behind, the world which we ordinarily inhabit. It takes us to where the real life of that world lies; or as D. H. Lawrence said of the novel, 'it can inform and lead into new places the flow of our sympathetic consciousness, and it can lead our sympathy away in recoil from things gone dead' " (pp. 113–14). Hence poets are, in the phrase of Shelley's that is the leitmotif of Falck's book, "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (p. 78).

Taken as theory, the development of these Romantic conceptualizations of subject and object is sound and convincing. Falck moves easily through both German and English sources, both philosophical and literary, in developing his themes, all the while developing careful criticisms of recent French and American literary theory that has been influenced by Saussure. In virtue of its compelling arguments, Myth, Truth and Literature is a book that might well do some good in changing the current drift of literary theory and in reinvigorating literary work. It deserves a wide audience.

But, despite the compelling character of its arguments, Myth, Truth and Literature also might well fail to have its intended effect, and this should lead us to rethink its achievement. The cultural world is both Balkanized and overwhelmingly influenced by the surrounding commodity culture. In this setting, could any intellectual argument—no matter how sound—by itself open up new possibilities of more coherent theory and practice? It seems unlikely. And if that is so, then perhaps it is not so open to poets to remake our world and restructure our involvements as Falck suggests. What is needed in order to develop the argument of Myth, Truth and Literature further is not more theory—the theory Falck presents is sound—but more direct poetic work that brings currently marginal practical involvements closer to the center of culture. To say this is to endorse Falck's general argument but also to wish that it had been more concretely developed in relation to specific present poetic particulars (Raymond Carver? Peter Handke? William Gaddis?). It is to be hoped that this concrete development is something that Falck himself, and now others, will have it in mind to complete.

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This is one of those rare books that employs the tools of scholarship, not as a self-contained exercise, but as a means of uncovering the truth about man and his place in reality. No doubt it is unfashionable and vulnerable to the