

Special European Issue
Spring 2012



Transparent Eyeball

VI

Protonism: The Role of Positive Literary Critiques in Contemporary American Writing

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Literary criticism is deeply ingrained in the American people, with many individuals skimming book jackets, looking up book reviews online, and asking friends and colleagues for recommendations before reading a particular piece of literature. These reviews can be positive or negative, but people tend to give more weight to positive reviews because they focus on the universal characteristics of a work that makes it appealing. Negative reviews are often written off by assuming that the person giving the review just has different taste or doesn't know what good literature is.

One way to explain this phenomenon is with the literary theory of Gjekë Marinaj. This Albanian-born author who immigrated to the United States in 1991 outlines the theory in his book *Protonizmi: Nga Teoria në Praktikë* (Protonism: Theory Into Practice). The theory is called Protonism because it borrows the concepts of the positive and negative from the chemical structure of atoms, which contain protons, neutrons, and electrons.

In an atom, the protons, which are the positively charged particles, and the neutrons, which are the non-charged particles, make up the core of the atom, called the nucleus. The electrons, which are negatively charged, are constantly moving around the atom, binding with other atoms, releasing under pressure, and sometimes being ripped entirely away from the atom. The atom's essential character and its atomic weight depend on the number of protons and neutrons in its nucleus, not the number of negatively charged electrons.

Marinaj believes that the core of every piece of literature, just like every atom, are the positive elements, or the protons. The negative elements are weaker and are more difficult to get a grasp on as a literary critic. In many cases, critics base their assessment of weak points on their fleeting personal interests, preferences, and moral opinions that are not universal to the population at large. Critics will always be able to identify things they don't like in a piece of literature, but that should not be the focus of literary criticism. Therefore, Marinaj proposes a theory of Protonism that recommends a focus on the positive elements of literature that are part of universal natural laws. This theory is a wise one that fits in well with what we see in American literary culture and history.

At its core, America's ideals include being a place where anyone can become anything. The idea of the American Dream is rich in the fabric of our history, and

people come here dreaming that their skills, talents and hard work can bring them the success and security they desire. As one example of the success of the American Dream, literary achievement is at the heart of the American history books. The Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and Bill of Rights are proudly on display in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., showcasing the words of people who came to this country and were inspired to strive for something better.

Protonism supports the American Dream because it emphasizes finding the good in all literary work. The path to success always requires revision and hard work, but it is smoothest if critics come alongside and draw out the good ideas, good sentence construction, and good word pictures. The documents our founding fathers wrote were not first drafts, but pieces they pored over collectively to emphasize the good ideas and cut out the unnecessary ones. In their final state, these words succeeded in acting as the foundation for a new nation that is a leader in the world today, among countries that have been recognized for hundreds of years longer.

Even from a young age, students in the United States learn a type of literary criticism that matches well with the theory of Protonism. Teachers select works that are classics that have stood the test of time and present them to students as a way to learn about reading, the art of crafting stories, and the development of themes in writing. Students do not bring their subjective lenses to analyze what they don't like about these works, but rather learn about the universal components of effective writing. Even as they grow older and branch out into literature without as much merits, students still talk about the books in terms of what they don't like, not in terms of what is objectively bad about the writing. Protonism holds because the core of a piece of writing is its positive elements, and those are what help it stand the test of time.

As students move on to higher levels, they still use Protonism to mold their views on literature and become better writers themselves. They learn by identifying what is effective, by studying the masters, and by practicing using these proven techniques to create their own pieces of writing. Even in literary critiques among peers, the focus is on what the writer does well and what parts resonate with the corpus of literature, leaving the writer to cut out or revise the portions that did not stand out and receive such accolades. Focusing on the positive aspects motivates writers to create literature that truly impacts those who read it and continues to shape culture in positive ways.

Looking forward, the approach of Protonism is one of the best ways to ensure high-quality literature in the decades to come. Because literature serves so many roles in society, there are a wide range of pieces that will appeal to individuals, and it is not the place of the literary critic to say that a piece of

literature is bad just because the critic is not part of the intended audience. Instead, critics should identify what resonates with universal ideals, which supports the role of literature in shaping individuals.

Protonism is especially important given the position of writing in the world now. Today's culture makes it easier to be a writer than it has been at any point in history. With the rise of e-readers and e-books, anyone can self-publish a book for free and make it available for instant download. This is advantageous because it allows people who have ideas to distribute them to anyone who is interested. Although most e-books won't be as good as books from major publishers, they still have value. Protonism dovetails well with this method of publishing because it advocates looking for the good in these self-published pieces of writing. Each e-book is valuable to someone, and by focusing on its positive aspects, we as a culture can support the process of sharing ideas and expertise with one another through literature.

If we were to follow a method that Protonism discourages and give scathing critiques based on our personal tastes and biased opinions, we could hinder the progress of literature today. Focusing on the bad in literary critique is a way to discourage the up-and-coming writers and potentially keep them from pushing forward and going on to create better works. Just as with sports, music, and many other skills, writing is developed through hours of practice, continually finding better ways to frame ideas into words. In contemporary America, much of the practice gets published, whether on blogs, in e-books, or in countless free journals, magazines, and newspapers. We need to be gentle toward writers and give critique that will build them up as they learn what works. Encouraging amateur writers through focusing on the positive aspects of their writing is the best way to develop them to their full potential.

The contribution of every writer is valuable in some way, and Protonism encourages looking for the value. It is as if the critic reads every piece of literature as a rock mined out of a large mountain. Many of the rocks have rough edges, and the dirt might even sometimes obscure what is hiding inside, but it is the critic's goal to find the precious stone in the middle and to talk about that. The precious stones come in many shapes and sizes, but as a whole, they are what make up our literary identity as a country. Critics uncover these gems and talk about the shining features, not about what fell away as they were getting to the gems. Marinaj clearly outlines this approach in his theory of Protonism, and all readers, whether professional critics or casual readers, can benefit from following the positive approach to literary criticism.