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REVIEW ESSAY

Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism: The Humanistic Alternative, by James Seaton. New York: Cambridge University Press, Spring 2014, approximately 216 pp., approximately $85.00 hardbound.

Real Sweetness, Real Light

Edward Alexander

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James Seaton has a well-earned reputation as a writer deserving—no, demanding—serious attention. Over the years, his essays about the New Critics, the philosopher George Santayana, the literary critic Lionel Trilling, the Frankfurt School, and the novelist and critic Ralph Ellison have appeared in *Academic Questions*, the *Weekly Standard*, and *Modern Age*. His new book, *Literary Criticism from Plato to Postmodernism: The Humanistic Alternative*, is a defense of literary criticism and of literature itself.

Edward Alexander is professor emeritus of English at the University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98105; eaengl@u.washington.edu. He is the author of *Lionel Trilling and Irving Howe: A Literary Friendship* (Transaction Publishers, 2009).

Seaton defends poetry against Plato, who barred poets from his republic because they outrageously stimulated the passions and, like other artists, turned men's attention away from the ideal, heavenly forms to imitations of imitations. He takes the side, nearly always, of Aristotle, whose ancient wisdom informs "the humanistic tradition in literary criticism… both in its view of literature as a source of insight about human life and in its willingness to judge grand theory by the norms of common sense." Seaton reads undogmatically and—a rare thing among English professors nowadays—writes not only intelligently but also intelligibly. Not for him the stupefying opacity of a Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak or Judith Butler.[1] Although Seaton excoriates

[1]Here is Butler's famous, indeed prize-winning entry (published in *Diacritics* in 1997) in the annual Bad Writing Contest conducted by the journal *Philosophy and Literature* for worst academic prose of that year:

> The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

Allen Tate for his agrarian and Southern loyalties, he follows Tate's dictum that "critical style should be as plain as the nose on one's face."

Seaton has undertaken the restoration of such literary critics as Edmund Wilson, Irving Babbitt, and Lionel Trilling from the obscurity to which they have been relegated by such collections as the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2010), now in its second edition (despite widespread rumors that "theory is dead"). Their humanism rested on the conviction that literature provides insights into "how to live" that can never be supplied by philosophy or theory, and that literature is a "criticism of life" in the sense that a good man is a criticism of a bad one. It is informed by a coherence, brightness, and energy that life may but too often does not realize. Seaton's defense of traditional humanist education against those who disparage literary criticism and the literary canon is a kind of *Dunciad* without the heroic couplets. (To mention Pope is to acknowledge that we have always had dunces among us, even when there was no system of tenure to keep them in place.) His counterattack shows how such formidable writers as Irving Howe, Ralph Ellison, and Robert Penn Warren shatter the generalizations about "leftist" writers and black writers and Southern writers foisted upon us by postmodernists, multiculturalists, and practitioners of cultural studies.

But Seaton's defense of criticism is also, like that of Matthew Arnold, a defense of civilization itself. In his famous essay of 1865, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," Arnold went beyond literature to define criticism as "the endeavor, in all branches of knowledge…to see the object as in itself it really is."[2] What Seaton calls "Arnold's expanded version of literary criticism" espoused the spirit of scientific disinterestedness and rejected the spirit of sectarianism, especially the sectarianism of his own (liberal) party and its rallying cry: "[L]et us organize and combine a party to pursue truth and new thought, let us call it *the liberal party,* and let us all stick to each other, and back each other up….If one of us speaks well, applaud him; if one of us speaks ill, applaud him too; we are all in the same movement, we are all liberals" (emphasis in original).[3] Although Seaton occasionally censures the Victorian Arnold for a (Romantic)

[2]Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," in *The Complete Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super, vol. 3, *Lectures and Essays in Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 258.

[3]Ibid., 276.

overvaluation of literature (for example, as a substitute for religion), he is, like Arnold, "a Liberal, [but] a Liberal tempered by experience, reflection, and renouncement, and… above all, a believer in culture."

Unlike many of his favorite targets—professors of literature who hate literature and prefer Derrida to Dickens, theorists who write in a repellent pseudo-jargon meant to suggest the profundities of a physics lab, and postmodernists who hold that nothing can be certain except their own certainty that nothing is certain—Seaton is lucid and precise. He understands the capacity of literature to elevate and refine, but also to degrade and coarsen. He knows things—about literature, history, the Greek and Roman classics—that most of his colleagues have long forgotten, or never knew. He challenges "an academic climate of opinion that is based on the impossible union of generalized epistemological skepticism with moral and political certainty."

That certainty is "progressive," if a tenacious clinging to the antiquated, exploded, and blood-spattered dogmas of Marxism can be progressive. Apparently nobody can teach courses in cultural studies, for example, who does not believe in "the radical transformation of capitalist society"—in the direction of socialism. Also required of cultural studies practitioners is a belief in the undesirability of America's "national heterosexuality," "male dominance," and "heteronormativity," whose narrow-minded "judgmentalism" sees to it that "promiscuity [among "boy-lovers"] is so heavily stigmatized." The job of cultural studies is not to analyze and evaluate literary works so much as to speak up for "the community of men who love underaged youth." (One wonders in which undiscovered holes and corners of America these reactionary devotees of "heteronormativity" reside.)

Seaton notes that both the skepticism and "inclusiveness" of cultural studies professors of diversity and multiculturalism have their limits. They stop short at people who believe in the moral relevance of religion, unless, of course, it be what the late Robert Heilman called the religion of atheism itself, the "dogmatic skepticism" that unites the different modes of deconstructive activity. This religion is so well-entrenched that even critics of the new orthodoxy like Anthony Kronman (author of *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*), who call for the revival of "secular humanism," vitiate their criticism because, Seaton observes,

"their rhetoric on behalf of the adjective weakens [their] central argument for the noun." Kronman would ban from the classroom the answers that any religion might give to the question of life's meaning because "every religion, even the most tolerant, is fundamentalist."[4] In a grotesque display of time-serving moral equivalence, Kronman lumps together "the fundamentalist Protestant churches in America, the jihadist wing of Islam, and the Pope" as enemies of "secular morality."[5]

Just when did the professorial resentment and hatred of literature begin? During the thirties, the Stalinist exploitation of literature for partisan political ends repelled even intelligent Marxists with a literary bent; in the late forties radical critics of both the Stalinist and Trotskyist persuasion believed that there was a Marxist "method" fully adequate to the analysis of literature, a distinctive radical aesthetic. This was distortion and manipulation, but not hatred. In the sixties, something changed. The dominant radical mood of the New Left was contemptuous of rationality, of mind, of complex and coherent literary structures—and of the past altogether.

This lethal combination of Stalinism with native know-nothingism and the provincialism of the contemporary found its home in the universities, especially in the English departments. In 1971 the Modern Language Association (to its everlasting disgrace) installed as president one Louis Kampf, an acknowledged spokesman for "leftist" English professors. He was providentially sent to supply teachers and critics who never cared much for literature in the first place a rationale for their hostility to literary studies: the great works of the literary canon were both an instrument and a result of class oppression.

Kampf was possessed by a fantasy of revolution to be achieved via the English department. To show his contempt for conventional modes of education, he reported how, while teaching a seminar on Proust, his "head was getting scrambled." Boredom reigned in his class until salvation came in the form of a student takeover of a campus building, to which liberated territory Kampf transferred his seminar. At this point, "The reading of Proust became…intimately tied to the goings-on in…the hall….Proust's sensibility became politicized for us." Instead of recognizing that he was a strong candidate for vocational retraining, Kampf thought he had received a

[4] Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 199.

[5] Ibid., 235.

revelation about how to "politicize" Proust and literature in general.

From this revelation Kampf moved on to the insight that he, like his brother radicals, became estranged from English literary tradition when he "discovered" that many great writers of the past did not think as he would like them to, and therefore might not like *him*. Indeed, he was certain—and certainly right—that neither Swift nor Pope would have received him into their homes.[6] But beyond this problem of hospitality for MIT English professors was the larger one: any writers with a tragic view of life must be deemed "counterrevolutionary" in their acceptance of fate. Irving Howe (a lifelong socialist and man of the Left), who debated Kampf at the 1971 Philadelphia meeting of the MLA, pointed out that ultimately all literature is the enemy of "persons of Kampf's political outlook," that is to say, those confident that they have a stranglehold on history, a confidence that has usually led to dictatorship and terror.[7]

Terror, in fact, is strangely intertwined with the theoretical musings of such literature professors as the aforementioned Butler (at Berkeley) and Spivak (at Columbia). The latter, a leading tribune of "international feminism" and postmodernist theory, delivered the following in a keynote address at a conference at Leeds University in June 2002:

> Suicide bombing—and the planes of 9/11 were living bombs—is a purposive self-annihilation, a confrontation between oneself and oneself, the extreme end of autoeroticism, killing oneself as other, in the process killing others….Suicidal resistance is a message inscribed on the body when no other means will get through. It is both execution and mourning…you die with me for the same cause, no matter which side you are on. Because no matter who you are there are no designated killees [*sic*] in suicide bombing….It is a response to the state terrorism practiced outside of its own ambit by the United States and in the Palestinian case additionally to an absolute failure of hospitality.[8]

[6]See the following essays by Kampf: "Culture without Criticism," *Massachusetts Review* 11, no. 4 (Autumn 1970): 624–44; "'It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)': Literature and Language in the Academy," *PMLA* 87, no. 3 (May 1972): 377–83; and "Real Students in Real Classrooms," *New Literary History* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1974): 595–604.

[7]See the account, from Irving Howe's point of view, of his debate with Kampf at the MLA meeting in Philadelphia in 1971: "Literary Criticism and Literary Radicals," *American Scholar* 41, no. 1 (Winter 1971–72): 113–20.

[8]Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Class and Culture in Diaspora," keynote address, "CongressCATH 2002: Translating Class, Altering Hospitality" conference, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK, June 22, 2002, http://www.leeds.ac.uk/cath/ahrc/congress/2002/programme/abs/209.shtml.

In the mouths of Spivak and other tenured guerrillas, the pseudojargon of literary postmodernism calls to mind Orwell's prescient statement of 1946 that the best examples of "political language…designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind" come from the mouths of "comfortable English professor[s]."[9]

There is yet a third influence from Matthew Arnold at work in Seaton's "defense of poetry" in the largest sense. That is Arnold's eloquent conclusion to the first chapter of *Culture and Anarchy.* Arnold knew that a truth may be valid but not potent until it is shared by others:

> [C]ulture has but one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light. Yes, it has one yet greater—the passion for making them *prevail*. It is not satisfied till we *all* come to a perfect man; it knows that the sweetness and light of the few must be imperfect until the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light.…Again and again I have insisted how those are the happy moments of humanity, how those are the marking epochs of a people's life, how those are the flowering times for literature and art …when there is a *national* glow of life and thought, when the whole of society is in the fullest measure permeated by thought, sensible to beauty, intelligent and alive. Only it must be *real* thought and *real* beauty; *real* sweetness and *real* light. Plenty of people will try to give the masses, as they call them, an intellectual food prepared and adapted in the way they think proper… will try to indoctrinate the masses with the set of ideas and judgments constituting the creed of their own…party. [But] culture works differently.…It seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere….
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> This is the *social idea;* and the men of culture are the true apostles of equality.[10]

For Seaton, Wilson and Trilling (Arnold's biographer) were America's apostles of equality. Long before

[9]George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," *Horizon* (April 1946), text available at http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/politics-and-the-english-language#/.

[10]Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 3rd ed. (1869; New York: Macmillan and Co., 1882), chap. 1, "Sweetness and Light," para. 31–32, available at http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/nonfiction_u/arnoldm_ca/ca_ch1.html. The authoritative edition is *The Complete Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super, vol. 5, *Culture and Anarchy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), 112–13.

America's university literature departments confronted the problem of joining a truly democratic culture to a democratic politics, Arnold saw that this could not be done by substituting the Newgate Calendar for Dante (or "Pop Goes the Weasel" for Beethoven). Seaton becomes Arnold's continuator by pointing out that students from "disadvantaged" backgrounds are done no favors by the substitution of Alice Walker for John Keats in the curriculum, or the discussion of movies for the study of literature.

Since so many of the postmodernists, theorists, and multiculturalists advocate cultural deprivation in the name of political advance on behalf of "the masses," perhaps Seaton should have recommended to them the following anecdote about Big Bill Haywood, the early twenties leader of the International Workers of the World. About to go abroad, Haywood granted an interview to journalists. Noticing that he was smoking a twenty-five-cent cigar (very expensive for those days), they asked Haywood to justify such extravagance. Nothing daunted, he replied: "Boys, nothing is too good for the proletariat."