LITERATURE AND THE CONSERVATIVE IDEAL

Edited by

MARK ZUNAC

LITERARY STUDIES • POLITICAL SCIENCE

"Scholarship on conservative literary traditions, conservative approaches to literary analysis, and conservative writers has become increasingly rare in the humanities. I welcome, with more than ordinary gratitude, the wisdom and moral balance of these otherwise silenced voices."

—RUTH WISSE, Harvard University

By examining the ways in which the conservative vision of the world informs certain modes of literary study and has been treated in various works of literature throughout the ages, this book seeks to recover conservatism as a viable, rigorous, intellectually sound method of critical inquiry. While it stops short of promoting political conservatism as an antidote to the dominant progressive strain of today's university, it recognizes literature's transformative power as an artistic reflection of the universal human condition. In this way, it operates against the grain of today's prevailing approaches to literature, particularly the postmodernist wave that has employed literature as a recorder of injustice rather than as evidence of artistic achievement. Therefore, the agenda is restorative, if not revolutionary, returning literature to its place as the center of a true liberal arts curriculum, one that celebrates human freedom, the unimpeded pursuit of truth, and the preservation of civilized life.

Perhaps this book's greatest service is that it seeks to define conservatism in highly distinct contexts. Its authors collectively reveal that the conservative ideal lacks formulaic expression, and is thus more richly complex than it is often credited for. Conservatism is not easily defined, and by presenting such divergent expressions of it, the essays here belie the red
so common throughout the academy. Ultimately, the conservative ideal ma
common with the stated goals of higher learning than has previously been
while this book in no way seeks to directly apply conservatism to curricular
a competing vision of how knowledge is transmitted through art and history, while also affirming the ways in which literature functions as a forum for ideas.

CONTRIBUTORS

Mark Bauerlein, D. Marcel DeCoste, Mary Grabar, Thomas L. Jeffers, Todd H. J. Pettigrew, James Seaton, Thomas W. Stanford III, Barton Swaim, Mark Zunac

MARK ZUNAC is associate professor in the Department of Languages and Literatures at the University of Wisconsin Whitewater.

Lexington Books
An imprint of
Rowman & Littlefield
800-462-6420 • www.rowman.com

ISBN 978-1-4985-1238-1
90000
9 781498 512381

ZUNAC

LITERATURE AND THE CONSERVATIVE

Literature and the Conservative Ideal

Edited by Mark Zunac

LEXINGTON BOOKS
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Lexington Books
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB

"The Idea of a University," found in *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, edited by Timothy Fuller, 95-104 (1989). Reprinted with permission.

"Carlyle the Wise: On the Political Thought of Thomas Carlyle" by Barton Swaim originally appeared in *The New Criterion* (February 2010) and is reproduced here with permission.

Excerpts from *A Handful of Dust* by Evelyn Waugh. Copyright 1934, © 1962 by Evelyn Waugh. Used by permission of Little, Brown and Company.

Excerpts from *A Handful of Dust* by Evelyn Waugh, edited with an introduction and notes by Robert Murray Davis (First published by Chapman and Hall 1934, Penguin Classics 2000). Copyright © Evelyn Waugh, 1934. Introduction and notes copyright © Robert Murray Davis, 1997. Reproduced by permission of Penguin Books Ltd.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Zunac, Mark, editor.
Title: Literature and the conservative ideal / edited by Mark Zunac.
Description: Lanham, Maryland : Lexington Books, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2015051174 (print) | ISBN 9781498512381 (cloth : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Conservatism in literature. | Conservatism and literature. | American literature--History and criticism. | English literature--History and criticism. | Authors, American--Political and social views. | Authors, English--Political and social views. | Criticism.
Classification: LCC PS169.C67 L58 2016 (print) | DDC 809/.933581--dc23
LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2015051174

♾™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

Literature and the Conservative Ideal

Contents

What Graduate School Was For

Mark Bauerlein

When I entered graduate school in English at UCLA in 1982, I had no professional sense of things. A doctoral pursuit was to me a course of study, not a training program. I knew nothing about the job market, the conference circuit, peer review, professional organizations such as the Modern Language Association, the administrative structure of the research university, or faculty politics. I expected to operate pretty much as I had as an undergraduate, at a higher level. Go to class, read books and essays, novels and poems, write more and longer papers. That's why I applied in the first place, not to get a job and make a career, but to study arguments and stories, plow through Nietzsche and Freud, fill historical gaps, improve my prose. When I graduated from college four months earlier, I was still ignorant and inarticulate, I thought. I needed more work. For what goal, I wasn't sure. The practical aim was uncertain. I just needed to become more knowledgeable and well-read, and a few extra years of Romanticism and deconstruction and Emerson would help.

I had my enthusiasms, too, and they remained unfulfilled to that point. In a course on literary criticism in my last year, I read Jacques Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" and Paul de Man's "The Rhetoric of Temporality." Both of them hit hard. I didn't fully understand them, but I had covered enough Continental philosophy in previous classes and on my own to handle the language of *being*, *consciousness*, and *interpretation*. The way Derrida and de Man mobilized ideas into a high-stakes quest for the meaning of things was mighty appealing to a twenty-three-year-old with a thirst to figure life out. Derrida talked about "reassuring certitudes" and intractable contradictions and "the force of a desire," drawing desperate human concerns into the study of texts and objects. "With this certitude anxiety can be mastered," he wrote, "for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being as it were from the very beginning as stake in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were from the very beginning as stake in the game." I didn't know exactly what the game was, but I heard in those lines the risk, the excitement. Thinking could be as venturesome and momentous as doing!

De Man's words were more somber. They added a sad mortal aura to the critical intelligence. I had undergone a sudden conversion a few years earlier that left me an unhappy atheist, and here was de Man voicing that regret in noble cadences. He spoke of a "grim awareness of the demystifying power of death," a consciousness that "sees things as they actually are," however painful the sight. He cited a description in *The Prelude* of a waterfall that Wordsworth presents as an image of eternity, then adds his decisive comment: "Such paradoxical assertions of eternity in motion can be applied to nature but not to a self caught up entirely in mutability." My ambition was to be able to speak this way.

I wanted more of this, more learning, not a professorship or a PhD. I didn't even think about those outcomes. The sole aim was the formation of a better mind. Only truth and beauty mattered. UCLA provided the right curriculum. It had a few theorists on the faculty—this was long before every English professor listed some brand of theory as an expertise—and they were open to avid novices like me. Graduate students also had to take an Introduction to Theory course that began with Plato and ran through Aristotle and Horace, Kant and Hegel, Freud and Lukacz . . . before landing on the post-structuralists. One of the theorists, Joseph Riddel, among the first of the American Derrideans, became my thesis advisor and dear friend. He had begun his career as a New Critic with a philosophical bent, mixing close readings of American poetry with concepts from phenomenology. His 1965 study of Wallace Stevens, *The Clairvoyant Eye*, is still one of the best books on the modernist. In the late 1960s he came across the work of Derrida and became a disciple.

Sectarianism in literary studies was powerful at the time, with deconstructors, feminists, New Historicists, political critics, Lacanians, and traditionalists of various kinds squaring off and claiming turf. It pleased Riddel (and dismayed some of my other teachers) that I had become an acolyte, and I plunged deeper into "*Différance*," *Grammatology*, *Allegories of Reading*, *A Map of Misreading*, Riddel's *The Inverted Bell*, and other works of High Theory, plus all the works they presumed (*The Phenomenology of Spirit*, "Truth and Falsity in Their Ultra-Moral Sense," *Being and Time*, etc.—not just passages, but the works in their entireties). Riddel had the wisdom, however, to require me to read all those theorists who had been eclipsed by the French invasion of the 1970s. On the syllabus was also *Practical Criticism*, *The Well-Wrought Urn*, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, *Anatomy of Criticism* and *The New Apologists for Poetry*, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," T. S. Eliot and T. E. Hulme. During that theory moment—J. Hillis Miller's 1986 MLA presidential address was titled "The Triumph of Theory"—it was easy to become triumphalist and erect a before-and-after reading list, people who preceded the theory turn (and merited cursory notice) and people who enacted it (among whom one signaled one's commitments). Many of my peers at UCLA and elsewhere caught the theory bug and concluded that they could dispense

with pre-1965 critics entirely. After all, the New Critics believed in the unity of form and content; they lifted poems out of historical context; and they were conservative, and sometimes racist and sexist. Why bother with the unenlightened?

It was a common attitude, with several advantages. First of all, every time they identified a moral or conceptual flaw in the Old Guard, citing, for instance, a bigoted comment by Malcom Cowley, the identifiers implicitly congratulated themselves on their discernment and propriety. It is easier for unaccomplished youths to cope with the achievements of the elders if the elders happen to have been naïve and immoral. Second, it made the young ones believe they had joined a progressive enterprise. The field was improving, they could assume, and they were part of the improvement. How nice to consider oneself at the center of a positive movement, working within the currents of history. I heard people claim in print and discussion that they aimed to produce new knowledge, not just pass along the old order. They were creators, not transmitters, they declared. It sounds fatuous now, but those were heady times for the humanities.

Finally, the consignment of the past to error had a practical benefit. It saved time and labor. You didn't have to read so much.

On this issue, the UCLA curriculum intervened. It wouldn't let you get away with shortcuts. Apart from the required history of theory course, we had to take two courses in the history of the English language from Old English to the nineteenth century. Assignments included readings in the Great Vowel Shift and phonetic transcriptions of Shakespeare and Pope. We had to chart the physiology of the mouth and throat and get our plosives and affricates straight. There was a course in stylistics, too, and two courses on composition pedagogy (everybody taught freshman writing). We had to demonstrate reading knowledge of two foreign languages as well, along with course work in at least six historical fields (or eight—I can't remember, but I'm sure "contemporary" didn't count as one).

The breadth guaranteed respect for the distant past. Specialization couldn't happen prematurely. A conservative premise underlay the requirements: the tradition has a value in itself. You should learn it even if you will never use it. The professors in the department back then would have regarded an assistant professor who taught and wrote about the post war American novel but took no Shakespeare, Romantic poetry, or Milton in graduate school as a failure of the discipline. They were committed enough to that principle to design an examination that weeded out those who neglected it. It was a merciless evaluation. They were called the Part One exams, written qualifying tests that students took in their third year. Over a two week period you took a four hour test in each of four areas you had chosen the previous year (nineteenth-century American, Romanticism, etc.). Each test had three components. The first

section involved a detailed question about a specific text in the area. Several months before, the department selected three "set texts," one of which would be the question topic. In preparation, you would study those texts scrupulously, including the history of criticism about them. In my sitting for the nineteenth-century American exam, I remember, Emerson's *English Traits* was one of the three. The second section presented a short passage from a text in the area, but it didn't ask for a historical or contextual reading of the passage. Instead, you had to do a focused explication of it, detailing prosody, diction, structure, etc. One might refer to historical knowledge such as the status of a particular verse form during the period, but that wouldn't win you a passing score. The question aimed to draw out your analytical powers, your eye for literary language. Are you a careful, meticulous reader? Then came the third question, which offered a couple of large-scale themes of some kind and asked you to formulate an essay on one of them using a half-dozen or more works from the period.

We spent months preparing for the exams, especially the third section (which counted the most), using reading lists provided by the department that contained more than a hundred novels, poems, plays, and treatises. Life was simple in those first two-and-a-half years of graduate study. Read, read, read. Concentrate only on storing reading knowledge in your head. Take courses that flood you with core texts and marginal texts from the time. Read the established works of criticism, such as M. H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism* for Romanticism and Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* for modernism. Don't react when a syllabus in a Restoration and eighteenth-century literature course asks you to cover Dryden's heroic tragedy *The Conquest of Granada* and an Elizabethan course assigns Jonson's masques, which you would probably never see or hear of again. Just do it.

We had two motivations. Our devotion to the material started the process, and our terror continued it. You see, with each administration of the Part One exams, the fail rate could be as high as 50 percent. People disappeared each year. After the first rejection, you had one more chance several months later to take them again, and if you didn't cross the bar, you were gone. UCLA took in enough graduate students each year to handle a high attrition rate, and it didn't invest money in first- and second-year enrollees in the form of fellowships, so the department flunked people out without blinking. We knew it, and we worked seventy hours a week on the courses and reading lists. Reality shrank to Pope's epistles and Henry James's later style. UCLA had a huge campus, thirty-five thousand students on four hundred acres in the middle of a sprawling megacity, but for us the cosmos was tiny. We took classes in one wing of Rolfe Hall, studied in the English reading room on the ground floor, met with professors in their offices in the other wing, and grabbed lunch in the North Campus eatery a few steps away.

We lived in a bubble. The job market and institutional politics seemed far away. The academic culture wars were just starting, but we didn't notice. How could you think about trends and mores in the profession when *Don Juan* lay on your desk sounding an alarm? A voice in your head crowded out everything else. It whispered, "You better finish Byron this week, buddy—you're running out of time." Agitations were rare. I recall a few students who tried to arouse us to make a collective statement against apartheid and demand that the UC system divest from companies big in South Africa. But it fizzled out when several of us gave a swift "No" to a strong version, then shrugged and agreed to a soft version. We didn't want to argue about it and we didn't want to expend any energy on it. The political types pressed us, but their moral fervor couldn't overcome the pressure of Wordsworth, Blake et al. When I made it through my Part Ones at the end of my third year, I felt like I had survived a hurricane.

But not for long. The oral exams were two years away and they required more reading, more study. The scope narrowed as you began to define an area of expertise, but you had to drill deeper, including mastering all the significant criticism on your authors.

We had to teach, too. I was a teaching assistant for two years in English 10B, the middle part of the year-long sophomore survey of literature from *Beowulf* to Ted Hughes. UCLA was on the quarter system, so the series fell into three courses. 10B ran from Dryden to Keats, and I led a discussion section and graded tests and papers on *Absalom and Achitophel*, etc., even though I was heading toward an American subject, Walt Whitman, for my dissertation. I never thought to object, to grumble over teaching outside my specialty. On the contrary, it fit my expectation. "Of course, I have to know Dryden-Pope-Swift," I thought. I couldn't have any self-respect if I didn't.

The TA-ing wasn't all. After two years, we proceeded to teach courses in freshman composition. As I noted above, the department prepared us for the task by requiring us to take two courses in freshman comp theory and practice. I think I taught ten of them before leaving UCLA for good.

I started teaching at Emory University in Fall 1989. Straight away, I knew something different had happened in graduate school at other universities. I finished my dissertation in 1988 and taught at UCLA for an extra year as a lecturer. I came to Emory expecting to strengthen my teaching and to begin working the dissertation into a shape that would be presentable to an academic press. But other young professors had done something I hadn't. They attended conferences and delivered papers, some of them multiple times. I was surprised, and I felt backward and inexperienced. I had assumed up until that point that I didn't deserve to give a talk until I had conducted more research and built a small reputation. Who was I, a newly-minted PhD, to think I had something to say that

would justify asking fifty colleagues to sit for an hour and listen? I was competitive, to be sure (you had to be, given the ultra-tight job market—which has only gotten worse), and I worried that I'd made a critical error. My peers had lost no time making contacts and getting attention, while I didn't know anybody.

A few years later, as I was teaching a graduate course on American literature and criticism, a student informed me that she would miss a session later in the term because she was to present a paper at a conference thousands of miles away. By this time, I had done a few papers of my own and found my first assumption intellectually correct, if professionally disadvantageous. Yes, it was necessary to appear on conference panels, but 90 percent of the specimens I witnessed were dreary and pointless affairs. The people were genial, but the contents were tiresome, windy, clumsy, half-baked, overdone, cutesy, discomfiting, and/or just plain sad. I include myself in that judgment; my first efforts were embarrassing, and not just because I was a novice at professional speaking. I didn't have the oratory, but I didn't have the knowledge, either. Henry James once said, "It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature." It also takes a great deal of learning to produce a little criticism. The system was forcing smart and ambitious individuals to attempt something for which they were unprepared.

It was a violation of sound education and research principles. The profession compelled us to ignore our un-readiness and go out and perform. A standard progressive premise underlay the whole thing, one of those basic beliefs that sound humane, but have damaging consequences. It is this: everyone has something valuable to say. If you carry that premise into academic life, then you naturally lower the bar of entry to conference proceedings. Even graduate students should have their moment at the microphone.

So I wasn't surprised when a graduate student explained her upcoming absence. I was dismayed, though. She had submitted a paper to me a few weeks earlier and the prose was terrible. I spoke to her about it and suggested a plan of improvement that included revision exercises and abundant reading of prose masters such as Ruskin and Thoreau. (Today I urge students to spend thirty minutes each day transcribing master stylists of the English language, in cursive script.) The sight of a twenty-four year old second-year doctoral student with writing skills that would earn a B in an undergraduate course on the roster of a research gathering struck me as beyond absurd. Something more had to be involved, something systemic in literary studies that revealed a new and different approach to the discipline. After all, her attendance at the conference had to pass through several stages of review before it was approved. The organizers had to conceive the event, secure funding and facilities, find sponsorship, market the gathering to the relevant fields, and fill slots on the proposed sessions. At each stage, scholarly legitimation had to be ob-

tained. For the student herself, she had to submit her paper proposal to the organizers and receive approval, then ask the English department to pay for the trip. Both parties gave their OK to her application. The trip happened, she returned to the class afterwards, and completed her work (which, happily for me, showed some advancement over the semester).

I single this instance out only because it identifies clearly the upside-down condition of literary study at the present time. The student was bright, earnest, and more or less hard-working, but the system prompted her to aim for advanced labor when she should have focused on preparatory work. She ended up devoting weeks to a specialized thesis in conference-paper form, when she should have passed those hours reading five novels by Henry James. It isn't hard to explain her choice. A conference paper can go on a curriculum vitae; those five novels cannot. A conference delivery sets you in the spotlight for fifteen minutes, with an audience of peers and superiors whose approbation is wonderful, while the novels set you alone and unacknowledged. She knew that she had more basic reading and writing to do, but the allure of travel and professional activity easily overrode the toil of erudition. Unless her presentation went poorly, she enjoyed the trip and felt professionalized by the experience. What's the downside?

The problem is that as she proceeded toward the doctorate, other professional activities and concerns diverted her from the learning necessary to be a competent teacher and scholar. She attended subsequent conferences. She tried to turn seminar papers into publishable articles. She got involved in departmental activities such as serving on a hiring committee as the graduate student representative. Instead of choosing a dissertation topic that would make her read widely and deeply, she chose a topic that seemed to follow recent trends in the humanities such as postcolonialism or sexuality studies. Those efforts met an immediate demand, but not a long-term one. She would have had plenty of time once she was an assistant professor or lecturer to prepare conference presentations, but never again would she enjoy the space and freedom to turn herself into a learned individual, a worthy representative of the literary-historical tradition.

This is, however, a common pattern of graduate study in the humanities today. Students are professionalized before their time. The doctoral program has been sped up. First- and second-year students aren't given the chance to disappear into their garrets and make themselves well-read and articulate. From Day One they have to think about career advancement. I realize now how lucky I was to enter a hierarchical program that regarded early graduate students as best seen and not heard—or rather, as not heard and infrequently seen. They did it out of respect for the traditions of graduate training and of literary history. Professional performance had to wait until broad and deep reading knowledge was attained and demonstrated (by the Part One exams).

This is, of course, a conservative vision of graduate training, and it has largely disappeared. Progressivism has flattened the hierarchy, regarding the old discriminations by rank as a constituent of the Old Boy Network. The tradition has fallen to multiculturalism, which dislikes English and American literary history pre-1900 for obvious identitarian reasons. And lengthy graduate programs that insist upon years of background reading have no justification when they can't promise a job to successful students eight years after they've started. High standards of learning haven't survived this ideological and economic onslaught, but the adjustments departments have made haven't stopped the deterioration of literary studies. And it has been a long time since I've heard anything interesting, unpredictable, or politically incorrect come out of the mouth of a post-2000 PhD.