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# BOOK REVIEWS

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Stanley Stewart. *“Renaissance” Talk: Ordinary Language and the Mystique of Critical Problems*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997. 306p.

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*“Renaissance” Talk* cross-examines the assertions of a few influential Renaissance critics. Stanley Stewart’s justification for this interrogation is modestly understated: “The point is to make sense, so as to clear away misunderstandings” (19). Adopting a pose of mild Socratic inquiry (Stewart even casts long stretches of his book in the form of imaginary dialogues between himself and, for instance, a defender of New Historicism), Stewart seems merely, and reasonably, to be asking these Renaissance critics to define their terms and explain their major ideas. Three or four chapters into the book the reader realizes that Stewart’s very Socratic intention is to expose the illogicality and indefensibility of many current Renaissance critical pronouncements, and indeed of much post-structuralist scholarship in general. Given its promisingly dramatic debate format, and its provocative conclusions, this ought to have been an exhilarating book, one to stir up both avant-garde theorists and traditional scholars. However, though Stewart’s careful counter-arguments undermine his opponents’ positions quite persuasively, his own philosophical hobbyhorse and his stilted writing undermine the book’s effectiveness. Even those predisposed to agree with Stewart will find reading the book a chore instead of a pleasure.

In his “Acknowledgements” Stewart thanks a host of colleagues, readers, editors and friends, and then avers, “I will not forget the patience and candor of this large contingent of faithful if informal collaborators. I consider all of them—I can think of no higher compliment—Wittgensteinians” (xiii). After this revelation, let the reader beware. Unless you share Stewart’s conviction that “Wittgensteinian” tops all other superlatives available in the lexicon of praise, much of the book will prove frustrating, if not maddening. The introductory chapter, “Investigating Renaissance Criticism,” is an extremely dense argument for applying Wittgenstein’s “ordinary language” philosophy to metacritical questions. Stewart’s thesis seems inarguable: “When critical locutions lead us into blind alleys, it is better to question the vocabulary than to proceed with credulity into further dark-

ness" (17). His subsequent procedure, however, can make you feel as if you've fallen into the hands of a logic-bully, like C.S. Lewis' tutor The Great Knock in *Surprised by Joy*, a man who would subject even polite remarks ("Nice weather today") to a merciless *reductio ad absurdum* ("What, precisely, do you mean by the fatuous modifier 'nice?") Stewart will seize upon a word (e.g.—and with unintended irony, as it turns out—"clarify") and then indulge in an agony of opaque distinction-drawing, which can go on for many pages. Stewart recognizes the deadening effect of such unbroken abstract discourse, but his occasional "regular talk" examples don't help matters much, stylistically. Here is his notion of colloquial American speech, the sort of thing one neighbor might say to another as they stood out on the front lawn: "Ten years ago, before this tree grew to its present height of thirty feet, this side of the house was much warmer in the summer" (9). Only a Wittgensteinian could regard this as "ordinary language."

This inability to present ideas simply and naturally accounts for the unreadable Chapter I, "A Critique of Pure Situating," the book's weakest section. The chapter purports to offer a "reconstructed" but actual conversation between two English professors in the departmental mailroom. Their topic: whether critics are obliged to declare their theoretical allegiance (feminist, Marxist, pluralist, humanist, etc.) at the outset of any academic discourse. This inconclusive debate serves better as a parody of intellectual cant and posturing than as a discussion two intelligent human beings might actually ever hold:

"I have noted the normative feature of critical self-situating, and express my doubts and apprehensions. Although he does allude to an 'imaginative community of the text,' Montrose registers disapproval, not of Spenser, but of Berger: 'Some readers may think me churlish, or at least impolite, to criticize the author in my introduction to his work' [16]. Here, social judgment forms itself in an almost Kantian imperative of expectation: one judges, and (or so that?) one may also be judged.

"I dwell on this instance of self-situating metacriticism, not because it is any better or any worse than other such examples, but because of its candid expression of interest in criticism as 'symptomatology.'" (45-6)

Thereafter in the book, nonetheless, both the thinking and the writing improve. For all his devotion to Wittgenstein, Stewart is at his best as a practical rather than theoretical critic. In each of the next five chapters, Stewart takes up a well-known critic's assertion and sets out to debunk it. He first takes issue with Camille Paglia's characteristically striking opinion that "The poetically strongest and most fully realized material in *The Faerie Queene* is pornographic" (57). He commonsensically demonstrates that Paglia's notion is *only* striking, not accurate, by dis-

qualifying her term “pornographic” when applied to Spenser’s worldview, and by relocating Spenser’s eroticism in its proper place beneath the overarching divine order which controlled Spenser’s conception of the poem. Next, Stewart contradicts Jonathan Goldberg’s contention that, since differing early texts of *King Lear* exist, “There never was a *King Lear*” (103). (In other words, *King Lear* is not a play; there are several different plays called *King Lear*.) In this chapter, as in the Spenser chapter, Stewart intends finally to confute more than a particular critic’s particular thesis. The Spenser chapter eventually becomes an indictment of New Historicism’s deterministic claim that “every choice made by Spenser and his contemporaries was made ‘among possibilities whose range was strictly delineated by the social and ideological system in force’” (85). For Stewart, poetry is not “inescapably” and exclusively political. Likewise, Stewart takes up the *King Lear* textual question in order to deplore the current critical crusade to devalue Shakespeare, led by critics who at times seem to regard Shakespeare’s reputation as “a xenophobic conspiracy on the part of the dominant, largely male, largely white, largely heterosexual, largely Anglophile culture” (144). According to Stewart, for these critics the canonization of Shakespeare is tantamount to social oppression, and regardless of Shakespeare’s literary worth, they declare the (canon’s) king must die.

Chapter 4, “Donne Among the Feminists,” is Stewart’s defense of Donne against the charges of misogyny by critics such as John Carey, Roma Gill and Stanley Fish. Stewart finds these critics guilty of immature, merely *ad hominem* attacks on Donne: they think Donne was a reprehensible man, and that therefore his poetry ought to be reviled. Unfortunately, in this chapter Stewart reverts to his “imaginary dialogue” method, and the result is confusing. It is hard to penetrate the serried ranks of quotation marks to discover who is citing whom while replying to whom. That eventually disentangled, the reader concludes with bemusement that the anti-Donne speaker seems to have made the better points. Chapter 5, “Herbert and the Historicity of Critical Metaphor,” comes as a welcome return to clear argumentation. Using very traditional close reading and historical scholarship, Stewart refutes the critical tendency, lately, to expose the High-Church (perhaps Romanist), Tory, Oxford George Herbert as a crypto-Puritan or even a hypocrite, a clerical poseur and unbeliever. Stewart once more expands the critical question to raise a larger issue: are we unable to escape from our cultural or political mindset when we read? Do critics attempt to prove Herbert an agnostic hypocrite (or Spenser a pornographer) because in our time of spiritual drought and pervasive cynicism we cannot read religious poets such as Herbert or Spenser sympathetically, “in good faith?”

Stewart's final chapter, "Evidence of Renaissance Criticism," is a critique of the radical relativism and subjectivity he sees in most postmodern literary criticism. He would have critics rely more upon historical evidence and attend more to logic. "When objections to the declarative mode of subjectivism are met by a cavalier dismissal of 'objectivity, verification, impartiality, the weighing of evidence, and the rest' [quoting Terry Eagleton], this modest question requires an answer: If not evidence, then what? Although in many situations intuition and unreasoned gut reactions have their uses—in everyday life they are indispensable—as guides to evaluation of critical statements about the Renaissance they serve as dubious replacements for documentary evidence" (278). Readers may applaud or reject the reactionary stance Stewart gradually reveals in this book, but his "corrective" interpretations are worth consideration for those who can weather his style. ✱