The New Criterion

Notes & Comments December 1998

James Tuttleton, 1934-1998

On the life & work of one of America's wisest & most percipient critics.

The death of James Tuttleton last month was an incalculable loss to *The New Criterion*. It was, first of all, a deep personal loss: Jim was a close friend of the editors, and his wise counsel and stately, companionable presence will be profoundly missed. His death also deprived *The New Criterion* of one of its most commanding writers. A specialist in American literature who had taught at New York University since 1968, Jim Tuttleton ranged with articulate authority over the vast expanse of American literature, from the work of James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Washington Irving to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain, Kate Chopin, William Dean Howells, Edith Wharton, and (a figure of special interest) Henry James. He also wrote with penetrating insight about more contemporary figures: Robert Frost, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot (another revered figure in the Tuttleton pantheon), Ralph Ellison, and Louis Auchincloss.

Nor did Jim confine his attention to fiction and poetry. Some of his most memorable work deals with what the critic Lionel Abel called "the intellectual follies": the insights and excesses, the wisdom and extravagance of other critics. Jim was often admiring. In essays on Edmund Wilson, for example, or the work of the great nineteenth-century historian Francis Parkman, he displayed an enviable gift for capturing the specific gravity—the distinctive inflection of individual sensibility—that stamped the work of a particular critic.

But Jim was also often the opposite of admiring. He brought enormous patience and rhetorical skill to the task of exposing the fraudulent, the intellectually bogus, the morally bankrupt in literature and criticism. As the academic profession of literature in our time has slid more and more deeply into a pit of fatuous word play, nihilistic pseudo-theories, and a repellent obsession with perverse sexuality, Jim became ever more adept at transforming distaste into lively and devastating criticism. Whether the subject was deconstruction, the feminist assault on literary studies, or simple misrepresentation of the historical record, he could be counted on to provide an exacting anatomization, laying out with wit, clarity, and formidable but ever discreet erudition the intellectual failings and moral pathologies of the subject under discussion.

Jim's first piece for *The New Criterion*, a review essay about the nineteenth-century feminist writer Margaret Fuller, appeared in December 1984, two years after we began publication. In the succeeding fourteen years, he wrote more than sixty pieces for *The New Criterion*—more, we believe, than he wrote for any other publication. His work appeared in many other places as well: in a number of specialist academic journals and also *The American Scholar*, *Commentary*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Chronicles*, *The Hudson Review*, *The Yale Review*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. He published two editions of Washington Irving's works, one for the Library of America, the other for *The Complete Writings of Washington Irving*. His book *The Novel of Manners in America* (1974) is widely recognized as a definitive study. In *Vital Signs: Essays on American Literature and Criticism* (1996) and *A Fine Silver Thread: Essays on American Writing and Criticism* (1998), he collected—generally in substantially expanded form—some of his most important essays. *The Primate's Dream*, a new collection of essays on race and American literature, will be published posthumously in the spring of 1999 by the house of Ivan R. Dee.

Jim Tuttleton was a critic on the side of truth. He had a profound faith in our ability to uncover the truth and, consequently, a profound conviction that criticism that sought to evade or deny the truth had reneged on its most fundamental mission. One of his most ambitious essays, "Simon Schama, Francis Parkman, and the Writing of History"—written for *The New Criterion*'s special tenth anniversary issue in September 1991—highlights this theme. The essay takes off from *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)*, a book by the well-known historian Simon Schama that had been published to wild adulation. The key to the popularity of Schama's book was in its fashionable denial of historical truth. *Dead Certainties* deliberately blended fact and fiction, truth and speculation, in an effort to undermine the distinctions that separate them. In one oft-quoted passage, Schama wrote that "historical knowledge must always be fatally circumscribed by the character and prejudices of its narrator"—a statement that robs history of any claim to objectivity or factual authority.

Schama's approach, Jim noted, "aligns him with the intelligentsia who nowadays tell us that there is no such thing as an essence of an event, that there are really no genres like 'history' or 'fiction,' and that there is no line between expository and narrative prose: there is only discourse, verbal production, *écriture*." If accepted, Schama's assertion is a prescription for intellectual nullity, as shocking as it is mendacious. As Jim put it:

> That a distinguished historian, at the top of his profession at Harvard, should dismiss as fatally false every historical account because of the personal perspective of the author is a scandal that the wise will ponder in dismay. It suggests that no historian can be self-conscious enough or objective enough to rise above his own horizon in contemplating the horizon of the past; and it implies that no reader is competent to judge whether or not the historian has sufficiently done so.

In effect, Schama's epistemological relativism denies that there is such a thing as the discipline of history: there are only stories, more or less compelling, equally bereft of any claim to truth.

Today, the relativism that Jim decried in Schama's book is endemic in the humanities. It is, indeed, the academic *deformation professionelle* of our age. One of the most celebrated impresarios for this hydra-headed virus is the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, the inventor of deconstruction—a form of intellectual self-abuse that stands to criticism in approximately the same relationship that "virtual reality" does to the everyday world we actually inhabit. Jim often attacked the demeaning frivolities of deconstruction. One of his wittiest and most far-ranging attacks is "Jacques et Moi," a long essay that he wrote especially for his book *Vital Signs*. About Derrida's assertion that "we cannot cling to the illusion that the signifier answers to the function of representing the signified"—i.e., that words refer to reality—Jim comments that

> Ideas, for me, have consequences. I have always acted on them and so, I believe, do most critics. What is the consequence of this argument banishing presence from the word, reality from discourse? What is the effect of asserting that the decentered text lacks a single referent, a unified aesthetic intention . . . that, in short, there is nothing outside the text and the text is a freeplay of diversities wherein authorial intention and coherence of meaning cannot be discovered? The effect is that the reader, or literary critic, is freed from the task of thinking that the text means something. . . . Meaning is not inherent in the text but is rather created by the reader. Interpretation is thus a free-for-all.

As he points out, the distortion that transforms criticism into free-play also robs literature of its most fundamental *raison d'être* as a purveyor of reality. At bottom, the "appeal of literature lies precisely in this capacity of the aesthetic to call into being credible worlds alternative to our own. If literature were merely a language game … we would tire of it very quickly." (An observation whose truth is confirmed by the extent to which literature is considered passé by the literature faculty at many of our premier colleges and universities.)

Although it was firmly grounded in literature, Jim Tuttleton's criticism and scholarship grew out of a larger existential concern—a concern with the continuity of those traditions—aesthetic, intellectual, political, religious—that have defined the shape of our cultural aspirations and made us who we are. That those traditions are everywhere under siege in cultural life today is the melancholy *donnée* with which we must all begin. This was a fact that Jim understood with profound historical insight. In an essay on Emerson and his circle he wrote for *The New Criterion* in 1996, he acknowledges Emerson's greatness as a writer but then dilates on "the negative impact, on American culture, of the transcendental doctrines Emerson espoused."

> I am not referring here to the doctrine of self-reliance, which most parents teach their children quite naturally, though not perhaps in so absolutist a degree. I refer to what happens in a culture like ours when institutions *as such* are attacked as vicious, when people are told that the church and temple, the college and the political party, the Red Cross, the employee's union, and the veteran's group (and so forth) are all unnecessary organizations and are indeed inimical to one's self-development, and that all one needs to do is to consult one's own inner oracle and act out one's own inner imperative, however antisocial it may be. To be told, Do your own thing, is for most people, it seems to me, ultimately

> disorienting and will leave them floundering and adrift and (even worse) determined—such is the Emersonian imperative—to *act out* their idiosyncrasies. . . . The 1960s represented, in my view, a widespread, disastrous, vulgar translation into action of such Emersonian doctrines, a sort of Age of Aquarius reincarnation of the 1830s "Newness." It produced some colorful personalities and genuinely eccentric communitarian "lifestyles" worthy of Fruitlands. But we have still not recovered from that decade's more sinister attack on the foundations of American culture and the moral life. We still have not directly challenged the Emersonian belief that there is no standard of right and wrong outside the self. And we have not recovered from his assault on the institutions by which we naturally and rightly organize our educational, political, religious, social, and intellectual life. It is through these institutions alone (however imperfect they may be) that jointly and mutually we implement our most deeply held convictions about the national life.

We observed that the death of Jim Tuttleton deprives *The New Criterion* of one of its most commanding writers. That must be emended: his death has deprived contemporary American letters of one of its wisest and most percipient critics.

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