

George Scialabba, *What Are Intellectuals Good For? Essays and Reviews*
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reviewed by Geoffrey Kurtz

Benjamin Franklin recounts in his *Autobiography* that during his years as a printer's apprentice he developed a "bookish inclination" and a fondness for "the arts of rhetoric and logic." He writes:

About this time I met with an odd volume of the *Spectator*. It was the third. I had never before seen any of them. I bought it, read it over and over, and was much delighted with it. I thought the writing excellent, and wished, if possible, to imitate it.

To stumble across delightful writing is one of the great pleasures of intellectual life. You read something and are at once settled and shaken by it, persuaded of one thing and provoked into new questions about another. Perhaps you are surprised by how a piece of good prose can both express and elicit a kind of moral poise, can clarify perceptions and can leave you—this will sound strange, but I think it is true nonetheless—a bit readier to stay a course of thought and action.

George Scialabba is one of the three or four contemporary writers who consistently have the effect on me that the *Spectator* did on Franklin. This, his first book, brings together 33 of his essays on writers, ideas, and public life. (Scialabba's previous chapbook and many of his other writings are available on his website, www.georgescialabba.net.) The essays here, written between 1983 and 2005, are almost all occasioned by specific books, although "book reviews" seems a thin and

colorless name for them. Although the title doesn't say so, the book is primarily about intellectuals of a particular country and era: the United States in the fairly recent past. About four fifths of the writers reviewed are American, by birth or by immigration, and only two did much of their writing before the Second World War; more than half of the writers did at least some of their work during the years when Scialabba wrote these essays. Two thirds of these review-essays were originally published in *Agni*, the *Boston Review*, *Dissent*, or *The Nation*, with the rest scattered through another half-dozen newspapers and small magazines.

Scialabba belongs to a tradition of generalist essay-writers and “citizen-critics” (his term) of the democratic left whose forebears include Randolph Bourne, Albert Camus, Nicola Chiaromonte, Irving Howe, Dwight Macdonald, George Orwell, and Ignazio Silone—to mention those Scialabba refers to most often. (Bourne and Macdonald seem to be his favorites among these, and the book includes at least one essay on each.) In the book's title essay, Scialabba describes this species of intellectual. They “wrote in the vernacular, with vigor and clarity, for the general, educated reader. Their topics were large, their interests wide; however small their actual, engaged audience, their writings opened out, and so helped sustain at least the idea and the hope of a public culture.” He quotes Irving Howe's description of one group of such writers: “The kind of essay they wrote was likely to be wide-ranging in reference, melding notions about literature and politics, sometimes announcing itself as a study of a writer or literary group but usually taut with a

pressure to ‘go beyond’ its subject, toward some encompassing moral or social observation.” Scialabba’s book is about the place of that tradition in America today (note the past tense in both the passages I quoted above) and the book itself is a superb contribution to the tradition.

Reading several of Scialabba’s essays together, one can sense his particular intellectual vocation. It is what Matthew Arnold, writing about Edmund Burke, called a “return...upon himself.” Scialabba writes:

To perceive as readily and pursue as energetically the difficulties of one’s own position as those of one’s opponents; to take pains to discover, and present fully, the genuine problems that one’s opponent is, however futilely, addressing—this is disinterestedness as Arnold understood it.

Arnold thought he had found a splendid example of it in Burke who, at the close of his last attack on the French Revolution, nevertheless conceded some doubts about the wisdom of opposing to the bitter end the new spirit of the age. In “The Function of Criticism,” Arnold cited this passage and commented:

That return of Burke upon himself has always seemed to me one of the finest things in English literature, or indeed any literature.

Scialabba is forever returning upon his own arguments, subjecting them to the most serious critiques he can find or invent. Again and again, he comes back to the cases against his own democratic, modernist, and socialist convictions: the nagging questions raised by elitist critiques of democracy, the conundrums of the liberal-communitarian debate, the new griefs that arrive with modernization, the unarguable successes of the parties of social inequality and war and imperial power. (My favorite of Scialabba’s returns upon himself is in an essay on faith and apostasy,

not included in this book but available on his website, in which he imagines his “beloved tormentor” C.S. Lewis visiting him in hell in an attempt “to persuade [him] to give up modernity for eternity.” He suggests that Lewis might, just possibly, succeed.)

The question posed by the book’s title suggests a return upon Scialabba’s work as a whole. What worth is there, here and now, in the model of intellectual work to which he aspires? In some essays here, Scialabba suggests that the intellectual, or at least the kind of intellectual he most admires, is no longer good for anything.

Of course the truths of political morality need frequent restatement. But much of what commands attention and respect about these writers [Bourne, Orwell, Silone, Camus, Macdonald, et al.] cannot be recaptured: the authoritative tone and sense of responsibility produced by their immersion in European literature the impression of high specific gravity produced by the historical circumstances and by the fact that all literate Europe and America was their audience; finally, their sheer virtuosity.

Even if the older intellectuals’ tone, sense of responsibility, and literacy were somehow recaptured in our time, Scialabba contends, the increased opacity of society and politics would make restatements of old moral truths less timely and that old virtuosity unattainable. We are saturated with words and images produced by “anti-public intellectuals” of the public relations industry; corporations and the wealthy have accumulated overwhelming political power; the “decline of print literacy” saps what sources of public thought might remain. Thus our most evident intellectual need is for writers who can research, expose, debunk.

It might seem obvious, for example, that Reaganomics was bad for ordinary Americans—this, if nothing else, a contemporary left-wing intellectual ought to be able to affirm with confidence. Unfortunately, some undeniably honest and intelligent people affirm the contrary. One who is determined to see ‘all sides of every question’ must then learn how to distinguish among ways of measuring median family income, job creation and job loss, unemployment, and several other economic indicators, along with the basics of monetary theory. For a literary intellectual, this is quite a chore.

The chore becomes a Herculean labor when we consider not just the specialized vocabulary and research methodologies of economics but also those of environmental science, public health, nuclear physics, chemical engineering—and so forth. “To be, or at any rate to seem, an expert on everything,” Scialabba writes, “is now not a challenge but an invitation to vertigo.” None of us today can “‘put together’ all of culture.” The scope and complexity of our problems and the quantity of information necessary to the serious investigation of our situation are so great that generalist intellectuals cannot hope to “make social relations transparent,” as Merleau-Ponty called on them to do. Literary intellectuals cannot be the legislators of our world because they are simply “ordinary citizens without politically relevant expertise.” And without relevant expertise, how is one to make a useful contribution to a public world in which rulers rule by obfuscating and in which questions of justice must be formulated and answered in technical vocabularies?

Scialabba argues, against his own example, that the only useful thing to do is to abandon the ideal of the humanist intellectual and become an expert in some area of public debate. Social criticism has necessarily “grown far more empirical, more

specialized,” than it was in the day of writers like Macdonald and Orwell. The newer kind of intellectual this situation calls for does not display the “pleasure in dispute, dialectic, dazzle” (Howe’s words, from a passage Scialabba quotes more than once) of the older literary intellectuals but simply aims to teach citizens “how to read the newspaper.” These empirical intellectuals are not artful in their composition of ideas; the most we can ask is that their writing be “[l]ucid, penetrating, austere, unaffected.” Scialabba sees Noam Chomsky as the model for this new kind of empirical intellectual. I am inclined to think that there are better models, but nevertheless this distinction between the newer and older intellectual styles is plausible and provocative. On the one hand we have researchers and journalists who make themselves into specialists, whose work lacks grace but who clarify and organize information that would otherwise bewilder the rest of us; on the other we have generalists who “go beyond” their immediate subjects, essayists whose prose models moral balance and thoughtful engagement with the world. We have one kind of writing that delights no one but that is serious, straightforward, eminently useful to the writer’s fellow citizens, unarguably good for something. And we have another which certainly has its delights but about which we have to ask: is it good for anything, in our circumstances?

It would no doubt be a good thing if more American intellectuals learned the languages of, say, labor economics or climate science. But Scialabba proposes that we conceive of “a division of labor and of sensibility among contemporary intellectuals”

that can also preserve something from the older tradition of the humanist intellectual.

Scialabba has an idea of what that something ought to be. Consider this passage from his essay on Howe:

[T]he very ideal of cosmopolitanism, of the intellectual as “anti-specialist,” uniting political and aesthetic interests and able to speak with some authority about both, is obsolescent...Perhaps the demise of the “public intellectual,” of the “dilettante-connoisseur,” is a symptom of inevitable crisis, a sign that intellectual wholeness is no longer attainable and that the classical ideals of wisdom as catholicity of understanding, and of citizenship as the capacity to discuss all public affairs, must be abandoned.

Here is at least the germ of an answer to the question in the book’s title: the kind of writing practiced by humanist intellectuals is a heightened, intensified, exemplary form of an activity that a healthy republic requires, to one degree or another, of all its citizens (although it is not, we should note, the only such activity). “Literature is,” Scialabba writes, “practice for civic life.” He describes “civic pedagogy” as the only remotely plausible response to the management of culture by social elites and to the deficits of “energy, imaginative range, sensual and familial detachment, and inner poise” that are “necessary for citizenship in a republic” but that elude most of us most of the time. (Part of what Scialabba is getting at in passages like these is the notion that words like “civic,” “citizenship,” and “republic” are useful for talking about the political work that a modernist and democratic socialism entails. This is an important idea—and one I agree with—but this is not the place to say much about it.)

The work of the humanist intellectual, then, is “to infuse politics with the values of art: intellectual detachment, emotional honesty, imaginative fullness” and thus to contribute to “the formation of a supple, humane political sensibility.” Scialabba wants to foster a political sensibility—or, better, a civic virtue—marked by “an emphatic lack of deference toward wealth, office, and professional credentials; contempt for luxury and greed; a strong preference for economic independence and for face-to-face relations in business and government; a sense of place; a lively curiosity about science, art, and philosophy; and perhaps most of all, a passion for vigorous debate and splendid rhetoric.” This sensibility (or virtue) emerges not from metaphysical propositions but from “what the eighteenth century called ‘sympathy’ or ‘benevolence’ and what we may simply call moral imagination.” And this moral imagination requires cultivation. In elementary school, I was given composition books that had on their covers the motto: “Learning maketh a man fit company for himself.” Scialabba’s motto might be: Humanist essays make—or at any rate, might sometimes help make—republican citizens fit company for each other.

Cultivating a sensibility is different from providing information. The former isn’t done so directly as the latter; it has more to do with arranging for new experiences than with presenting data. For Scialabba, thus, the style and form of writing are at least as important as its subject matter. Scialabba’s highest praise is to say that one writer holds to “strict standards of honest intellectual craftsmanship” and his sharpest dig is to note that another “writes like a dean.” Writing that fosters civic

virtue, he suggests, is characterized not merely by clarity, but by grace of expression and willingness to return on the writer's own arguments.

Scialabba's own writing is delightfully graceful, but if it succeeds as civic pedagogy it is also because of two other characteristics, more structural than stylistic. The first is that Scialabba often quotes big, satisfying clusters of sentences from the works he is writing about. My Great Aunt Esther tested her cooking with a large serving spoon, not with a teaspoon; she insisted that she couldn't properly taste sauce or soup unless it filled her mouth. That's how Scialabba quotes those he writes about. Thus the reader gets enough of the writer's argument to think beyond whatever argument Scialabba happens to be developing and, perhaps more importantly, gets the not merely the concepts of the writer's work, but the feel.

The second is Scialabba's way of returning upon his own argument about the work under review by stepping back and forth between appreciation and critique. He somehow does this in a way that is elegant but also decisive, even forceful. He is generous toward those he criticizes, but also knows when not to pull a punch. Consider this passage from his review of Michael Walzer's *The Company of Critics*, a book in which Walzer argues for a model of the "connected" or "internal" social critic.

Concerned not to cut himself off from his fellow-citizens, the internal critic will be tempted to moderate, if not his indignation, then at least the expression of it: his rhetoric. And sometimes—usually—he will be right to do so, to set political effectiveness above literary effect.

But indignation is not always manageable. And however conscientiously the critic tries to reiterate, to reconstruct the moral history of those in other communities, it will always be difficult for him to give their suffering due weight. We are properly skeptical of the habitually enraged critic; but we are also disappointed on occasion—and they may be the most important occasions—by the invariably judicious one. Perhaps this is why, though I largely share Walzer’s political positions, I have seldom been profoundly moved by his own social criticism—enlightened, yes, but rarely inspired. The young Kafka wrote: “If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it?” Walzer is, alas, far too polite ever to have hammered on anyone’s skull.

Nearly every sentence pivots from what Scialabba thinks Walzer gets right to what he thinks Walzer doesn’t, and sometimes a sentence pivots more than once within itself. But the interesting thing is that the structure of this passage achieves much the same thing as Scialabba’s substantive critique of Walzer. Scialabba argues that social criticism should hammer as well as ponder—and this passage ponders for a while, with a bit of well-timed hammering at the end. Having read this, I expect that my appreciation for Walzer’s polite and judicious social criticism will be alloyed with a bit of Scialabba’s impatience. I like Walzer’s work, and so I need to be attuned to what is weakest in it, and Scialabba has both convinced me of that and given form to my needed return upon my own habits of mind.

And that seems to be precisely what the humanist essay is good for. By insisting that we return upon our own arguments and habits and attitudes, Scialabba imparts a valuable idea. But through the structure and feel of his essays he lets us experience a virtue essential to the republican citizen, the virtue of listening and thinking at the same time. (We forget that the main activity of citizens in the

Athenian assembly—who still, and rightly, give us our ideal of the citizen—was not speaking but listening.)

The classical ideal of citizenship faces different threats in America today than it has in other countries and times, and Scialabba is right to point out that the humanist essay is not particularly well suited to confronting those particular threats. It is not that no audience exists for this sort of writing. We seem to live in a decent time (there has never been a great time) for the publication and reading of “little magazines.” But the need for specialized empirical intellectuals who can clarify technical problems for the public does indeed overshadow the other roles that intellectuals might take on, and the experience of residing in a republic that often resembles an oligarchy or an empire can be horribly disorienting. To respond with essays and reviews is, to say the least, awkward.

But that turns out not to matter as much as one might think. The grace and integrity and sympathy required of the good citizen must be learned, and we cannot afford to neglect any opportunity for that education. The humanist essay cannot put together all of culture or make social relations fully transparent. It cannot replace the kinds of education citizens get through participation in political campaigns or trade unions or social movements or neighborhood organizations. It can, however, provide some occasions for some parts of our education as self-questioning and public-spirited citizens. That is a small thing, but to be good for a small thing is still to be good for something.

And, no less, the essay can delight us. That delight—in the nicely placed word, the rhythm and flow of prose, the lull and roar of ideas—is a good thing in itself. It is also a subtle invitation to public life that no overt civic pedagogy can replace. A renewal of that invitation, it seems to me, should be counted among the things Scialabba's essays are good for.