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2-9-2020

February 9, 2020: The Sprit of the Age

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2020). February 9, 2020: The Sprit of the Age. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/1286>

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Title: The Sprit of the Age

Date: 2020-02-09T06:34:00.000-05:00

2/9/2020—Humanism and materialism are not sustainable. Neither is solipsism. Nor, for that matter, is skepticism. So, today, I can read in the New York Times on both the Right and Left, Ross Douthat and Jamelle Bouie, repetitive theories of history. (Right now we're down). I also have on my desk the a January 19, 2019 review of books on liberalism and democracy by David Bell, " Each of the three books under review makes a renewed case for elements of the liberal ideal, but with a powerfully heightened sense of its fragility and of the contingent factors behind its historical development." And also on my desk a letter to the editor about a review by Elain Blair, which will not get published. Here is what I wrote. To the Editor: Elaine Balir writes, concerning a moment in Ben Lerner's novel, 10:04, "Lerner...is writing in a time of doubt about the realist writer's authority to take us very far beyond the bounds of his own experience." ["Learning to Fight," NYR, February 13, 2020] Undoubtedly, Blair does speak for the cultural moment. But this unthinking solipsism must be confronted in order to defeat it. Think of the implications of Blair's understanding. The rich author cannot write about a poor person. Not really. Because he cannot know what it is like to be poor. Similarly, a man cannot write about a woman. A white author cannot write about a person of color. But why stop there? The soloistic student famously said to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, "No one can know my pain." How could an author have "authority" to write about anyone else? He cannot know another. Furthermore, Wittgenstein retorted, "Are you sure you know?" How can Blair grant the author authority to write about "his own experience," as if that fraught category were self-evident? We don't know ourselves. The only authority is truth. Ben Lerner can write a social novel to the extent he is true to its characters and situations. That is our only authority and it is an exacting one. There is no escaping judgment. Vapid nihilism leads only to the abyss. An abyss all too obvious in our current political life.
***** The problem with all of this is that we take these views as obvious and self-evident. Or as beyond investigation. In other words, there is no actual truth we might learn. This is really the age of evasion about learning anything.