



Barry Sanders. *The Private Death of Public Discourse*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998. 248 p. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8070-0434-0.

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The Private and the Public

Sanders says that this book is about meaning. He intends that the reader interpret his intention in the senses that civilization needs communication and that individuals need to locate some interior purpose. From this intention, Sanders expounds on the barriers, even enemies, of meaning in contemporary life. The intention is admirable; it is the effort that is a bit lacking.

It is not that this book is uninteresting, but it is unfulfilling. Sanders' principal thesis is that civil public discourse is possible only if there is the necessary corollary of truly introspective quest for meaning. That is, the public is dependent upon the private seeking of meaning through the literate exploration of prior thought and writings and through the internal articulation of purpose informed by the exploration just described. The thesis is a potentially valid one, and is certainly worthy of examination. The shortcoming of the book lies in its dropping of portentous observations, followed by ramblings that do not fully develop those observations. For instance he writes, "The communitarian collapse—of morals, of virtue, of compassion—begins on the inside first, with that personal interiority I have been exploring ... To fix what is broken in the outside world, we must first begin with its analysis in our own inside worlds, in dialogue with the self" (p. 73). Sanders either fails to listen to his own advice or carries his internal conversation to extremes; he does not follow this insight with a sufficiently focused critical scrutiny.

The greater part of the book is a litany of disconnected exemplars of societal ill. Sanders moves jerkily from Desert Storm to the Unabomber to the Free Speech Movement. He intersperses his examples with statements such as "Images cannot carry on discourse" (p. 153) and "Without space, people have a difficult if not impossible time creating politics with each other, working out relationships of power for some common goal, for some common good" (p. 183). If they were fleshed

out, these thoughts could be the basis of serious study of the sources of privacy's demise and the crowding that can lead to destruction of interiority. As they stand, however, they are little more than islands in a sea of polemical excursions.

Sanders is particularly disdainful of New Criticism. It seems rather odd that this literary school of thought would so fascinate him. New Criticism is certainly not without its problems, but it is a stretch to conclude, as Sanders seems to, that this approach to literature shares in the obscuring of interiority. True, many who have adopted a New Critical stance have gone to the extreme of claiming that there is one true reading of a literary work, and further that worthwhile literature is that which is representative of the West (and the male, and the white). To paint all who urge readers to look first to the text with this brush is not justifiable, though. One could ask legitimately why Sanders does not spread his wrath to the stance that claims there is a definably correct interpretation of literature that captures the author's intent (a stance most forcefully defended by E. D. Hirsch).

This book does appear to be an honest effort at exploring the deterioration of public discourse. However, it offers precious few insights, and is at once too fractious and too polemical to comprise a sustained examination. It is a very personal book; it seems clear that Sanders is touching on points that he cares deeply about. Perhaps it is that caring that precludes any kind of cool assessment either of the nature of the collapse of public discourse or of its cause. As a reader, I can sympathize with his political leanings; on the other hand I feel frustrated at the lack of clearly-articulated and clearly-followed purpose.

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