

The New Criterion

Letters

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Crucial points: A reply

by [Jeffrey Meyers](#)

A response from Jeffrey Meyers.

Sisman perfectly exemplifies the first sentence of my review: “Writers, craving praise and hating criticism, are unusually contentious.” It has never occurred to Sisman that he might find new material by doing a bit of work in the archives. Kenneth Johnston’s recent life of Wordsworth, for example, was based on extensive research in the Public Records Offices in Carlisle, Kendal, Winchester, Halifax, Norfolk and Edinburgh; and in the manuscript collections of the British Museum, Bristol University, Guildhall Libraries, Hawkshead School, Kendal Public Library, Bibliothèque Nationale and the Royal Post Office.

Sisman, never venturing beyond the London Library, has served up the old familiar story, puffed out with potted history and pathetically inept comments on the poetry. Sisman may have mentioned the crucial points, but that is not sufficient. He failed to discuss them in a meaningful way. He seems to feel biography envy when ...

Jeffrey Meyers is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and is writing a biography of Samuel Johnson. He grew up in New York, was an undergraduate at Michigan and earned his doctorate at Berkeley. He taught in Japan, at UCLA and Tufts, and was a writer in London and Málaga before teaching at the University of Colorado from 1975 to 1992. He has been a Visiting Professor at the universities of Kent and Massachusetts, Jemison Professor at the University of Alabama and Visiting Scholar at Berkeley. He has won three Colorado research awards and two Faculty Fellowships as well as Huntington Library, Fulbright, ACLS and Guggenheim grants. He is one of twelve Americans who are Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature. Since 1992, he has been a professional writer in Berkeley, California. Professor Meyers, one of the most respected scholars in his field, has published 40 books and 500 articles on modern American, English and European literature. His wide range of interests include bibliography, editing, literary criticism, art history, film and biography. He is a specialist in archival research and has discovered the FBI file on Hemingway and important literary manuscripts by Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound and Roy Campbell. A distinguished biographer, he is the author of several works on T.E. Lawrence and George Orwell; lives of Katherine Mansfield, Wyndham Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, Robert Lowell, D.H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, Edgar Poe, Scott Fitzgerald, Edmund Wilson, Humphrey Bogart, Gary Cooper, George Orwell and *Inherited Risk*, a father-and-son life of Errol and Sean Flynn. He has also published *Fiction and the Colonial Experience*, *Painting and the Novel*, *A Fever at the Core: The Idealist is Politics Married to Genius*, *Homosexuality and Literature*, *D.H. Lawrence and the Experience of Italy*, *Disease and the Novel*, *Graham Greene: A Revaluation*, *Hemingway: Life into Art* and *Privileged Moments: Encounters with Writers*. He has edited two collections of original

essays on biography, and is now writing a life of Somerset Maugham. Professor Meyers' works have been translated into Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, Danish, Polish, Hebrew, Japanese and Korean. His manuscripts are in the Tulsa, Texas, Huntington, Harvard, Virginia and J.F. Kennedy libraries. He has lectured at seventy universities including Harvard Medical School in America, Canada, England, France, Holland, Spain, Burma and New Zealand as well as at the Library of Congress, the Tate Gallery, Royal Festival Hall and the Royal Society of Literature. He has been interviewed scores of times for newspapers, radio and television; has appeared in documentary films about Katherine Mansfield and Gary Cooper, and BBC-TV programs on Hemingway and D.H. Lawrence. He has spoken about his literary discoveries on CBS-TV morning news and about Orwell on C-Span's "Booknotes." In England, Meyers' life of Hemingway was praised by the novelists Anthony Powell and Anthony Burgess, and the playwright Tom Stoppard chose it as the "Best Book of the Year" in 1986. In America, the poet James Dickey noted: "Meyers has given us an extremely valuable deepening of what is quite likely to prove Hemingway's greatest work, his life." The National Book Award winner J. F. Powers said: "This is simply the best book there is on Hemingway, thorough, perceptive, no holds barred, highly entertaining, so good and right on the famous writer and also on the famous performer who acted from the All-American hope that what goes up may *not* come down, but did, in this case, tragically." And George Painter, the highly respected biographer of Marcel Proust, wrote: "I believe that Professor Meyers' Hemingway is one of the great biographies of our half-century, a masterwork in which true scholarship and creative art are so united as to become indistinguishable, and worthy to belong with Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce*, Marchand's *Byron* or Michael Holroyd's *Lytton Strachey*. Ellmann's passing has been universally mourned; but one can at least feel that the world now has a new major biographer."

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