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Empson's only heir?

by [Paul Dean](#)

Review of Essays in Appreciation by Christopher Ricks

“For some of us, the most brutal hatred within the acronym DWEM is not the racism of White or the sexism of Male but the embittered provincialism which makes Dead a term of abuse.” This, from the concluding essay in Professor Ricks’s new collection, is both a heartening statement of principle and a pointer to one of his central concerns. Making literature live for us, he says emphatically, is not a matter of making it “relevant” to us, but of making *us* relevant to *it*. Matthew Arnold warned against what he called the historic fallacy, the assumption that because a work is a linguistic or literary milestone it is therefore good; but he also asserted, in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” (1864), the need for criticism to concern itself with the best literature of past ages, not to be obsessed by modishness. Echoing both Arnold’s title and sentiments, T. S. Eliot added in his “The Function of Criticism” (1923) that “a critic must have a very highly developed sense of fact.”

Contemporary “wisdom” feels itself to be superior to this, denying the existence of facts and ignoring, or at best condescending to, the historical development of literary forms and aesthetic concepts. Professor Ricks cites a colleague of his whose proposals for a graduate course entitled “Introduction to Literary Study” gave pride of place to literary theory, adding almost as an afterthought, “plus a couple of weeks for the old verities.” Well, the old verities have kept Ricks busy for over thirty years now, and they have not finished with him yet. He equips us, as he has equipped himself, to respond to the past as those for whom it was the present might have done. He knows that literature lives, among other locations, in the interstices of allusion, quotation, echo, and biographical encounter (whether a meeting of persons or minds)—all matters of fact, not speculation.

One essay in the collection, “The Wit and Weight of Clarendon,” is devoted to a historian, and it well brings out the relationship between fact and interpretation. Clarendon’s judgments are conveyed as much through cadence and wordplay as through explicit verdict, his narrative is a creative reenactment of the kind specified by R. G. Collingwood as the highest form of historical thinking. (It is disconcerting to find him omitted entirely from Collingwood’s *The Idea of History*.) Yet it would be unsubtle—worse, it would be wrong—to say that Clarendon, or any other historian, is a novelist by another name. History, like criticism and unlike the novel, is second-order writing, though no less important for that; but, whereas the critic’s data are ever available in the form of printed texts, the historian’s are gone forever. We can’t have another English Civil War, to see who is right about the causes. What we can have is another reading of Clarendon.

Ricks’s ear for allusions is unrivaled, and his tempting case that Hardy’s poem “A Spellbound Palace” borrows from Eliot’s “Sweeney Erect” is only the most startling of the juxtapositions he

offers. Not that he is gullible; he enumerates the factual blunders of creative artists in his lecture “Literature and the Matter of Fact,” insisting that to notice, and be troubled by, such errors is not mere pedantry. (Tennyson was honorably exasperated to discover that the initial reports in the London *Times*, which gave him his figure of six hundred for “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” were apparently based on underestimates.) Sometimes, it is true, his allusion-hunting becomes a verbal tic, and expends itself unprofitably. The least satisfactory essay here, on the literary borrowings of the philosopher J. L. Austin, significantly focuses on a writer who resembles Ricks at his exhibitionistic worst, when he is trying to out-Empson Empson but only succeeds in reproducing William Empson’s cleverness without his intelligence. Ricks perhaps ought to be more guarded about Austin, whose *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) with its imperfectly formulated ideas and smart-aleck manner, has been responsible for the content and tone of much of the kind of criticism which, in other moods, he detests.

To adapt Johnson on Shakespeare, Ricks is sometimes great, when some great occasion is presented to him. The invitation to deliver the Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1991 was one such occasion, and the lectures, hitherto unpublished, form the core of this volume. They take as their subject Victorian biography, exemplified by that fashionably relegated genre *Life and Letters*, of which Ricks is a vigorous defender. It is, he says, “uniquely imaginative in its variety of textures and of metabolism,” and he is a firm opponent of the current dogma that, in biography, “all we do is impose ourselves, as upon everything else; all biographies are fictions, since everything is a fiction; and all biographies are autobiographies.” Nowadays, when, at least in Britain, biography outsells every other genre, except perhaps fiction, by a long way, we need reminding frequently that those are gross fallacies. All biographies are interpretations of facts—as, indeed, are all autobiographies—but that there are facts to interpret no one, except an academic in search of a career, would deny.

The lives of Charlotte Brontë by E. C. Gaskell, of Jane and Thomas Carlyle by J. A. Froude, and of Tennyson by his son Hallam and his grandson Charles, are studied by Ricks with the kind of tenacious attentiveness to detail most critics normally reserve for poems. Inverting the Poundian aphorism, he remarks in another essay that “Prose should be at least as well written as poetry,” and he shows that it can be, indeed that it can aspire to the poetic without divagating into the prose-poetic. He identifies a master-motif in each biography—disappointment in Gaskell’s Brontë, remorse and repentance in Froude’s Carlyle, and parent-child inheritance in Tennyson’s Tennyson—and traces its development illuminatingly, justifying his contention that these apparently ramshackle structures are in fact works of art. They are out of fashion now, not only because they are forbiddingly long, not only because they are informed by unpopular virtues, listed by Ricks as “affection, generosity, sympathy, and imagination,” but also because they make an assumption which almost no modern critic can make: that religion matters.

As Ricks says, Charlotte Brontë’s disappointment, like Gaskell’s account of it, can only be truly understood in the light of their beliefs about divine *appointment* (Carlyle and Tennyson, while idiosyncratic in belief, would have been outraged at the charge that they were devoid of it). Ricks doesn’t reveal his own religious position, if any, and there’s no reason why he should, but he is clear about the need to understand “the indisputable distinction between the entertaining of a belief and the holding of one.” This goes with his lethal aside, in an essay on Donne, that that archentertainer John Carey is “quite unperturbed by religion,” which would seem to incapacitate him pretty comprehensively as a commentator on the man who wrote “Those are my best days, when I shake with fear.”

As we might expect, the lecture on “Tennyson’s Tennyson” is the finest. Which Tennyson is which in that title? This is exactly Ricks’s point. The son was able to shape the life, and the *Life*, of his father (we can say this without denying the existence of biographical facts, as above), and if at times

Hallam seems overwhelmed, not to say effaced, by his father's literary progeny, the biography is his reestablishment of the equilibrium. He was far from being the compliant and colorless Telemachus-figure he is often taken to be. Tennyson was lucky in this son, the only one of three who survived him. Lucky in another sense, too; for, in this same essay, Ricks gives a list of great writers who were childless: Carlyle, Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and Samuel Beckett. It is a striking fact, and in two reprinted pieces he considers its implications for Jane Austen and George Eliot, both of whom saw their fictions as children.

Austen's novels are not as devoid of children as many believe, but, Ricks thinks, they are astringent about them as a corrective to an overly sentimental or idealized view; while George Eliot's childlessness (a conscious decision, since she and G. H. Lewes practiced contraception) is presented as a major impulsion behind her late launch into creative writing. Here Ricks is up against the feminists who are anxious to enlist Austen and Eliot as sisters in the campaign against the male plot to curb women's freedom. He makes merry at the expense of his principal opponent, Nina Auerbach ("somebody else has to have babies, if only to keep up the supply of feminists"), but he is unwaveringly serious in his opposition to a slick politicized reading of these writers. "George Eliot, in her life with Lewes," he adds forcefully, "manifested incomparably more courage in confronting slanderous social and sexual spite than is asked of any late-twentieth-century feminist professor." Furthermore, the artist who imagined the tragic futility, born of desperation, of Hetty Sorrel's infanticide needs no lectures on patriarchy.

This volume prompts some general reflections about Ricks's career. His output has been impressive in bulk and variety, but his versatility has been a curse as well as a blessing. His editorial labors on Tennyson and, more recently, T. S. Eliot show how exquisitely tuned his ear can be; but his criticism seemed to me to lose its way badly about the time of the publication of that embarrassing book *Keats and Embarrassment* (1974). His previous collection of essays, *The Force of Poetry* (1984), and his previous full-length book *Beckett's Dying Words* (1993) were both badly marred by showing off and by superficiality taking itself for profundity. However, it must not be forgotten that he resigned his Cambridge chair after a row with the literary theorists, only to bump into them again at Boston University; and it would seem that his disagreements with them have recently made a more genuine impact on his conscience and sense of duty. There are some deeply felt, stern rebukes in several essays here to fellow members of what he reminds us is only the "profession" of university teacher, as distinct from the "calling" of the creative artist.

He laments, too, that academia has paid "the price paid for all professionalism: an induration against its own central human imperatives." "Whereas there is no such thing as philosophical study distinct from philosophy," Ricks points out, "there is such a thing as literature, which should not be confused with—or by—literary studies." In "Literary Principles as Against Theory," Ricks has recourse to T. S. Eliot's gloss on "intelligence," "of which an important function is the discernment of exactly what, and how much, we feel in any given situation." Nowadays, when academic criticism (and teaching) is awash with emotional falsity, a hunger for totems, and a terror of seriousness, we should take Eliot's words to such hearts as we can muster.

In the final essay in the collection (again previously unpublished), Ricks condemns, with a severity unprecedented in his work, "the insolently mendacious misrepresentation not only of the great works of Western literature but of the responses they received over the centuries" from our academic Thought Police. Such individuals are baffled by, and hence hate and fear, the idea that reading literature sharpens our judgment because it forces us to try to understand points of view other than our own. William Empson, who figures in this essay and frequently elsewhere, rejoiced in this enabling, and ennobling, discipline, and Ricks (who for better or worse is Empson's only authentic successor), when he is being intellectually continent, shares and transmits that joy. *Essays in Appreciation* shows—and I don't intend to be patronizing in saying this, rather the reverse—that

Ricks, until now the oldest *enfant terrible* in the business, is growing up.

Notes

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1. Ricks's essay "What Is at Stake in the 'Battle of the Books'?" first appeared in *The New Criterion* (September 1989) and is accordingly left out of account in this review. [Go back to the text.](#)

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