“Canon” Ricks

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The Oxford Book of English Verse
edited by Christopher Ricks.

That the Christian religion was never disestablished in England—or in the ancient English universities of Oxford and Cambridge—is a fact of momentous cultural importance, not only for England but for the English-speaking peoples generally. Despite Newman’s withdrawal from Oxford in 1845 and the subsequent gradual secularization of much of the life of the two universities, the Christian dialogue between faith and reason has continued to thrive there. What’s more, that dialogue’s articulation in works of literature, literary criticism, and lexicography, as well as in works of philosophy, theology, and Biblical scholarship, has often retained a ghostly but genuine stamp of orthodoxy.

Especially is this true of Oxford University and its press, and even more so of that press’s Oxford Book of English Verse, now available in a new, third edition. The first edition appeared in 1900 and was edited by Arthur Quiller-Couch, a poet himself and sometime King Edward VII Professor of English Literature at Cambridge. He chose poems from the period 1250-1900. Enormously popular, this volume was revised once, in 1939, by the editor. It concluded movingly with an orthodox poem by R. D. Blackmore expressing faith in Christ’s triumph over death, “Dominus Illuminatio Mea” (the Lord is my illumination), the Latin phrase itself being the motto of Oxford University. This edition influenced seven decades of English-language readers before being superseded in 1972 by the anthology edited by Dame Helen Gardner, an Oxford don of pious views who was influenced by the neo-orthodox Christian revival of the mid-century, and especially by the poetic and critical achievement of T. S. Eliot, on whom she wrote a fine book.

Dame Helen was very much influenced by Eliot’s revision of the canon of English poetry as represented by two anthologies assembled by Eliot’s friend and disciple John Hayward, a revision that emphasized the importance of two great seventeenth-century “metaphysical” priest-poets, John Donne and George Herbert, though both had also been represented in Quiller-Couch’s 1900 selection. She also restored Alexander Pope to the prominence denied him by the more Romantic and Victorian
Christopher Ricks's new volume thus has distinguished and influential predecessors, and in fact contains many of the same poets and poems from the period 1200-1950. But Ricks's edition also includes poems of the period from 1950 to the late 1990s, concluding with Geoffrey Hill and Seamus Heaney—both born, like Ricks, before World War II. The first thing to be said about this anthology is that it is a magnificent achievement, orthodox in the best sense of its predecessors, with its alternative and additional choices deftly and learnedly made and evincing no factitious desire for novelty in selection. It is very unlikely that anyone alive knows as much about English poetry as Ricks; his learning is lightly and wittily worn without sacrificing any of the gravity and centrality of the line of pious Oxford “clerks” that extends from the Middle Ages through Hooker, Samuel Johnson, Newman, and Arnold, to C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Dorothy Sayers, and Ronald Knox.

Like Helen Gardner, Ricks has acknowledged the influence of Hayward’s anthologies, and if anything, the presence of T. S. Eliot looms even larger in his anthology than in Dame Helen’s—which amounts to a principled rejection of the contemporary devaluation of Eliot. Ricks’s Introduction (wittily divided in two) is exceptional for its simultaneously displaying the craft of literary criticism at its best while also puncturing the “envious usurpation” of prominence for literary criticism over literature itself that our most fashionable literary critics—e.g., Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Stanley Fish, and their French gurus—have effected in the last quarter century. This usurpation is more poisonous and destructive than people outside of literary studies can easily conceive.

Though not a Christian, Ricks is often accused of being one, and for good reason. He is implicitly a philosophical foundationalist: a “Logocentrist,” a term of abuse employed by our tenured radicals. And morally, he is an “anima naturaliter cristiana”—if not a Christian, then at least the best kind of fellow-traveller. This is to say that he is a moralist on whose mind and sensibility the waves of twentieth-century historical experience have not beaten in vain. A doggedly unoriginal natural law thinker, Ricks honorably refuses to deny, ignore, mock, or replace the category of religion in human experience, a fact shown in his generous, sympathetic, and precise discussions of Christian poets such as Milton, Johnson, Coleridge, Hopkins, Eliot, and Geoffrey Hill.

Piously but precisely deferential, unlike the self-vaunting deconstructionists who are now in charge of literary studies in the United States, Ricks pays homage in his Introduction to the central line of major poet-critics in English: Ben Jonson, Dryden, Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, Arnold, and Eliot. Especially in light of the failure of the Anglo-Catholic restoration, represented by Newman’s conversion and withdrawal from Oxford in 1845, Ricks knows well the massive modern momentum of scientistic reductionism. “Literary study, like literature itself,” he wrote fifteen years ago, “has always needed to resist...the imperialism of science.” Arnold had made this point, and to their credit even the triumphant Victorian agnostics J. S. Mill and T. H. Huxley (winners, where Newman, Keble, and Pusey were losers) came, however late and ruefully, to acknowledge its force.

Yet to the opposite extreme from scientism—aestheticism—Ricks has been even more implacably hostile. If we ought not to make a fetish of objects and their means of measurement, nor should we make a fetish of arbitrary human subjectivity, what Ricks calls “the Activity of everything.” Ricks’s brilliant 1977 attack on the sly and...
self-serving aestheticism of Walter Pater (reprinted in The Force of Poetry, 1984) is of a piece with his reduction and demotion of Yeats in this Oxford anthology and his assertion that “as a poet [Yeats] is the most overrated of them all” (London Sunday Times, May 20, 1984). For Ricks, aesthetic immoralism is no cause for celebration or praise; he takes no joy in being what Wallace Stevens called “a connoisseur of chaos.”

Ricks will shock, outrage, or depress our reigning post-modernists (who will disdain his anthology, but whose works will themselves disappear ‘ere long) with his demonstration, in his Introduction and his selections, of the pervasively and perennially moral character of English verse, in contrast to the aestheticism of so much modern French, German, and American poetry (from Whitman to Ginsberg). The covertly or implicitly Platonist element that Coleridge thought so characteristic of English literature is vividly apparent and credible to Ricks. “For [Ben] Jonson,” he writes in his Introduction, “it was imperative to hold to an ancient faith: the impossibility of anyone’s being a good poet without first being a good man or a good woman.” This point, of course, was made later and even more famously, by Milton. Despite modern skepticism and relativism, Ricks defends Jonson’s view. He comments: “Realized in the very words of a true poem, there has to be a new sensitivity to consciousness and to conscience, and where could this come from but somewhere good?”

In an era of increasingly esoteric, pretentious, and virtually incomprehensible, centrifugal specialisms which impoverish and denature the common idiom, the state of the language, the dialect of the tribe, good literature is the bulwark, the living vehicle, the highest expression of normative discourse itself. (“We will always learn more about human life and human personality from novels than from scientific psychology,” Noam Chomsky wrote a decade ago.) For this reason Ricks particularly despises the arcane scientistic pretenses of literary theorists and their “envious usurpation” of the place of literature. Conveying the great literary and critical tradition of Jonson, Milton, Dryden, Johnson, Arnold, and Eliot, Ricks defends the existence and importance of normative principles and proverbs, and of poems themselves—the far from common “common sense” of the race. This he does in fine essays such as “Literature and the Matter of Fact” (1990) and “Literary Principles as Against Theory” (1985), where he writes that “a fully compacted principle is rooted as a proverb.” Here is the piety, the traditionalism, the “Logocentrism” that have made Ricks anathema to our vehement, voluble post-modernists and deconstructionists, and that make his anthology so trustworthy and rich. He sees himself as a steward or trustee of the canon of classic English literature, one of the great civilizing agencies of the modern world—a world from which so much sanity, decency, and beauty have been eroded by the acids of nihilism.

Like so many wise men and women in the English-speaking world, Ricks venerates Samuel Johnson, from whose Rambler (No. 168, 1751) he quotes a key assertion in the Oxford Book’s Introduction: “the force of poetry...calls new powers into being, ...embodies sentiment, and animates matter.” A commonsense dualist, Ricks knows that there is in language something uncanny and inexplicable in naturalistic terms. He knows that, as E. A. Burtt put it, “The only way to avoid metaphysics is to say nothing.” Of course the Christian poets whom Ricks anthologizes, and about whom he writes so well, go a step further in believing that the scope of the Word itself is not less, but more, than that of all the words that are or will be; but if Ricks cannot confess the Word, neither will he collaborate in mock-
ing, impugning, ignoring, or deleting it. His Introduction to Milton in the Signet paperback series, his deftly-argued T. S. Eliot and Prejudice, and his insistent advocacy and explication of the distinguished contemporary Christian poet Geoffrey Hill represent the continuation and vindication of a long tradition that is clerkly and monastic in its judiciousness and scrupulous attention to texts.

So, too, the present anthology. The Oxford Book of English Verse is a marvelous antidote to the contemporary Dunciad of American university-press publishing in the field of literary studies. The selections are made in the best spirit of the now-scorned New Critics—John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, William Empson, and countless others—and with the moral seriousness that Ricks admires in F. R. Leavis and Lionel Trilling, as well as in Eliot. Open to originality and innovation, Ricks is nevertheless not afraid of appreciation and piety, and he has done his job well by gathering words worthwhile, in many of which the reverberation of the Johannine prologue can be distinctly heard.