

Editorial

THE professional study of English literature steadily increases in universities and colleges; with the growth of their schools or teaching departments come many challenges to those who are appointed to teach and conduct research in the subject. The shift from a Saintsbury-style survey or a Quiller-Couch appreciation, from a deceptively simple Raleigh account or a Nichol Smith stream of factual information punctuated by aperçus, to Empsonian ambiguities or Richardsonian practicality of criticism or Wilson Knightian symbolism, has brought in its train many earnestly instructional university and college teachers didactically preoccupied with the word-on-the-page.

Two emphases have come to be neglected: comparison and background — and behind them both looms a disturbing lack of ability to carry more than a few disconnected examination tags in the memory. Thus students' pleasures of recognition can become those of motorists driving too fast in a fog; indeed students are too often guided on to the motorway of the critics' own canon. The pleasure of the uncongested byway is increasingly more likely to be that of the fortunate general reader, prepared to map out his own route and consult his own pleasure. The speed of the motorway, suitable to transporting a mass age, sweeps the student, guided by the critics' stern, uniform directions, writ large and spotlit by publicity, past the historical background through which the byways so often wander, compellingly and illuminatingly.

Stern highway engineers, these new teachers oftentimes, depopulators as wicked in their way as Goldsmith's Lords, yet perhaps as historically inevitable for our period as were the popularizers Addison and Steele; they run the risk of becoming bored with their acceptance of the routes mapped out for them by the prophetic surveyors. Through their critical skill the surveyors may have made the way seem deceptively easy, and not unnaturally their followers, faced with the Leavis Line, the Ricks Route, the Kermode Cutting or the Ellmann Elevated, seek to

bend the curves, to keep the drivers awake. But in the process they themselves are often led to niggling and carping, out of a very understandable desire to say something new, to modify and add something of their own.

Shakespeare and Milton, perhaps most of all, suffer from this tendency of the teacher to over-teach. It has recently been skilfully and persuasively indicted by Professor D. J. Enright, who remarked¹ that a pupil's personal involvement in a play of Shakespeare is discouraged by modesty (How can he compete with the famous exegetes?) or by his respect for scientific-sounding formulations and jargon or by his lazy pragmatism (Why not use someone else's résumé?) Isn't the proper answer always to concentrate on the text? Any critic who does not return us to it, capable of making up our own minds through thorough knowledge of it, of the history behind it, and of the parallel achievements beside it, should not be licensed to plan any route for the young, lest they forget that travel in the realm of literature should not be restricted by any lanes or limits or critics' laws. Discovery, and in the process self-discovery, is what we ought to be able to claim as a major part of the pleasure of reading and thinking: the excessive solemnity of the professional educator is all too often a bar to the accidental discoveries promoted by enjoyment. When literature becomes a toil, a task, a mere target on the way to the end of the motorway and its pot not of gold but Poseidon shares then indeed we are deep in the sciolism of an Alexandrian age. But such a state would be one of our own creating; given freedom of mind and intellectual curiosity, we can find our own way among major and minor writers; we can create our own particular independence through discovering the pleasure of a wide range of literature idiosyncratically chosen and enjoyed.

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¹ In *Shakespeare and the Students*, 1970.