

Why Scholarship Matters

Scholars are an endangered species these days, but what a poorer place the world would be without their dedication to detail and passion for accuracy. They're our invaluable guides to the monuments of the life of the mind.

by A. D. Nuttall

One sunny morning in, I think, 1966, one of my more enigmatic Oxford colleagues said to me, “Whatever happened to scholarship?” I made some nonsensical and uncomprehending reply, for the question, like many other remarks of this colleague, needed mulling over. He had noticed what I, with the musty integument of a 1950s Oxford education still spectrally about me, had not yet seen—that the ideal of scholarship had almost ceased to figure explicitly in the moralizing tittle-tattle of English literature academics. The incidence of the word in intellectual discourse had dropped, while that of *intelligent*, *brilliant*, and *right* had risen. *Scholarly* and *scholarship* are now terms for talking about individuals who are in some degree remote from us and belong to a culture very close to but not identical with our own.

It may be that *intelligence* and *rightness* have begun to take over from *scholarship* because of an increasingly widespread presumption that scholarship itself, insofar as it is commendable, is already comprehended by those terms. If a writer is intelligent and right about the material, what need have we to discuss the level of scholarship? All that matters has already been taken care of. In any case, if *scholarly* means no more than this, why revive a word that is otiose? If, on the other hand, it really does carry a meaning beyond *intelligent* and *right*, it may continue as a word, but we feel no obligation to notice it, since the whole duty of an intellectual is already comprehended by the other terms (*intelligent* and *right* and such). This, I suspect, is the tacit logic of the situation, and I want to argue that there is something crass, perhaps even disingenuous, in the general acceptance of it.

I was careful to say earlier that *scholarship* has ceased to figure explicitly in our talk, and I have tried to make it clear that it is the word, rather than the thought, that is now less prominent in gossip about our colleagues. But even now, the ideal of scholarship, openly upheld by the educators of my generation, continues to operate at an unacknowledged level, though in varying degrees. Let us return to the question, What does *scholarly* say that is not said by *intelligent* and *right*? The word, I think, connotes a quality of completeness:



A 17th-century ideal: The selfless scholar, pursuing knowledge for its own sake.

at the lowest level, complete literacy (never a colon where a comma should be); complete, though not redundant, documentation; complete accuracy, *even with reference to matters not crucial to the main argument*; and, together with all this, a sense that the writer's knowledge of material at the fringe of the thesis is as sound as his or her knowledge of the core material. This seems to me to be the essence of the matter—that although a strong central thesis may rightly absorb most of the energies available, the writer nevertheless maintains a broad front of total accuracy, a sort of democracy of fact, in which no atom of truth, however humble in relation to the main theme, shall be slighted.

Now this kind of vigilance, this regard for facts even when they are not pet facts, is not natural to human beings. Just as the ordinary person cannot copy a page of 18th-century prose without committing about 10 errors, so the ordinary person cannot tell a story or advance an argument without mangling and misrepresenting everything at the edge of his or her interest. Of course, people lie and blunder in their main theses too, but at least they are conscious that such behavior is discreditable. The very concept of trying to get *everything* right involves a queer, abstract altruism of the intellect, and it took thousands of years to learn.

Surveying the intellectual history of humanity, some may question whether the effort was worthwhile. So many wonderful people have been quite without scholarship; so many sad bores have possessed it in the highest degree. Shakespeare (natural man writ large, as the bardolaters used to say) has no tincture of scholarship. Everything relevant to his purpose he gets right, and the rest is what Virgil called *tibicines*—just props to keep the roof up. On the diction of a courtier, Shakespeare may lavish a linguistic scrupulousness beyond anything we can find in the commentaries of his critics, but on, say, surrounding geographical details (as, for instance, the sea coast of Bohemia), he will be content with his usual unobtrusive inaccuracy.

But since he is a writer of fictions, Shakespeare may be thought an inappropriate example. Let me bring the argument nearer home. What, today, is the difference between a scholarly article and one that is not particularly scholarly but yet such that we admire it? The brilliant but unscholarly article advances and adequately supports a new thesis of great intrinsic interest and explanatory power. At the same time, its author fails to specify which editions are being used, quotes on occasion from two different translations of the same work (without noticing that they differ), betrays in passing the fact—which does not destroy the main thesis—that he or she has not consulted the German original. Note that, as regards the main thesis, all is well. The scholarly article, in contrast, exhibits none of these “vices” and does things “in proper form.”

Since the author of the unscholarly article got right everything that he or she needed to get right, the extra, peripheral accuracy of the scholarly article would seem to be, by definition, superfluous. And this implies that scholarship, so defined, equals pedantry. Indeed, in the present climate of opinion, it is very easy to make our scholarly writer, doggedly crossing every “t” and dotting every “i,” look somewhat foolish. Who needs that sort of thing? Keats couldn’t spell. Plato couldn’t quote Homer straight (perhaps lacked even the *concept* of quoting straight). The great period of ancient scholarship was the Alexandrian, and it was the great period of nothing else, except perhaps astronomy. Jesus (though he gave the doctors in the temple a bad time) shows no sign of any scholarly distinction. All the really important things—and that includes the really important things of intellect and spirit—can go on without it.

To this it may be replied that scholarship, though never a necessity, has proved, at a modest level, a very useful assistant to the intellectual life. A former colleague has told me that he hates, instinctively and immediately, books with copious footnotes and indexes. I find such things useful and am more often irritated by their absence than by their presence. Scholarly scrupulousness is, in the first place, useful to other scholars, who may wish to push a given line of inquiry in fresh directions. Getting all your references right is a sort of good manners, like not slamming doors in people’s faces.

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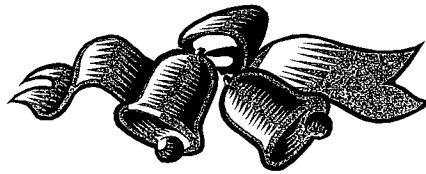
But, the antischolar may persist, the scholar's stance has grown more artificial with the years. Accuracy of measurement is necessary to the scientist, but scholarship carefully detached itself, as being "humane," from science some centuries ago, and its parade of accuracy, when set beside the scrupulousness of an Isaac Newton or an Ernest Rutherford, appears grotesquely factitious, an affectation rather than an instrument of the intellectual life. This view is given an extra charge by ex-scientist William Empson, who wrote in the preface to his *Milton's God*: "Line references are to the nearest factor of five, because factors of 10 are usually given in the margin of the text, and the eye can then find the place without further calculation. The show of scientific accuracy about literary quotations has reached a point which feels odd to anyone who knows how numbers are really used in the sciences."

My antischolar still speaks: Why should we insist that our students spell better than Keats did? Because a student who cannot spell will write "complaisant" when he or she means "complacent," or, worse still, forget the difference? Such things are drops in the ocean of the intellectual life. Anyone who thinks them more must be, intellectually, in a condition of senile myopia. Even if we admit that scholars do not form a completely closed society—differing in this from, say, philosophers, who really do spend most of their time wrestling with problems that would not have appeared but for other philosophers—and grant that the effects of scholarly activity permeate the larger intellectual world, is this intellectual world so important? The meticulous procedures of scholarship may have a certain ethical status within the group, but what if the group activity is itself only a kind of expensive sport, singularly lacking in spectator interest?

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The scholars annotate and review, while babies die and are born. Here the argument becomes radical, and I confess that, in a way, I find it insuperable: As long as people are starving and it is in my power to help them, it is wrong to stick to scholarship. I will add only that the same argument disposes of almost every human activity I can think of. We have all of us, by this standard, opted for second best; beside Simone Weil, we are all second-rate people.

But has the ideal of scholarship no foothold in morality at all? Is there no real virtue in it anywhere? The most obviously moral component in the scholarly ideal has already been mentioned: a reverence for truth, in all its possible minuteness and complexity. The absolute obligation of the scholar to truth, even at a terrible human cost, can be a severe, intransigent ethic, whose appeal will be greater for some people than for others. Personally, I feel that it has real force. There is no need to set it up as a simple, autonomous command: "Always tell the truth, not because it will make people happy, but



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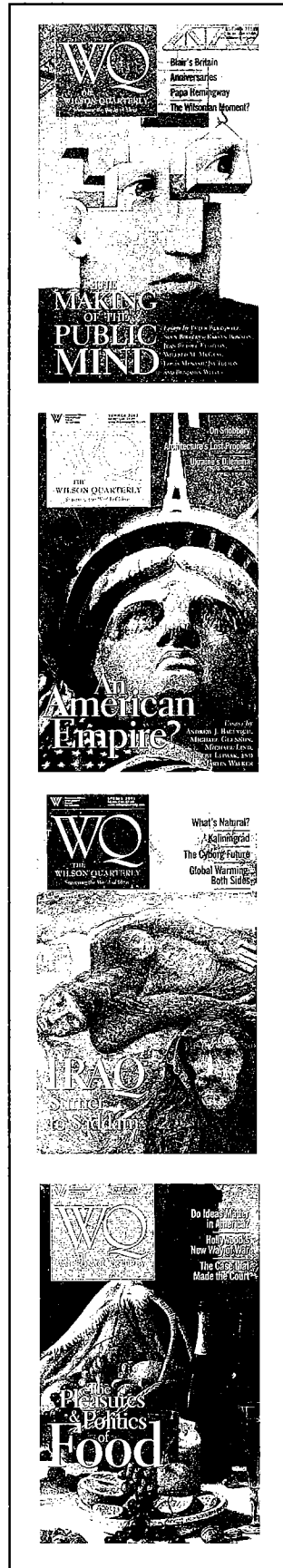
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because truth-telling is, in itself, right.” The issue is, in practice, muddier than that. Other obligations, such as the obligation of compassion, may also be present, in tension with the obligation to be truthful.

Meanwhile, scholarly truth-telling itself may have a utilitarian aspect. If we cannot place a reasonable degree of trust in our scholars, we cannot trust anyone. The contention of my antischolar—that even if habits of scholarly accuracy permeate the intellectual world, this intellectual world is itself negligibly small—rests, after all, on a rhetorical exaggeration. The area of influence is, in fact, immense: Ideologies spread wider every day, and in many populous nations the middle classes now outnumber the proletariat. In the practical details of daily life, habitual accuracy is a great oiler of wheels. The output of universities does, by and large, administer the complex institutions of Western society, and, if I ask myself what sort of higher education is likely to instill habitual, small-scale accuracy, I am inclined to think that the old-style scholarly training was better than the present Western vogue for matching ideologies (unless you want to train revolutionaries).

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As noted earlier, the principal moral component of the scholarly ideal is truth telling. But ideals are one thing and practice another. *Scholarship* may mean truth telling and scrupulousness, but scholars are honest and false, like other people. Scholars may even have a greater capacity for evil mendacity than others just because of the authority they wield. I ask myself whether the ideal in any degree conditions the practice—whether the habit of verification, for example, makes people more truthful in general—and I think that it does, but not in any very marked degree. When I reflect on the character of scholars I have known, what strikes me immediately is their eccentricity. This feature of the scholarly character has a long history. The ancient scholar Didymus, who wrote between 3,500 and 4,000 books (ancient books were short, and the numbers reduce to a mere 300 or so modern books), is palpably eccentric, even at this distance. Quintilian tells us about the way he forgot in one book what he had written in another, and his nickname, “Brazen Guts,” is disquieting. What are we to think of Mavortius, who improvised Virgilian centos (that is, he could spontaneously emit metrically correct, meaningful Latin poetry composed entirely of rearranged fragments of Virgil)? The eminent numismatist Richard Payne Knight was deeply—some felt, inordinately—interested in representations of the phallus in antiquity. The great classical scholar Richard Porson once carried a young woman round a room in his teeth, and Friedrich August Wolf, during periods of strenuous study, “would sit up the whole night in a room without a stove, his feet in a pan of cold water, and one of his eyes bound up *to rest the other*.” When I was an undergraduate, the most learned philolo-

Scholars

gist I knew once said to an assembled class, “Gentlemen, I shall expect you on Tuesday at 11,” and when one of the pupils said, “But Mr. Smithers, you are giving a lecture in the schools at 11 on Tuesdays,” replied, “Ah yes, but that is on *Havelok the Dane*. You need not go to that.”

More worryingly, for all the scholarly ideal of objectivity, I have a distinct impression that real scholars, as compared with the smoother “ideas-men” who have begun to replace them, are characterized by a manic partiality toward their own theories. I remember my old tutor Robert Levens telling me how he once met W. S. Barrett, the learned editor of Euripides, and Barrett said something like, “Grube has just come up with a completely new explanation of line 843 — but I’ll shoot it down, I’ll shoot it down somehow.” We prate of scholarly objectivity, but does no one remember *odium scholasticum*, “scholastic hatred”?

Here is the learned classicist and poet A. E. Housman on Elias Stoeber, who, like Housman, wrote a commentary on the Roman poet Manilius:

If a man will comprehend the richness and variety of the universe, and inspire his mind with a due measure of wonder and awe, he must contemplate the human intellect not only on its heights of genius but in its abysses of ineptitude; and it might fruitlessly be debated to the end of time whether Richard Bentley or Elias Stoeber was the more marvelous work of the creator: Elias Stoeber, whose reprint of Bentley’s text, with a commentary intended to confute it, saw the light in 1767 at Strasburg, a city still famous for its geese. . . . Stoeber’s mind, though that is no name to call it by, was one which turned as unswervingly to the false, the meaningless, the un-metrical, and the ungrammatical as the needle to the pole.

Housman also thought little of Franz Buecheler, and still less of Siegfried Sudhaus. So he wrote, “I imagine that Mr. Buecheler, when he first perused Mr. Sudhaus’s edition of the *Aetna*, must have felt something like Sin when she gave birth to Death.”

And in his 1894 review of G. C. Schulze’s edition of Emil Baehrens’s *Catullus*, Housman said this:

The first edition of Baehrens’s *Catullus*, which now that the second has appeared will fetch fancy prices, was in the rigour of the term an epoch-making work. But it exhibited a text of the author much corrupted by unprovoked or unlikely or incredible conjecture; so that the task of revision was delicate, and the choice of a reviser was not easy. It was not easy, but scholars who are acquainted with the history of *Catullus*’s text and with the metres he wrote in, who know how to edit a book and how to collate a manuscript, who are capable of coherent reasoning or at all events of consecutive thought, exist; and to such a scholar the task might have been allotted. It has been allotted to Mr. Schultze.

High scholarship is clearly compatible with prejudice and bigotry. But even if particular scholars fail on occasion to come up to their own highest standards not only of charity but of ordinary fairness, habits are catching. The habit of truth-

fulness, though often dishonored, has spread and had effect. It has now become clear that the question, What can I do, as a scholar, that is morally useful? is quite different from the question, Should there be scholars? The answer to the first question is comparatively simple: Labor to be accurate, correct the errors of others with charity and honesty, free the minds of the young from cant, arm them against sophistry and imposture, teach them to be intellectually just. This duty is made the more pressing by the existence of bad scholars and teachers. As to the



A. E. Housman is best known today as a poet, but he was an exacting Latin scholar too, and the scourge of others less meticulous.

second question, Should there be scholars? I have to say that money spent on university libraries would be better spent on relieving the Third World. But if that is not to be, since man doth not live by bread alone but is an incurable spinner of ideas, we might as well have some individuals who are trained to ask critical questions—to weigh and to test. Even moral imperatives that seem most absolute, such as that of Marx or, in another age, of Calvin, turn out to need the modest queries of Merry Middle Earth.



Turn now to teaching. I have a generalized feeling that recent trends in university education have proved to be merely an extremely subtle way of making young people wretched. I say “subtle” because the superficial indicators point in the opposite direction. Under the old scholarly method, one was constantly under correction—one’s mental knuckles, so to speak, smarted continuously. Today, by contrast, the typical experience of a student in an English university is of a sort of matey neutrality: “Yes, that’s very interesting,”

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says the tutor. A dreadful word, that “interesting.” Had it been available in Shakespeare’s time, Iago would have used it. One of the advantages of being told when you are wrong is that you gradually build up a sense of what it might mean to be right. Progress, when it occurs, is palpable. Meanwhile, that matey neutrality is often interpreted by students—correctly, I would say—as callous indifference.

We do not choose culture. Good or bad, it is ours without our asking. I used the phrase “man doth not live by bread alone” in a prescriptive manner earlier. I now use it descriptively. It is a fact that human beings ideologize. Although cultures without scholarship can be better than cultures with, other things being equal, a culture laced with scholarship is an inch



or two better than one without. In the face of this, it seems ill judged to pretend that the life of the mind does not matter or is less than fully real. The unimpeded exercise of the intellect itself constitutes a good—one of the terminal goods, though not the most important. But if intellection is one of the terminal goods, references to further utility have only a secondary status. That is why Aristotle chose to turn the argument round. If all the

goods are good only because they promote some other good, we are launched on an infinite regress. Somewhere there must be some thing or things for the sake of which the other goods exist, something not merely useful for a further purpose but good in itself. And so Aristotle asked, in effect, “What do we do when we are no longer pressed and harried by hunger, enemies, and sickness?” His answer, which is one of several possible, is that we then pursue with unimpeded energy the intellectual life. So that must be a good in itself—a terminal good.

History has played a series of strange tricks on Marx. About 20 years ago, a friend told me how he crossed from West Berlin to East Berlin and was profoundly affected by his visit. West Berlin, he said, was a showpiece of capitalism, blazing with pornographic cinemas, the shop windows loaded with *Playboy* magazine goodies and gifts for the man who has everything. Meanwhile, in East Berlin, autumn leaves drifted in a faded street of pale stucco houses; there was a long queue at the opera house, another at the concert hall, and the bookshops were full of classics

of German literature. It occurred to me as he spoke that he was moved entirely by the overmastering spiritual value of what he saw, or thought he saw, in East Berlin. Dialectical materialism had turned out to be so much less materialist. Then the Berlin Wall came down and an entirely different set of paradoxes appeared. Though the spirit had somehow flourished in the Marxist state, economic reality, the professed center of Marxist thinking, was catastrophic, desperate. And so the countries of the former Warsaw Pact moved convulsively to the free market and (with some exceptions) to its presumed necessary correlatives: the shutting of art galleries and opera houses, the opening of strip clubs. Today in the West, we hear little of Moscow and St. Petersburg except stories of drug wars and the like—a kind of exaggerated parody of the West. Another friend of mine observed that it was as if one were to think that, having ceased to be a believing Christian, one must forthwith become a Satanist.

I DO NOT THINK MILTON IS
GOOD BECAUSE HE GIVES
PLEASURE. I THINK HE GIVES
PLEASURE BECAUSE HE IS GOOD.



The monuments of the life of the mind are enormously good in themselves—some of the best things we have. We in England could live without Shakespeare and could not live without the sea, but, for all that, Shakespeare is very like the sea. Which brings me to the last benefit of scholarship, and to my mind the most important of all.

I once went to a lecture by F. R. Leavis in which he discussed what a literary education could give to the student. He said a good deal about the capacity for sensitive appreciation of the needs of others, about the capacity for a fuller life, about the development of critical acumen, and so forth. All a bit true and no more. As I left the lecture hall, I asked myself what my literary education seemed to be giving me, and suddenly the answer blazed in my mind. My teachers had given or were giving me (I refuse to shorten this list): Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Theocritus, Virgil, Horace, Chaucer, Langland, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Marvell, Milton, Pope, Sterne, Keats, Wordsworth. And for good measure they added Sappho, Catullus, the Gawain poet, Marlowe, Herbert, Vaughan, Crabbe. And then more. I think I had never before noticed what wealth was there. Why did no one mention this? All the clichéd titles of dog-eared anthologies—*The Golden Treasury*, *Realms of Gold*, and the like—became for the moment soberly meaningful. It will be said that I am describing the literary canon, which has been shown to be an instrument of oppression. I would have had none of that then, and I will have none of it now. It was clear to me that I had inherited an endless, glittering landscape with hills, dales, and secret woods, “all mine, yet common to my every peer.”

There is no doubt in my mind that the scholars gave all this to me. It could be said that I might have read these books by myself, unaided by scholars. That is simply not true. The ancient authors would have been too hard. *Paradise Lost*, I am pretty sure, I would never have read, for I was instinctively repelled by it at first, though later it altered my consciousness of literature forever. Shakespeare I would certainly have read, but I would have been pusillanimously content with a fraction of his meaning. Mere perusal is not, after all, enough. These are not tables and chairs but great poets. They are immensely, indefinitely complex objects. Explainers, demonstrators, explorers must always be at work, or the thing itself will be lost.

More than that, the text we peruse is itself subject to decay. Even more than we need explanatory critics, we need editors. Wholly futile essays have been written on the supposedly Yeatsian phrase “soldier Aristotle.” Good editing showed that Yeats wrote not “soldier” but “solider,” and the hole was plugged. It is the editors who recover, preserve, and hand down. Scholarship is, at one and the same time, a conservative and an exploratory activity. Even a modern book, carelessly reprinted, deteriorates fast. Hard-pressed printers, true to their principle of *facilior lectio potior*—in effect, “choose the easier reading”—again and again substitute the commonplace for the unique, and the insensible drift from better to worse begins. The old principle of textual criticism was, of course, the opposite: Other things being equal, *difficilior lectio potior*, “choose the more difficult reading.” Housman shows profound editorial skill, in line with this ancient principle, when he tells how, in a printed version of a poem by Walter de la Mare, he read the words “May the rustling harvest hedgerow / Still the traveller’s joy entwine.” “I knew in a moment,” he writes, “that Mr. de la Mare had not written *rustling*, and in another moment I had found the true word.” The true reading was the much rarer word *rusting*, meaning “turning brown,” the *difficilior lectio*.

In the course of doing our job, we critics may find fault with a line of Hopkins or disparage a Miltonic lyric. But we should not forget that Hopkins’s and Milton’s writings constitute a good so great as to render such local discriminations needle fine in their ultimate effect—a good so great, in fact, that most of the time we do not even see it, any more than we feel the air in our nostrils.

Because one thing I am saying may seem strange, I will try in conclusion to make its full oddity clear. I am saying that Milton and Keats are, in a certain sense, good in themselves. I am conscious of saying this at a time when the wind of fashion is blowing stiffly in the opposite direction. When some theorists are willing to argue that the former substances—that is, the poem, the writer, and the reader—are all, equally, mere constructions, it would seem that, a fortiori, the *value* of a poem is the more certainly a social construction rather than a reality-to-be-perceived. Yet I am saying that the value is indeed just such a reality. Nor is my position here in any way a utilitarian one. I am not just saying that Milton and Keats give better and more lasting pleasure than Jackie Collins and

bingo (though I believe they do for a large number of people). The hedonistic argument that Donne will be found a better felicific investment than Agatha Christie is often used dishonestly by teachers, I think. The number of those for whom it is true must be small, and many people read Agatha Christie over and over again with the greatest of pleasure. If I examine my own sensibility, I have to say that not Agatha Christie, whom I can't read, but Arthur Conan Doyle has given me a little more pleasure than Donne has. Yet it is clear to me that Donne is better than Doyle, and the excellence of Donne interests me deeply.

If I were to tell a schoolchild that reading the classics would give him or her more pleasure than he or she could get from computer games, I should feel uncertain in my conscience afterwards. But if I were to tell the child that these books were really good, my conscience would be clear. I do not think Milton is good because he gives pleasure. I think he gives pleasure because he is good. If the sustaining of a certain quantum of pleasure were our sole aim in caring for the work of great poets, there would surely be occasions when it would be our duty to alter the text, to give not what Blake wrote but what people would like him to have written. The head-counting argument which tells us that the number of those who derive great pleasure from Johnson's *Rasselas* is small would suddenly have great weight.

To scholars, it is always the other way round: The poet's authority is first in their minds. It is the poet rather than the sensibility of the present age that is to be followed. Doubtless there will be cases (and scholarship will show us those cases) in which it makes no sense to look for the individual author. Ballad poetry is a possible example. But in those instances, a parallel principle will still apply: The authority of the culture that produced the work will be set above the present, receiving culture. The celebrated, learned drunk Porson said it all when he observed, "I am quite satisfied if, 300 years hence, it shall be said that one Porson lived toward the close of the 18th century who did a good deal for the text of Euripides." Why, so you did, sir (I address his ghost). What would F. R. Leavis say in similar circumstances? That he did his bit for D. H. Lawrence? Or that he did something to stop the rot among the English intelligentsia? I suspect that it would be the second. For Leavis was not a scholar. Therefore, his head is turned in another direction.

Certainly, if the sum of readers' happiness had priority over the author's words in the scholar's scheme of values, the task would be easier. The special discipline of compassing thought utterly unlike one's own would gradually fall into disuse. The study of literature would become for all what it already is for some, a mode of narcissism. Those who talk most loudly about "relevance" might be pleased to be handed not Milton but a Miltonized version of their own features. But to receive ourselves is to receive nothing, and those who provide such stuff are fraudulent. In contrast, the real scholars have been generous—the editors, the *editores*, the givers-out-into-the-world, the givers of good things. □