

Eric Griffiths, *If Not Critical*

Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*

In Britain, quite a few academics are still called 'lecturers'. Yet the status of the lecture in British universities has become uncertain. In the humanities especially, many students seem to think that lecturing is hardly necessary at all. They can see the point of classes or tutorials, where, in theory, they get to speak, but why go to a lecture when you can get all the information online? Isn't lecturing the relic of a bygone age? As a form of communication, isn't it a bit one-way? Authoritarian, even? The student suspicion of lectures might be one of the reasons that many universities are keen to get rid of the very word 'lecturer', preferring the *faux* egalitarianism of making everyone some kind of (assistant, associate) 'professor'. Universities confirm the suspicion that the live event is an anachronism by encouraging academics to record their lectures. How much better to have a lecture-cast, so that the student can watch and listen at his or her leisure, replaying the bits that are hard to grasp or sound useful for the exam, and all without the inconvenience of having to sit next to other students.

Until a severe stroke forced him to retire when he was only 57, Eric Griffiths was a Lecturer in English at Cambridge. This was not just his title (and he was never promoted to a different one), it was more like his vocation. Literary criticism as live event - a kind of performance art - was his thing. His lectures were renowned amongst English students for their verbal wit, fierce cleverness and not infrequent indiscretion. And for the mysterious liquid (whiskey? milk?) he sipped from a plastic container. They were generally packed out. In the 1980s I was first a graduate student and then a junior academic in the same Faculty and remember the stir they caused. There were one or two other star lecturers, but Griffiths was soon renowned as the English Faculty's top performer. He was also renowned for his variously inspiring or scornful supervision of students, his brilliant, booze-fuelled talk with chosen intimates, his satirical rudeness, his ability to win disciples, his bad behaviour. His death on 26 September this year, aged only 65, went almost unremarked in the wider world of letters and Higher Education, but amongst his former colleagues and students it was big news. Unusually, the former students included not just those who had once visited his rooms in Trinity College to be grilled or bamboozled, it also included those who once sat on a bench in a lecture hall to hear him declaim.

Obituaries in the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* both repeated the fact that Griffiths's lectures featured in the entertainments listings of a Cambridge student newspaper. Well, so it was. The student journalists responsible were not just acknowledging the reliable *brio* of Griffiths's performances, they were also having a laugh about how this compared to the usual pedagogic fare. When Griffiths first began treading the boards, lectures given in the Cambridge English Faculty were treated by most students - and many lecturers - as optional extras. Loosely pegged to one undergraduate course or another, they entirely followed the bent of the academic who had a certain contracted number of hours to fill. The lecture course might be a chapter of a book that he or she happened to be writing. It was often a sequence honoured by repetition every year. Lectures were anything but compulsory, and lecturers rarely on their mettle. It was not uncommon to find lectures with attendance in single figures.

For most of the academics, lecturing seemed a duty; for just a few, it was a show. *Kudos* did attach to being one of these few who were able to draw a crowd. Everyone knew about the days when I.A. Richards began giving the lectures in Cambridge that became his book *Practical Criticism* and attracted audiences so large that they could not fit into the largest lecture hall. To be able to make your lectures into special occasions was to be part of a great tradition. To be a star lecturer, you had to want to be one. (Of course, as some admirers

who became lecturers themselves were to find, this was a necessary but not sufficient condition.) This did not just mean craving the instant feedback, the laughs and occasional intakes of breath, the reputation amongst students, the envy of colleagues. It also meant putting your all into it. In the course of a career that allowed him plenty of time for reading and writing (he was never someone to be weighed down by administrative duties), Griffiths published a monograph about Victorian poetry and (in collaboration with Matthew Reynolds) an anthology of English versions of Dante. Not an output to wet the lips of the REF bureaucrats. His thinking and his arguing and his efforts to specify the intricate working of literary texts mostly went into his lectures. Now Freya Johnston, a former student of his and herself an academic, has edited a collection of ten of them, selected from ‘hundreds’. As she explains in her introduction, this has been possible because Griffiths typed out every word of the lectures that he delivered. She has had to supply footnoted references and perform light re-punctuation, but the words were all there.

This will seem strange to many who lecture to undergraduates nowadays: student feedback forms frequently complain if a benighted lecturer is thought to have been ‘reading out’ his or her lecture. It will seem all the stranger, as this published version provides us with great slabs of prose – whole closely printed pages without a relieving indentation. There are many pages without a single paragraph break. Apparently, the scripts really looked like this. In one of the lectures in this selection, ‘French as a Literary Medium’, Griffiths tells his audience that, if they could see his script, they would not see any indication of ‘my accent or other tricks of my voice’. Such tricks included flourishes of mimicry, funny accents, whispers or bursts of noise. Apparently, he practised his performances beforehand, reading out loud and revising, so that he would know just how it was supposed to sound – and would be able to make it come alive on stage, as it were. More Dickens than F.R. Leavis. He was often nerve-racked, fidgety, chain smoking before he made his entrance. Johnston, who as an undergraduate attended many of his lectures, recalls that he spoke very quickly. ‘His public voice was fast, sardonic, protesting, and exact’. As is clear from the scripts, he demanded that the listener stick with him. He did not speak for the note-taker; he certainly did not have to be troubled by thoughts of future lecture-casts.

He lectured mostly in a pre-Powerpoint age, but he would never have used that *sine qua non* of today’s lectures. No bullet points, no neat summaries, no reading lists. No downloadable recapitulation of his main points. Like all lecturers, Griffiths does sometimes repeat himself. By a glitch in the ordering of these lectures (ironic, as the first two lectures are both about the ordering of lexical items in sequences) Lecture 2, ‘Timing’, uses more or less the same analysis of the same passage of Swift’s *Modest Proposal* as Lecture 1, ‘Lists’. For the most part, however, he cheerfully ignores all those injunctions to lecturers to repeat each point or to summarise at the end of each stage of the argument. Listen up, or lose the track! Often, he will begin with a disconcerting tug on the listener’s attention. ‘Let me tell you a joke ...’. ‘When is it chic to be antique?’ ‘Nietzsche and his mind parted company in January 1889 on the via Po ...’. For all its forbidding pauselessness on the page, *If Not Critical* catches something of the movement of a speaking voice and its demandingness. It is literary criticism ‘to the moment’.

The voice is there in the frequent urgency of the delivery. The lecturer attends to small details of syntax or diction – like his former PhD supervisor Christopher Ricks, he is above all an apostle of close reading – but he is up to big questions: mortality, morality, why we laugh at things. (He is particularly good on the last of these.) There is plenty about God or his aching absence. It all really matters. Griffiths begins the final lecture on *If Not Critical*, ‘Godforsakenness’, with an analysis of the dialogue in Beckett’s *Endgame* where the characters try addressing God. ‘The bastard! He doesn’t exist!’ This leads to a lengthy rumination on Christ’s last words on the Cross (according to St Mark and St Matthew). ‘My

God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?’ Passages of Sophocles, George Herbert and T.S. Eliot are woven in to what becomes something close to a sermon, albeit a very erudite sermon, on ‘the mystery of the Incarnation’. Heady stuff for students postponing their essay crises for an hour. Griffiths was a convert to Catholicism and has some of the convert’s proverbial keenness.

Lecturing is not an academic exercise here, but an exploration of all that most matters in life. Griffiths treats the samples from his select authors - Shakespeare, Swift, Beckett – as morally and psychologically instructive, as well as semantically subtle. In the Leavisite manner, he talks as if the best writing is a kind of test of the reader. But unlike Leavis, he loves the energies of talk. The lectures published here are most enjoyable for their unashamed, occasionally shameless, exploitation of colloquial affects. They are rich in clichés and idioms, gleefully twisted or misapplied. Giving examples of the ‘ethical transparency’ of characters’ names in Revenge Tragedy (‘Ambitioso’, ‘Supervacuo’, et al) Griffiths calls them ‘fine flowers of the bleeding obvious’. (‘Bleeding’ is good.) Nailing ‘a grave elderly lady’ in a Swift satire, whose ‘modesty’ conceals lustful thoughts, he calls her ‘not so much a shrinking violet, as a Venus fly-trap’. He informs the students that the actress who originally played the tragic protagonist of Racine’s *Andromache*, Thérèse Du Parc, was not only the dramatist’s mistress, but a former acrobat who had danced before Louis XIV. So, the first audience knew that the woman inhabiting the role of ‘the pious widow’ was ‘also a hooper, always happy to show the king a bit of leg’.

Incongruity and bracing anachronism are his favourite tricks. Shakespeare’s ‘fabrication’ of antique-seeming language in his poems and in *Troilus and Cressida* is like our manufacture of ‘distressed pine’ or ‘stone-washed jeans’. When Thersites, in that play, uses disgusted culinary metaphors for the canoodling of Diomedes and Cressida (‘frye lechery, frye’), it is as if he ‘saw the whole business of love and procreation as a steak-house chain, endlessly serving up the same, mass-produced, finally tasteless dishes’. Griffiths earned something of a reputation for his relish for popular culture. He inserted an Amy Winehouse lyric into an English Tripos Practical Criticism exam paper – a fact reported in national newspapers - and once made a somewhat awed TV programme celebrating the work of David Byrne of Talking Heads. Here he delightedly sets a passage from Swift’s *True and Faithful Narrative of What Passed in London* alongside an inadvertently droll article from the *Evening Standard*. Swift’s satire imagines the behaviour of various inhabitants of Georgian London who have been instructed by a charismatic preacher that the world will end on the following Friday. The *Evening Standard* article reports a noise abatement order issued by Lewisham Council to an elderly resident preaching to passers-by from his window, and the comments of neighbours. ‘It’s like the Sermon on the Mount every night’.

The scabrous delights of Rabelais are clarified with reference to the pleasures of watching *Poltergeist* at the cinema or the rhetorical tricks of Dame Edna Everage. ‘*Hamlet* stands to “revenge tragedy” as *The Royle Family* stands to soap-opera or *Little Britain* to a tourist-board video; it is a derisive instance of a rule’. And, with a triumphant sense of the ridiculous, Nietzsche’s habit of thinking of the present as ‘suddenly and absolutely different from the past’ is illuminated by Victoria Derbyshire’s casual locution on Radio 5, talking of an ‘age-old problem’ when she is referring to the debate about whether or not to build a third runway at Heathrow. Griffiths does have the *politesse* to wonder that such a ‘sensible woman’ would fall into this trap, while Nietzsche (‘nothing if not symptomatic as usual’) is one of the major villains of this book and gets no such concession.

‘Literaturists’ (defined as those ‘who exist on a diet of literature alone’) get plenty of his scorn. It is presumed that a good literary critic will also relish Dr Who and detective fiction. It is also presumed that criticism will stoop to the ways in which ordinary language works. Like one of his favourite critics, William Empson, Griffiths believes that complex

poetic affects are susceptible to paraphrase into words and phrases that we find easier to recognise. The first of the lectures given here, on 'Lists', delights in the subtleties of a linguistic habit, listing, that is often too rudimentary (for which he reads, essential) for literary critics with fine minds to notice. In Empsonian fashion, he enjoins his listeners to prefer 'observational patience and careful statement' to 'verbal posturing which has only its own lexical flourishes to support it'. His later lecture on Primo Levi is an attentive appreciation of Levi's observational precision.

Flatteringly for his original auditors, the lectures, while sometimes excitingly chatty and demotic, are also uncompromisingly erudite. Like T.S. Eliot, whom he often quotes admiringly, he takes it that the literature of Europe of the last seven centuries is all right there for the reader. In a conventional academic book, this might feel presumptuous or portentous. In a lecture, where everything is about holding one example up to the light, and flitting to the next example, it can feel generous and exhilarating. Moving around between European languages was one of Griffiths's skills. Johnston has included some of his poems as an appendix to this collection, and they include accomplished English versions of originals by Apollinaire, Montale and Heine. Five of the ten lectures in this collection are centrally concerned with non-English writers (Rabelais, Dante, Racine, Kafka and Primo Levi), all of them quoted extensively in their original languages (though with his own user-friendly translations). He dares do close readings of lines from Racine and Corneille, and confident analyses of Proust's diction.

Yet the undergraduates who made up almost all of his original audiences are prodded and teased, as well as flattered. Every lecture includes digs at the assumptions of those notionally educated in literary appreciation. 'Students of imaginative literature are prone to be unimaginative about any writing which isn't imaginative literature'. 'Detecting sexism in the writers of the past forms a major part of the literary-critical endeavour nowadays'. We can enjoy his mockery, hoping that it is mostly at the expense of those who are not in the room. Glossing remarks by Thomas Hardy that might wilfully be misunderstood by a reader determined to catch him in 'the toils of sexism', he sarcastically announces, 'Thomas Hardy thought women came halfway between men and the lower animals, the bastard'. Above all he invokes – in order to ridicule – 'that sad tendency people have to want to believe that in the past everybody thought one thing until, by a wholly inexplicable process, they suddenly all changed their minds and ways of thinking and started thinking and doing something wholly different'. He loves parodying 'modern' views of the past, including, implicitly, the assumptions of some of the less thoughtful members of his own audience. But then nobody ever wanted to be one of those.

The possibility of giving offence was always there. Johnston obviously admires Griffiths, and this book is a labour of intellectual devotion on her part, but she concedes that there are 'plenty of things to object to in this book'. 'The writing can be scornful, rude, and slangy; it includes glancing references to soap operas, jibes at other critics, and disdain for politicians'. Some of the objections she imagines would not be mine. Amongst these, it is really only the 'disdain for politicians' that is irksome, because so effortlessly superior. Look how disingenuously they use language! The scorn and the rudeness and the slanginess, however, are thoroughly enlivening. Griffiths jokes about 'the pleasure to be derived from slagging off fellow-critics', but he admits to it too. A few named critics get it in the neck. John Carey gets laughed at for his supposed 'naivety' in taking Shakespeare's plays as 'a good example of how vivacious the English language was in the playwright's day'. This is really just an excuse for Griffiths to perform a slab of imagined dialogue from a pub in 'Jacobean Walford' in cod Shakespeare-ese. Shakespeare scholar Gary Taylor 'deserves a gold star' for noticing the importance of lists of *dramatis personae* prefixed to Renaissance

play scripts, but ‘the gold star has to be taken away again’ for the obtuseness of his analysis. O well.

In the 1980s, Griffiths was a fairly devoted satirist of what went by the name of Literary Theory, but only a little of that antagonism carries through here. He does, in passing, have a good old grapple with Michel Foucault (‘an excitable reader and an even more excitable writer’). There must have been a *frisson* in the lecture hall in the 1980s or 90s when he found in ‘the profundity and vehemence of Hitler’s contempt for humanistic ethics’ a ‘striking resemblance to some recent idols of advanced thought, Michel Foucault, for instance’. More bracing and more fun – and much more thorough – is his debunking of Mikhail Bakhtin’s ‘monstrously influential’ account of Rabelais in his brilliant lecture on the ‘beastliness’ of much humour.

Johnston recalls the ‘joyous swipes and digs’ at ‘his school, friends, family, cats, students, college, faculty, and colleagues’. Disappointingly few of these crop up here. (You suspect that some of the intra-Faculty barbs must have been removed by the tactful editor.) Griffiths was renowned as the only lecturer in the English Faculty who would make fun of colleagues who had not yet died or retired. I remember students telling me, with a quiver of delighted shock, of some mocking comment he had made from the podium at the expense of another lecturer. Not what they call ‘best practice’. At least Griffiths usually picked on a big beast – big, that is, in the little world of Cambridge English. It was something of a mark of status to have been the butt of one of his pedagogic jokes, or to have been held up as one of his examples of how not to do literary criticism.

In 1989 Griffiths published his one book of critical writing, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*. It was never paper-backed, and became very difficult to obtain. Recently I remember finding that the cheapest copy on the Abe Books website was about £200 – a kind of compliment to its desirability. The single copy in my own university library has long since been purloined by a thief with elevated critical taste. Now, in tandem with the collection of lectures, a welcome new edition has been issued by Oxford University Press. It is a study of the ways in which poetry ‘envisages and reaches towards a rediscovery of some characters of speech’. To do so it ‘searches out from print ... prosodic features, tones of absent voice’. This last carefully contradictory phrase catches the paradox that animates almost every phase of its many close readings. The book’s thesis, tested on the poetry of Tennyson, the Brownings, Hardy and Hopkins, is that poetry can make much of a good reader’s uncertainty about how to speak it. For these writers, ‘creative opportunities’ can come ‘from the comparative absence of vocal quality in print’.

The intonational ambiguity of a written text may create a mute polyphony through which we see rather than hear alternatively possible voicings, and are led by such vision to reflect on the inter-resonance of those voicings.

The book’s title is a phrase of Robert Browning’s from *The Ring and the Book* and stands for the way in which poetry might both provide the cues for a sounding out and yet leave us unsure about how that should sound. It is a study in acoustic ambiguity, that aspect of more-than-one meaning that one of William Empson left out. Perhaps it should have been *Eight Types of Ambiguity*.

Oddly enough, I find that the first chapter of the book includes some of a lecture by Griffiths on *Othello* that I once attended. (As a very junior academic, I wanted to see what all the fuss was about.) Griffiths invokes H.P. Grice’s technical use of the term ‘implicature’ to analyse exchanges between Othello and Iago. He is even more taken with the philosopher J.L. Austin’s notion of the ‘illocutionary force’ of speech – the ways in which speech does things as well as says things. In his lecture on *Hamlet*, he tells his audience that, as a dramatist, Shakespeare’s speciality was ‘the things that people do with words’ (echoing the title of Austin’s most famous book, *How to Do Things with Words*). Iago’s ‘illocutionary’ use of

words ('Honest, my lord?') fascinated Griffiths, and Iago often inserts himself into his criticism. Thus Johnson's apt title, from Iago's only half-jesting comment to Desdemona, when she lightly asks him to think of something nice to say about her. 'O gentle lady, do not put me to't, / For I am nothing if not critical'.

I had forgotten, however, that despite some fizzing analysis of passages of Shakespeare, the lengthy opening chapter, where Griffiths seeks to show the deficiencies of sundry linguists and deconstructionists, is pretty hard going. Griffiths was doubtless gratified to notice how Derrida has faded from fashion in recent years, but then all his wrestling with Derrida, once of the moment, now seems much less compelling. It is as if an editor, knowing that what his or her author really likes to do is take some lines of great poetry and look at what and how they mean, has demanded that he first provide a bit of theoretical grounding. In order to show the importance of the prosodic possibilities of language that are neglected, he argues, by linguists, Griffiths takes a sentence whose drift can be reversed by intonation, 'This is a fascinating argument'. Spoken sarcastically, it sounds like the author's own verdict on what he had to do to make his book intellectually serious.

The exemplary readings in which the book abounds are still absorbing, even if rarely possessing the wit and surprise of the lectures. The long chapter on Tennyson, though eloquent, now seems rather solemnly admiring, perhaps under the spell of his mentor Christopher Ricks's own book on Tennyson. Fresh from reading the lectures, I hankered for the incongruous comparisons, the re-purposed colloquialisms, the jokes that –Dickens-style – become irresistible when the subject matter is most sombre. (Almost alone amongst pre-twentieth-century novelists, Dickens is quoted with admiration by this novel-averse critic.) The much shorter sections on Robert Browning, in contrast, do have the verve of the lectures, as he sets out to show how Browning teases his readers 'by tasking us to speak the poems aloud, and to see when and why we cannot quite do that'. This part of the book ends with a brilliant treatment of 'Andrea del Sarto', the dramatic monologue of a disappointed artist that subtly appeals, like much of Browning, to Griffiths's own amateur dramatic spirit.

Apart from Tennyson, the poet dealt with a greatest length is Gerard Manley Hopkins. A sonic virtuoso who was also a spiritually agonised convert to Roman Catholicism, it is hardly surprising that Hopkins is Griffiths's man. Griffiths traces the 'exultant agility' of a poem like 'God's Grandeur' with as close attention to patterns of sound and the implications of their possible stresses as the poet could ever have wished. But he is always looking for the theological pressure that Hopkins's religious beliefs placed on his language, 'the unspeakable stresses Hopkins sometimes calls for'. Over and over again, he discovers in Hopkins' repetitions and exclamations 'a double aspect, at once of baffled and or heightened fluency'. In the poet's surprising uses of colloquial phrases ('in truth', 'God knows', 'for all this') he keeps finding the simultaneous presence of despondent shrug and grave recognition, a simultaneity that cannot be voiced in any single reading aloud.

'Astonishing', 'magnificent', 'wonderful', 'greatness', 'genius', 'masterpiece': unstinting with his superlatives, Griffiths seems as rapt before Hopkins's poetry as the poet himself is before God's Creation. He is devoted to Hopkins's devoutness, and expects his readers to be able to share his interest in distinguishing the poet's religious commitment from the closely documented reasonings of Victorian churchmen. He is heavy on the theology in this chapter, as if daring the reader to care less than he does. But no critic has been so prepared to do admiring justice to any one of those Hopkins sequences that is a 'mouthful of quandary, brain-teaser and tongue-twister', and perhaps you have to be very keen on the religion to go all the way on the close reading. The surprising thing is that, with all his religion, Griffiths is often best on the writers who have been abandoned by God: Beckett and Primo Levi in his lectures, Thomas Hardy in *The Printed Voice*. The section of this book devoted to Hardy's haunted, mournful poems about the aging or loss of love is as compelling

as practical criticism can be and unhampered by any need to justify the poet's beliefs to a complacently unbelieving age.

Perhaps new interest in *The Printed Voice*, much better known by middle-aged academics than by students, will have been stirred by the publication of *If Not Critical*. And perhaps OUP will now think it worthwhile to publish more of those singular lectures. You leave off reading them re-animated, relishing the way that a critical voice can talk its way through lines of literature and past some of your own unthinking assumptions. Griffiths's own precise and sardonic voice was stopped prematurely by the stroke that ended his career. He did, however, subsequently play some part in the selection of the lectures in this volume and did see them published before his death. I hope that he got some satisfaction from knowing that his voice comes alive in on the page. Very few lecturers would ever be able to claim as much.