

“Good Criticism Is Ethical”: Claude Rawson’s IAELC Presidential Addresses¹

Claude Rawson

Maynard Mack Professor Emeritus of English, Yale University

Email: clauderawson@yale.edu

Abstract The following is a collection of five Presidential Addresses delivered by Claude Rawson, professor of Yale University and former President of IAELC, at the opening ceremonies of the annual international symposiums of IAELC. In his addresses, Claude Rawson celebrates Ethical Criticism as an attempt to liberate the study of books and restore the centrality of the literary text as distinct from the excesses of theory-driven abstraction. According to Claude Rawson, good criticism is ethical in so far as it transcends paraphrasable ethical doctrines and seeks to capture a larger unparaphrasable human totality. He approves the interdisciplinarity in literary studies, while proposing that interdisciplinary approaches to literature should be backed with reliable expertise, and should be ancillary to literary texts. Ethical literary criticism is an admirably challenging enterprise, that carries with it a responsibility to the texts of the literatures we study. Our business as professors of literature is the knowledge, understanding and analysis of creative works of literature, and of what they have to tell us about ourselves and the world around us.

Keywords ethical criticism; centrality of literary text; theory; interdisciplinarity

Author **Claude Rawson** is the Maynard Mack Professor of English Emeritus at Yale University and a specialist in eighteenth -century English literature. His publications include *Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal Under Stress* (1972), *Gulliver and the Gentle Reader* (1973), *Order from Confusion Sprung* (1985), *Satire and Sentiment 1660-1830* (1994), *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 4, The Eighteenth Century* (1997, with B. H. Nisbet), and *God, Gulliver, and Genocide: Barbarism and the European Imagination 1492-1945* (2001), *Swift’s*

1 The general title and the subtitles of this little collection of five Presidential Addresses (except the first one, which is given by Claude Rawson himself) are extracted by Wang Songlin from Claude Rawson’s Presidential Addresses. Wang Songlin is currently Professor of English at Ningbo University, China. He had the privilege to read these addresses on behalf of Claude Rawson and translated them into Chinese.

Angers (2014) and *Swift and Others* (2015). Among the volumes he has recently edited are *Cambridge Companion to Fielding* (2007); *Henry Fielding, Novelist, Playwright, Journalist, Magistrate: A Double Anniversary Tribute (1707-1754)* (2008); *Essential Writings of Jonathan Swift: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed., with Ian Higgins (2009); *Literature and Politics in the Age of Swift: English and Irish Perspectives* (2010); and *Cambridge Companion to English Poets* (2011). In addition, he is the General Editor of the Cambridge History of Literary Criticism and the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift. He was a former President of the British Society for 18th-Century Studies and former President of the International Association for Ethical Criticism (IAELC).

Thoughts on Achilles' Heel: A Fable for Ethical Criticism¹

Once again it is a pleasure and privilege for me to address the annual International Symposium of IAELC, and once again it is my sadness to be unable to attend in person, this time because of the comic indignity of an injury to my Achilles heel. Allow me to use the critical history of Achilles as a text. It was not a textual injury that the ancient hero suffered, nor did it prevent his making speeches, though he did not have the resources of the internet to do it at a distance. But at least I now know a little of what he felt. His injury may be called "critical," because he is said to have been killed soon after, and I hope to survive it better than he did. I also derive some comfort from the fact that the myth of Achilles' Heel does not feature in Homer's epic about the great hero, but seems to belong to a later inventive tradition.

I do not wish to compare myself any further to Achilles. Achilles was not very ethical, and certainly not an ethical critic. But it is part of my point that he was a "literary" creation, the hero of a poem, and not a real-life person, though he influenced many real lives. We admire this poetic figure for doing things we do not admire in real life, and that is an issue for ethical critics. The poem of which he is the hero was Homer's *Iliad*, which Aristotle, one of the founders of literary criticism, gave to a real-life warrior, Alexander of Macedon, who was his student. I would like to dwell on the fact that the many poets and critics who represented Achilles as a heroic model were doing so in a role very like our own, as themselves educators. Achilles became an exemplar of military ruthlessness and conquest. His poem was made famous by teachers, as an expression of military glory and cultural pre-eminence. Through that process, Achilles became a practical model for

¹ This is Claude Rawson's Presidential Address delivered for the 6th IAELC International Symposium held at Tartu, Estonia, in 2016.

cruel warmongers, from Alexander himself to Louis XIV of France, Charles XII of Sweden (called the Alexander of the North), and the all-conquering Napoleon, while the poem about him remained a work which we teach our students to admire in the peace of the classroom. Since the days of Homer, the character of Achilles, brave, undaunted, the noble champion of the Hellenic armies, and at the same time arrogant, childish, rapacious, and ruthlessly murderous, has been the subject of a central ethical questioning in our literary culture. How does the *Iliad*, and the whole heroic tradition in literature, retain its place at the pinnacle of literary esteem, while seeming to embody, and even glorify, values that celebrate murder, plunder, conquest and its cruel devastations? How is it that even when poets (for example like Milton, England’s greatest epic poet) rejected these values and deplored their appearance in admired poems by Homer and Virgil, they nevertheless imitated and echoed their epic poems and the poetry of heroic celebration they found in them?

This disjunction between the values of a literary work and those which govern our ethical thinking is a perennial one. It has troubled great writers in all periods, who revered Homer but deplored the concept of military glory and found the grandeurs of heroic speech disturbingly seductive. Some, like Erasmus or Blake, actually thought the epic poets were among the main causes of war. Among the voices which have expressed these concerns, but also outfaced them by attempting heroic accents or epic compositions of their own, are those of Juvenal, Erasmus, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope (who translated Homer), Voltaire, Fielding, Blake, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Brecht, and, in a mode radically modified by modernism, T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* and Pound’s *Cantos*.

Ever since Aristotle gave Alexander a copy of the *Iliad*, and Alexander carried it on the battlefield as a guide to military tactics, epic poems have featured prominently in the educational curriculum. Charles XII learned about Achilles and Alexander from his Latin tutor. Fielding’s *Jonathan Wild* learned gangster behaviour from school readings of Homer and Virgil in schoolboy translations. The Roman poet Juvenal complained about the use of grandiloquent heroic bombast in schoolboy recitations. Erasmus worried about the effect of beautiful epic poems on the minds of young nobles, and Alfred Jarry, and Auden and Isherwood, as well as Fielding, equated schoolboy and gangster thuggery with the exploits of tyrants in Shakespeare or the sagas, as well as classical epic. At every turn, and despite every kind of moral ambivalence or outright opprobrium, every literary culture has continued to place extended heroic poems, whether the epics of Greece and Rome, or of Renaissance Europe, or the sagas of the Nordic world, at the pinnacle of their sense of literary value and cultural identity. From the ancient Greeks through the

whole of literary history, the epic poem has been considered the highest of poetic forms.

This confrontation between poetic and ethical valuations seems to me the core issue for a sophisticated ethical criticism to address. Why and how do we admire and love writings whose moral sympathies we might dislike or reject? The simple idea that art has its own values and that these can be detached from their moral content is not one to which, I suspect, most of you will subscribe. What are the implications of saying, like Joseph Addison, that Achilles was “Morally Vicious, and only Poetically Good”? We can admit this is true in its way but hardly enough to reconcile the coexistence of admiration and disapproval with which we read the *Iliad*, let alone account for the complexity of the poetry in question. Addison’s wording reminds us of the view of Pope and some of his contemporaries, who thought that the matter could be settled by saying that Homer’s imagination (Pope called it “invention”) transcended the deplorably sanguinary nature of his subject. But Pope also, in translating Homer, kept apologising, in footnotes and other prose interventions, for scenes he felt to be excessively bloody, and often toned down or sanitised his original. He attributed the cruelty of many scenes to the times in which, or about which, Homer wrote, which were sometimes said to be good for writing poems but bad for living in. We would all agree that these suggestions contain truths but are not answers. They do not resolve the complex issue of the ethical element, which is moral but not moralistic, either in poems or in criticism. Perhaps the issue cannot be resolved, but the questions have to be asked, every time, in relation to every text, in a way that will be subtly and individually different, and specific to every particular case. No theory will contain the answer except the supremely ethical principle that affirms that there are many questions which must be asked even as we know they have no encompassing answer. This is the scope of Ethical Literary Criticism. Its contradictions and necessary irresolutions, its tension between rational values and contrary and potentially amoral (for example, “heroic”) loyalties or aspirations, constitute a teasing resistance to interpretation, perhaps the riddle in what Nie Zhenzhao has suggestively described as the Sphinx Factor.

I wish you a happy and productive Symposium.

The Vital Subject of Criticism is Books¹

It is once again my privilege and pleasure to welcome you to another Convention, the eighth, of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism. It is also

1 This is Claude Rawson’s Presidential Address delivered for the 8th IAELC International Symposium held at Fukuoka, Japan, in 2016.

my regret that I am once more unable, for reasons of health, to attend in person at such an interesting and distinguished gathering. I am additionally regretful at missing another opportunity of revisiting Japan, which I first visited twice as a child, as well as more recently in a professional capacity. But my regrets are tempered by the thought that you will be in the expert hands of Professor Nie Zhenzhao, the founder of the society and conceptual father of Ethical Criticism, and of his distinguished colleagues Professors Shang Biwu and Wang Songlin. I am deeply grateful to all three of them for their many services to the Association, and in a particular and personal way to Professor Wang, who did me the honour of translating one of my books into Chinese.

It has been a theme of my previous addresses to celebrate Ethical Criticism as an attempt to liberate the study of books, and of knowledge about books, from the excesses of theory-driven abstraction. The vital subject of criticism is books, and always begins with particular texts. This year I am gratified to note that the emphasis of the symposium is on interdisciplinarity. The promise of this interdisciplinarity is that particular texts are studied with additional increments of knowledge and perspective derived from the second discipline, just as in comparative literature a mastery of the second literature and of its precise relevance adds substance and focus to the text or theme in question. The corresponding danger in both interdisciplinary and comparative studies is that a second discipline or second literature becomes merely ancillary to the first, and is invoked without expertise (including knowledge of the second language), thus becoming in its way another abstraction from the live subject at hand. We have all read essays on, for example, “literature and capitalism,” by scholars who are unfamiliar with economics or economic history. Similar examples of the inexpert application of ancillary disciplines, masquerading as a false interdisciplinarity, have been not uncommon in literary studies. They are one of the things which I am sure a true Ethical Criticism, such as this Association stands for, is designed to resist. I am confident that the talented speakers at this eighth Convention, like its predecessors, will do so with honour.

Ethical Criticism: Restoring the Centrality of the Literary Text ¹

In their important account of the history and significance of Ethical Criticism, “Fruitful Collaborations,” in the TLS in 2015, William Baker and Shang Biwu describe how Professor Niezhenzhao inaugurated his project with a cardinal

¹ This is Claude Rawson’s Presidential Address delivered for the 9th IAELC International Symposium held at Hangzhou, China, in 2019.

principle. This was to reverse the tendency in Western literary pedagogy of replacing the study of literary texts by theoretical discourses that bypassed attention to the texts themselves. Since the 1970s, this tendency has resulted in an increasing habit in Western universities to practice literary studies by almost any method other than the reading of books and the promotion of historical knowledge about them.

Ethical Criticism has sought since 2004 to reverse this trend, by restoring the centrality of the literary text as distinct from theoretical lucubrations about what it might be like to read them if one tried, or in the pursuit of diversionary disciplines which bypass the text in favour of abstract political, or economic or psychological, or other, systems, in which the literary scholar is often unlikely to possess specialist expertise, while evading the specialist challenge of the discipline of reading books in which he or she is presumed to be expert. The true ethics of Ethical Criticism does not reside in any simple programmatic doctrine but in a full human confrontation with the totality of the text. Good criticism is ethical in so far as it transcends paraphrasable ethical doctrines, even those which might be enunciated by the work in question, and seeks to capture a larger unparaphrasable human totality. It is very difficult to do, and this is why the modern academy has often preferred to do almost anything with a book other than read it.

The noblest mission of IAELC, as formulated in Niezhenzhao's teachings, is to restore the critical discipline to its proper suppleness and subtlety, its engagement with central human purposes, undogmatic, faithful to its documents, respectful of historical knowledge, and in short empirical in the best and most sensitive readerly way.

It is my privilege to welcome you all to an annual conference in which I am sure that this mission will continue to be carried out. It is my regret that I am prevented by circumstances from attending in person, but my good wishes go out to all of you.

Our Principal Obligation is to Teach Students to Read Books¹

It has been an honour and a pleasure to serve as your President for the last four years. My only regret is that, for reasons of health, I have not often been able to attend your meetings in person. But I have been kept in very close touch with your activities, and have had the privilege of welcoming you, each year, to your annual conference, albeit remotely in the last three years. I had great enjoyment from attending and speaking at your conference in Ningbo a few years ago, when I

¹ This is Claude Rawson's Presidential Address delivered for the 10th IAELC International Symposium held at Beijing, China, in 2021.

was Vice President, and at Queen Mary, University of London, in 2017, when you kindly elected me as your President. I have very much appreciated the hospitality of Professor Nie Zhenzhao in Wuhan and Professor Wang Songlin in Ningbo, and of both of them as my hosts in London.

At other times my opening welcome message has followed similar lines, and I will repeat my main recommendations now. As Professors of Literature, and contrary to some recent trends in universities, our principal obligation is to teach students to read books, and only secondarily books about books. Literature (mainly, though not exclusively, poems, plays and novels) and knowledge and understanding of literary texts should be the prime objects of study. These are the things which we are expert in, not ancillary subjects like economics, politics, psychoanalysis, sociology, or even theories of reading, except insofar as they bear directly on the prime object of study, and support an understanding of it. These topics, though ancillary to the study of literature, are of course important in their own right, and they deserve the attention of experts in these other fields, and not of literary scholars, except where their relation to a literary text is specific and palpable, and supports the understanding of literary works. Unfortunately, there are people in our profession who are prepared to do anything with a book rather than read it. This includes theorists of the act of reading, and what reading a book is like, whose work throws no light on the text itself, and sometimes seems to have been composed without evidence of having actually read it. It has always seemed to me that members of IAELC do not often practise this form of activity, and that is one of the great strengths of the Association under the leadership of Professor Nie. It is now time for me to retire, and make way for a new incumbent, who I hope will be able to take a more active part in your papers and discussions in the future. I shall continue to retain an active interest in your proceedings and will keenly follow their progress. Meanwhile, I should like to welcome you to this conference, and I hope it will be as enjoyable and as intellectually stimulating as its predecessors.

The Texts of the Literatures We Study Are, and Should Be the True Ethical Focus of Our Profession ¹

It is a great honour for me to welcome you, no longer as your President but in my new role as Honorary President, to the IAELC Conference of 2022, which is taking place under the enlightened leadership of your founder and President Professor Nie Zhenzhao. I wish I could be with you in the beautiful and historic city of

¹ This is Claude Rawson’s Presidential Address delivered for the 11th IAELC International Symposium held at Guangzhou, China, in 2022.

Guangzhou.

The scope of this year's conference is more wide-ranging and international than ever, making for a truly global occasion. You will be addressing traditional topics of literary study as well as making imaginative explorations into more unusual and specialised topics, including regional and diaspora literatures. You will be offering new insights into the literature of the past as well as examining the ways that literature is beginning to intersect with highly contemporary developments, such as artificial intelligence, once considered matters entirely for science fiction but now becoming part of everyday reality. This is in the true spirit of academic enquiry, combining the consolidation of past knowledge and well-tried procedures with the other academic virtues of openness to enlargement of the canon and of critical method.

To be as wide ranging as this, under the disciplined umbrella of ethical criticism, which has never been more necessary than it is today, is an admirably challenging enterprise, that carries with it a responsibility to the texts of the literatures we study. These are, and should be, the true ethical focus of our profession. I was recently shocked to receive a manuscript from a leading University Press which proposed that literary critical works should be studied on the same footing as the primary writings that are the proper subject of our discipline. It seems to me that that is not intellectually respectable, and indeed not ethical. It gives the professorial practitioner a centrality that is an affront to his or her subject matter. It introduces a damaging self-regard and self-importance to an exercise which must be directed to an understanding of the object of study rather than the secondary activity of the critic. As I have often remarked in the past, our business as professors of literature is the knowledge, understanding and analysis of creative works of literature, and of what they have to tell us about ourselves and the world around us.

I wish you a very happy and productive conference, and for those of you attending in person a very agreeable stay in Guangzhou.