

## Editorial: Blind Mouths!

Milton, in *Lycidas*, is here speaking of the *Bishops* of his time, 'Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know how to hold/ A sheep-hook, or have learn'd aught else, the least/ That to the faithful herdsman's art belongs! What recks it them? What need they? They are sped...'

Clear enough, one might think, but what of *blind mouths*? Was it one of Milton's supposed oxymoronic epithets, such as the 'darkness visible' castigated by T.S. Eliot? Not so, says Ruskin. A Bishop is one who sees, a Pastor one who feeds his flock. But the crew Milton was excoriating neither see nor feed their flocks, but speed, blindly, to feast themselves: hence 'blind mouths' expresses 'the precisely accurate contraries of right character, in the two great offices of the Church'.

Ruskin's exposition of these lines of Milton is in the course of a more general argument about how we should *read*, or at least about how we should read an author who actually has something to say. What we should do is to watch every accent and expression, putting ourselves in the author's place to the extent we can, annihilating our own personality so that in the end we can 'assuredly' say 'Thus Milton thought', not 'Thus I thought, in misreading Milton'. And then, having discovered what Milton thought you will begin to perceive that your thoughts on any subject are not the clearest and wisest, that unless you are a very singular person, 'you cannot be said to have any "thoughts" at all; you have no materials for them, in any serious matters, no right to 'think', but only to try to learn more of the facts.'

Allowing for a degree of pardonable (?) hyperbole on Ruskin's part, one imagines that many, or some, philosophers would go along with Ruskin's drift were we to substitute the names of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Kant or Wittgenstein, for that of Milton; and especially if we were to add what has just been said Ruskin's suggestion that in the great writers there is often a 'cruel reticence'; they do not want us too easily to imagine we have grasped their thought without the necessary study and struggle. (Some might argue that this surface cruelty is in fact a kindness; only if we have worked at it will we truly begin to understand thought worth thinking.)

The direction of much educational 'thought' of recent times has, though, been precisely the opposite, to take evaluating and criticising on the part of pupils as the summit of educational aspiration and

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achievement, way beyond the supposedly lower skills of knowing and understanding. But then, as Ruskin observed, 'Modern "Education" for the most part signifies giving people the faculty of thinking wrong on every conceivable subject of importance to them'. What was 'modern' in 1864, when Ruskin was writing *Sesame and Lillies*, is even more modern in 2016. And so, in Milton's words. encouraged by the blind mouths of education, 'The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed' / But swoln with wind' hold forth in a thousand forms of media on every subject under the sun.