

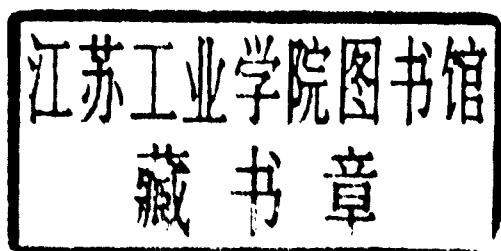
Christopher  
Ricks

Allusion  
to  
the Poets

OXFORD

# Allusion to the Poets

CHRISTOPHER RICKS



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## Prefatory Note

These essays attend to allusion, as the calling into play—by poets—of the words and phrases of previous writers. Largely, of earlier poets writing in English. There is an earlier essay of mine on the philosopher J. L. Austin and his allusive wit, collected in *Essays in Appreciation* (1996).

The first part of the book is chronological, and considers poets Augustan, Romantic, and Victorian: Dryden and Pope, Burns, Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, and Tennyson. All are seen under the aegis of the poet as heir. Allusion is one form that inheritance may take, even while inheritance takes diverse forms in different ages and for individual genius.

The second part consists of half a dozen pieces that have some relation to allusion. The one on plagiarism takes plagiarism to be allusion's contrary (the alluder hopes that the reader will recognize something, the plagiarist that the reader will not). That on metaphor is germane to allusion, in that allusion is one form that metaphor may take (as the illuminating perception of similitude in dissimilitude, and as a relation between two things that then creates a new imaginative entity). The essay on loneliness has its bearing on allusion in that one thing allusion provides and calls upon is company (the society of dead poets being a living resource in its company). The piece on A. E. Housman considers a particular cluster in one of his poems, alluding to a prejudicial prose tradition. The case of Yvor Winters is that of a poet-critic whose poems are unremittingly allusive but whose intransigent criticism can find no place for allusion. Finally, the poetic art of David Ferry may recall to us the ways in which translation constitutes one of the highest forms that allusion can take.

The undertaking is one that aims to contribute not to the theory of allusion<sup>1</sup> but to apprehending the allusive practice, principles, and tact

<sup>1</sup> For which, see, for instance, William Irwin, 'What Is an Allusion?', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59 (2001); and Carmela Perri, 'On Alluding', *Poetics* 7 (1978).

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of the poets. William Empson formulated a crucial principle when he commented on another kind of allusion, that to classical mythology. In 'The Nymph complaining for the death of her Faun', Andrew Marvell writes exquisitely:

The brotherless *Heliades*  
Melt in such Amber Teares as these.

Empson's elucidation has its own beauty in acknowledging Marvell's:

It is tactful, when making an obscure reference, to arrange that the verse shall be intelligible even when the reference is not understood. Thus many conceits are prepared to be treated as subdued conceits, though in themselves they have been fully worked out. Consider as the simplest kind of example

The brotherless Heliades  
Melt in such amber tears as these.  
(Marvell, *The Nymph complaining*)

If you have forgotten, as I had myself, who their brother was, and look it up, the poetry will scarcely seem more beautiful; such of the myth as is wanted is implied. It is for reasons of this sort that poetry has so much equilibrium, and is so much less dependent on notes than one would suppose. But something has happened after you have looked up the Heliades; the couplet has been justified. Marvell has claimed to make a classical reference and it has turned out to be all right; this is of importance, because it was only because you had faith in Marvell's classical references that you felt as you did, that this mode of admiring nature seemed witty, sensitive, and cultured. If you had expected, or if you had discovered, that Marvell had made the myth up, the couplet might still be admired but the situation would be different; for instance, you would want the *brother* to be more relevant to the matter in hand.<sup>2</sup>

Empson imagines responsibly the responsibility of the poet who alludes, and he is at once speculative and precise when it comes to matters of learning. A poem, without being dependent on our knowing certain things, may yet benefit greatly from our doing so. For to say that poetry 'is so much less dependent on notes than one would suppose' is not at all to demean that which can be supplied by notes, those necessary evils.

Samuel Johnson issued advice, a warning that was not a disparagement:

<sup>2</sup> *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930, rev. 1947), pp. 167–8.

Notes are often necessary, but they are necessary evils. Let him, that is yet unacquainted with the powers of *Shakespeare*, and who desires to feel the highest pleasure that the drama can give, read every play from the first scene to the last, with utter negligence of all his commentators. When his fancy is once on the wing, let it not stoop at correction or explanation. When his attention is strongly engaged, let it disdain alike to turn aside to the name of *Theobald* and of *Pope*. Let him read on through brightness and obscurity, through integrity and corruption; let him preserve his comprehension of the dialogue and his interest in the fable. And when the pleasures of novelty have ceased, let him attempt exactness, and read the commentators. (Preface to his edition of *Shakespeare*, 1765)

*Caveat lector.*

What the commentators offer might be thought of as the valuably over-and-above, or (in the best and true sense) *supererogation*: 'The performance of good works beyond what God commands or requires, which are held to constitute a store of merit which the Church may dispense to others to make up for their deficiencies'; 'Performance of more than duty or circumstances require; doing more than is needed'. The supererogatory should not be degradingly equated with the superfluous. There is no substitute for knowledge, even though the knowledge of who the Heliades were, and who their brother was,<sup>3</sup> is not a necessary, let alone a sufficient, condition of appreciating Marvell's lines. Tact will be called for, from all parties; sometimes a particular reader may stand in no need of the annotation, but then—as Empson said—'it does not require much fortitude to endure seeing what you already know in a note'.<sup>4</sup>

There are distinctions to be philosophized about: borrowings, parallels, sources, echoes, allusions. If you ask a philosopher whether there exists any indispensable account of allusion, he or she has a way of implicating you in implicatures, or of referring you to his or her work on referring—which is not the same as allusion. And although to speak of an allusion is always to predicate a source (and you cannot call into play something of which you have never heard), a source may not be an allusion, for it may not be called into play; it may be scaffolding such as went to the building but does not constitute any part of the building. Readers always have to decide—if they accept that such-and-such

<sup>3</sup> 'Disconsolate at the death of Phaethon, his sisters were turned into poplar trees and their tears into amber' (Elizabeth Story Donno's edition of Marvell's *Poems*, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> 1935; *Collected Poems* (1955), p. 93.

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is indeed a *source* for certain lines—whether it is also more than a source, being part not only of the making of the poem but of its meaning. The question of intention bears upon allusion as it bears upon everything not only in literature but in every form of communication; suffice it (not) to say here that the present writer believes that it is not only proper but often obligatory to invoke authorial intention, while maintaining that there is (as Wittgenstein proposed) nothing self-contradictory or sly about positing the existence of unconscious or subconscious intentions—as in the case of the Freudian slip, where some part of you may wish to intimate something that another part of you would disavow. Coleridge sometimes despaired of writing ‘on any subject without finding his poem, against his will and without his previous consciousness, a cento of lines that had pre-existed in other works’.<sup>5</sup> ‘Previous consciousness’ is telling.

In this, as in so much else, the unignorable clarifications are those of T. S. Eliot.<sup>6</sup> First, his famous comments in *Philip Massinger* (1920):

One of the surest of tests is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest.<sup>7</sup>

Second, his address on *The Bible as Scripture and as Literature*, given in Boston, December 1932:

You cannot effectively ‘borrow’ an image, unless you borrow also, or have spontaneously, something like the feeling which prompted the original image. An ‘image’, in itself, is like dream symbolism, is only vigorous in relation to the feelings out of which it issues, in the relation of word to flesh. You are entitled to take it for your own purposes in so far as your fundamental purposes are akin to those of the one who is, for you, the author of the phrase, the inventor of the image; or if you take it for other purposes then your purposes must be consciously and *pointedly* diverse from those of the author, and the contrast is very much to the point; you may not take it merely because it is a good phrase or a lovely image. I confess that I never felt assured that

<sup>5</sup> *Collected Letters*, ed. E. L. Griggs (1956–71), iii 469–70.

<sup>6</sup> See the pages on annotation (sources and allusions) in the Introduction to T. S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (1996).

<sup>7</sup> *Selected Essays* (1932, rev. 1951), p. 206.



Henry James was justified in naming a novel *The Golden Bowl*, though my scruples may only show that I have not understood the novel.<sup>8</sup>

Third, his issuing an acknowledgement, a distinction, and a reservation. He wrote to I. A. Richards, 11 November 1931, about *Ash-Wednesday*:

As for the allusions you mention, that is perfectly deliberate, and it was my intention that the reader should recognize them. As for the question why I made the allusions at all, that seems to me definitely a matter which should not concern the reader [*amended from* author]. That, as you know, is a theory of mine, that very often it is possible to increase the effect for the reader by letting him know [*half deleted*] a reference or a meaning; but if the reader knew more, the poetic effect would actually be diminished; that if the reader knows too much about the crude material in the author's mind, his own reaction may tend to become at best merely a kind of feeble image of the author's feelings, whereas a good poem should have a potentiality of evoking feelings and associations in the reader of which the author is wholly ignorant. I am rather inclined to believe, for myself, that my best poems are possibly those which evoke the greatest number and variety of interpretations surprising to myself. What do you think about this?<sup>9</sup>

One thing that I, for one, think about this is how fully it would—in a just world—preclude the misrepresentation by which recent literary politicians have insisted that in the bad old days there was held to be one authoritative authoritarian reading of a poem, constituted of a declaration by the writer himself.

Yet in one respect Eliot was, I believe, misleading, when he said of tradition that 'It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour'.<sup>10</sup> For it is not true that inheritance does not have to be laboured for and at.

As to recent work on allusion in literature, four critics stand out. First, the pair (*père et fils*) who set allusion within a large history and romance: W. Jackson Bate, in *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (1970), and Harold Bloom, in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973). Bate inaugurated a critical tradition in limning a poetic tradition, and of Bloom's energies we are all both beneficiaries and victims. Beneficiaries, granted his passion, his learning, and his so

<sup>8</sup> Houghton Library; b.MS.Am.1691 (26), pp. 11–12.

<sup>9</sup> The Library of Magdalene College, Cambridge.

<sup>10</sup> 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919); *Selected Essays*, p. 14.

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giving salience to the impulse or spirit of allusion. Victims, because of his melodramatic sub-Freudian parricidal scenario, his sentimental discrediting of gratitude, and his explicit repudiation of all interest in allusion as a matter of the very words. Second, there is the pair who have most elicited the resourcefulness of allusion in poetic practice: John Hollander, in *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (1981), and Eleanor Cook, in *Against Coercion: Games Poets Play* (1998). To these critics I am grateful, as I am to the poets' editors who supply so much knowledge for which there is no substitute.

C.R.

*I*

*The Poet as Heir*



## Dryden and Pope

Augustan poetry is remarkable for its literary allusion; the poetry creates meanings, comprehends judgements, and animates experiences, by bringing into play other works of literature and their very words. This is 'the Poetry of Allusion', to cite the subtitle of Reuben Brower's *Alexander Pope*.<sup>1</sup> I should like to consider the implications of J. B. Broadbent's words: 'Literary allusion can be a lesson in the abuse of authority, as well as in the generous spending of an inheritance. We need an essay on "The poet as heir".'<sup>2</sup>

Literary allusion is a way of dealing with the predicaments and responsibilities of 'the poet as heir'; there are features of late seventeenth-century history and literary history, and of Dryden's biography (Dryden, the father of literary allusion for the Augustans), that parallel such predicaments and responsibilities; and many of the most telling instances of allusion in Augustan poetry have to do with the poet as heir. We should notice when the subject-matter of an allusion is at one with the impulse that underlies the making of allusions at all, because it is characteristic of art to find energy and delight in an enacting of that which it is saying, and to be rendered vigilant by a consciousness of metaphors and analogies which relate its literary practices to the great world.

There are many ways in which allusion can be self-delightingly about allusion, can catch fire from the rapidity of its own motion.

Pope:

Back to the Devil the last echoes roll,  
And 'Coll!' each Butcher roars at Hockley-hole.  
(*The Dunciad* B, i 325-6)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Alexander Pope: The Poetry of Allusion* (1959).

<sup>2</sup> *Paradise Lost: Introduction* (1972), pp. 100, 102.

<sup>3</sup> Quotations from Pope are from *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (1963), which I follow in citing as *The Dunciad* A the edition of 1728-9, and as *The Dunciad* B the edition of 1742-3.

Dryden:

Echoes from *Pissing-Ally*, *Sh*— call.  
And *Sh*— they resound from *A*— Hall.  
(*Mac Flecknoe* 47–8)<sup>4</sup>

Pope's echoes reverberate, re-sound, because they depend on the allusion's echo; and the movement is not 'Back to the Devil' but gratefully back to Dryden. Again:

But gentle *Simkin* just reception finds  
Amidst this Monument of vanisht minds.  
(*Mac Flecknoe* 81–2)

Which some the *Monument of Bodies*, name;  
The Arke, which saves from Graves all dying kindes;  
This to a structure led, long knowne to Fame,  
And cald, The Monument of vanish'd Mindes.  
(Davenant, *Gondibert*, II v 36)

Dryden's geniality is a matter of his allusion's alluding to itself, its saying to Davenant that he spoke too soon and yet spoke more wisely than he knew. What survives from Davenant rather gives the lie to any grand claim of 'long knowne to Fame'; and yet it does survive, and it was a good phrase, and Dryden is suitably grateful. The allusion is charmingly aware of allusiveness; the scale of it is appropriate to the scale of Davenant.

When a poet the equal of Dryden alludes to a poet incomparably greater than Davenant, the scale is altogether grander, but the allusion still owes its fineness to its comprehending the nature of allusion.

*The Dunciad* B, ii 9–12:

His Peers shine round him with reflected grace,  
New edge their dulness, and new bronze their face.  
So from the Sun's broad beam, in shallow urns  
Heav'ns twinkling Sparks draw light, and point their horns.

*Paradise Lost*, vii 364–6:

Hither as to thir Fountain other Starrs  
Repairing, in thir gold'n Urns draw Light,  
And hence the Morning Planet guilds her horns.

<sup>4</sup> Quotations from Dryden's poems are from *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley (1958).

Pope's allusion is doing truly what it contemplates in a travesty: it is gratefully drawing light from an even greater source of energy and illumination (Milton, the Sun); it is new-edging itself, and pointing itself, by means of a 'reflected grace'. To say this is not to smooth away the edged and pointed animosity in 'twinkling Sparks'; but the feeling is of Pope and Milton ('Peers' in a true sense) standing assuredly together against such mere sparks. The result is a genuine 'grace' in Pope's sense of Milton; Pope is both graceful and gracious in the respect which he evinces for Milton, a respect perfectly compatible with an affection which knows that it risks impudence in thus turning such great poetry to its purposes, an affection that twinkles filially and not vacantly. In short, not only do Pope's lines describe the nature of an allusion in the act of making one, they breathe the right spirit, 'the generous spending of an inheritance'.

Likewise, there is a special preposterousness of geniality at the moment in *Mac Flecknoe* when Fleckno's adjuration to Shadwell so amply refers to himself in the third person:

Nor let false friends seduce thy mind to fame,  
By arrogating *Johnson's* Hostile name.  
Let Father *Fleckno* fire thy mind with praise,  
And Uncle *Ogleby* thy envy raise.

(171-4)

The breadth of Dryden's humour here is a matter of the allusion to Virgil:

ecquid in antiquam virtutem animosque virilis  
et pater Aeneas et avunculus excitat Hector?

(*Aeneid*, iii 342-3)

'Do his father Aeneas and his uncle Hector arouse him at all to ancestral valour and to manly spirit?' This is not the employment of Virgil as a wheel to break a butterfly; the risk of such an easily destructive comparison is what the poetry has to fend off, and it succeeds in doing so because Dryden's lines are themselves about the allusive habit and the poet as heir. For it is Father Virgil who here properly yet modestly fires Dryden's mind with praise, in lines splendidly free from that 'envy' to which they allude. Dryden, humane and unsaintly, speaks often about the possibility of envy in the poet, and about a generous recognition of succession:

Auspicious Poet, wert thou not my Friend,  
 How could I envy, what I must commend!  
 But since 'tis Natures Law in Love and Wit  
 That Youth shou'd Reign, and with'ring Age submit,  
 With less regret, those Lawrels I resign,  
 Which dying on my Brows, revive on thine.  
 ('To Mr Granville, on his Excellent Tragedy' 1-6)

Literary allusions to fathers (or to uncles) are liable to suggest a paternal-filial relationship between the alluded-to and the alluder, since the alluder has entered upon an inheritance; the great instances of allusion are often those where that to which allusion is liable ceases to be any kind of liability and becomes a source of energy and gratitude. As with the Virgilian allusion in one of Dryden's great poems, 'To the Memory of Mr. Oldham':

Once more, hail and farewell; farewell thou young,  
 But ah too short, *Marcellus* of our Tongue.  
 (22-3)

Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid* had discussed different interpretations of the lines at the end of Book vi:

'Tis plain, that *Virgil* cannot mean the same *Marcellus*; but one of his Descendants; whom I call a new *Marcellus*; who so much resembled his Ancestor, perhaps in his Features, and his Person, but certainly in his Military Vertues, that *Virgil* cries out, *quantum instar in ipso est!* which I have translated,

*How like the former, and almost the same.*<sup>5</sup>—

His Son, or one of his Illustrious Name,  
 How like the former, and almost the same.  
 (*Aeneid*, vi 1194-5)

The beauty and the propriety of the Virgilian allusion in 'To the Memory of Mr. Oldham' derive from the gentle confidence that to Virgil, Dryden would be 'one of his Descendants'. If we had to sum up in one line both a true lineage and the true poetic lineage manifested in the art of allusion, it would be hard to better the similarity within difference of

How like the former, and almost the same.

<sup>5</sup> *The Works of Virgil* (1697), p. 633.



Two influential books are particularly apt, though neither speaks of allusion: Walter Jackson Bate's *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* and—a book which acknowledges its inheritance from Bate—Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*.

'What is there left to do?': this cry animates Bate's book, in the belief that it has animated most poetry for the last three centuries.

The central interest of the eighteenth century is that it is the first period in modern history to face the problem of what it means to come immediately after a great creative achievement.

If Restoration England, through its delayed but now ready embrace of the neoclassic mode, at once secured standards that permitted it to avoid competition with the literature of the immediate past, this was especially because it could do so with that authority (in this case classical antiquity) which is always pleasing to have when you can invoke it from a distant (and therefore 'purer') source; pleasing because it is not an authority looming over you but, as something ancestral rather than parental, is remote enough to be more manageable in the quest for your own identity. . . . for that matter, the ancestral permitted one—by providing a 'purer', more time-hallowed, more conveniently malleable example—even to disparage the parent in the name of 'tradition'. And in the period from 1660 to about 1730 there were plenty of people ready to snatch this opportunity. If their ranks did not include the major minds and artists, there were enough of them to justify us in recognizing this as the first large-scale example, in the modern history of the arts, of the 'leapfrog' use of the past for authority or psychological comfort: the leap over the parental—the principal immediate predecessors—to what Northrop Frye calls the 'modal grandfather'.<sup>6</sup>

For Bate, the crisis of Augustanism (with its heroic self-renewal) in the mid eighteenth century is a parental and ancestral burden of the past:

In short, the poet was now becoming flanked, in his own effort, on both sides—the parental as well as the classical-ancestral. At the same time, in a deeply disturbing way the features of the dead parent (more removed now and therefore most susceptible to the reverential and idealizing imagination) seemed to be settling into a countenance more like that of the ancestor. Almost—to the mid-eighteenth-century poet—the parental and ancestral seemed to be linking arms as twin deities looming above him.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (1970). p. 12. To illustrate Bate's point: Charles Churchill, for example, tried to escape oppression from Pope by leaping back to Dryden. Ben Jonson, in *Discoveries*: 'Greatnesse of name, in the Father, oft-times helps not forth, but o'rewhelmes the Sonne: they stand too neere one another. The shadow kills the growth; so much, that wee see the Grand-child come more, and oftener, to be the heire of the first, then doth the second: He dies betweene; the Possession is the thirds.' <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 43.