



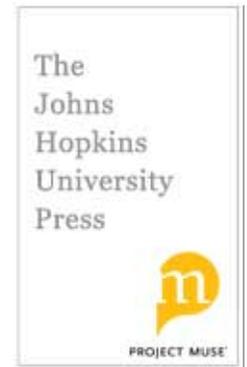
PROJECT MUSE®

*The Fullness of Knowing: Modernity and Postmodernity from
Defoe to Gadamer* by Daniel E. Ritchie (review)

James Rovira

Christianity & Literature, Volume 61, Number 4, Summer 2012, pp. 672-676
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/739187/summary>

was more concerned about the delay in the Second Coming. And so the exegesis of Adam, Plutarch, and Ovid are only *analogous* to Paul's teaching: "If Adam's soliloquy means anything, it shows that Milton, like other post-Reformation writers, had to rely on secular, Greco-Roman, and non-Pauline themes in order to give literary life to their version of Paul's theology" (160). This is typical of Kneidel's methodology. The literature chosen for explication is analyzed according to some framework (neo-Stoicism, property contracts, humanist rhetoric) that is only tangentially or analogously related to the universalist theology of Paul. Heterogeneous elements seem yoked together. The persuasiveness of the argument does not go much further than the following abstraction: "Thus English verse is to humanist poetics and the English nation is to human civilization as diverse members are to the mystical body of Christ" (73).

Rethinking the Turn to Religion might be considered a learned book. There are excursions and diversions into many theological, cultural, and literary byways, but the overall argument of the book just does not cohere.

William Gentrup

Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies

The Fullness of Knowing: Modernity and Postmodernity from Defoe to Gadamer.

By Daniel E. Ritchie. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-1-932792-17-1. Pp. ix + 281. \$54.95.

Daniel E. Ritchie's *The Fullness of Knowing: Modernity and Postmodernity from Defoe to Gadamer* attempts to connect epistemological questions raised by postmodernism to similar questions asked by eighteenth-century figures in response to the rise of the Enlightenment. Chapter five is an exception, however, as it compares the worst excesses of the French Revolution to what Ritchie believes are the worst excesses of the political correctness movement in U.S. universities. Ritchie's *Fullness of Knowing* is strongest in its treatment of eighteenth-century material and in exploring confluences between his eighteenth-century material and his twentieth, but weakest with his twentieth-century material, especially when he is engaged in polemic against it.

Chapter one juxtaposes the epistemological conflicts surrounding Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* with Lyotard's claims about knowledge in *The Postmodern Condition* and Rorty's later extension of these claims. The epistemological question considered in this chapter is about the nature of the truth provided by narrative. According to Ritchie, Enlightenment thinkers assume that each narrative's veracity is determined by its ability to contribute to and be understood within the confines of a metanarrative. This view is, of course, contradicted by Lyotard's and Rorty's

postmodern distrust of grand narratives. Ritchie considers whether or not Defoe's early claim that *Crusoe* was real falsifies all of its claims for truth and the implications of this question for Biblical interpretation. If a story is not demonstrably factual, thus contributing to a scientific grand narrative, can it still also be true?

Enlightenment hermeneutics assert that "if Scripture is taken as literally true, it must also be historically verifiable" (12), leaving interpreters with a choice between defending the historical verifiability of Scripture or seeking a "nonhistorical meaning of the scriptural text, separate from its literal meaning, either in existentialism, myth, or religious experience" (12). Therefore, a narrative's "literal truth" must be "proven by empirical investigation undertaken by a detached, rational observer" for the narrative to have any value (17). According to Ritchie, Defoe's changing positions toward *Robinson Crusoe*'s historicity model these options and illustrate the ways in which Enlightenment assumptions crippled Defoe's ability to understand the nature of his own achievement. Because Defoe initially claimed that *Robinson Crusoe* was a factual account, the first novel suggests that the "theological and personal" meanings that *Crusoe* derived from his experiences were "inseparable from his fictional, personal history" (10).

Later, however, as Defoe had to back down from his claims about *Robinson Crusoe*'s historicity in his sequels, he separated the "fictional 'history' of *Crusoe*'s life" from its "meaning," which to him was moral in nature (10). Ritchie is dissatisfied with Defoe's resolution of the crisis of *Crusoe*'s historicity as it fails to acknowledge the possibility of a fictional narrative being true because, following the example of narrative theology, he "found his life story answering to the patterns of biblical stories and images" (12). This third way rejects postmodern approaches to narrative that Ritchie criticizes, ultimately, only for being self-contradictory while he also rejects the limitations of Enlightenment approaches.

Ritchie's treatment of this subject seems muddled at points because he ignores the existence of similar questioning about the truth of narrative prior to the Reformation. Catholic interpreters from Origen to the present have made clear distinctions between literal, ethical, and spiritual interpretations of Scripture, a tradition that can be traced back to Plato. Furthermore, Ritchie does not clarify the difference between finding meaning in "existentialism, myth, or religious experience" and the approach of narrative theology as he describes it. Neither is it clear why Ritchie had to bring up postmodernism at all as his critique of postmodernism in this chapter is not anticipated by his prior discussion. In a twenty-six page chapter, only a little more than three and one-half pages are devoted to a discussion of both Lyotard and Rorty, while Ritchie spends five and one-half pages discussing narrative theology and the remainder on Defoe. His close reading of Defoe reveals a scholar working with care on a subject to which he has devoted time and attention, while his short work on postmodernism reveals an impatience with that subject and an unwillingness to fully engage it.

With the exception of the chapter on the French Revolution, the rest of

Ritchie's monograph generally follows the pattern of detailed discussion of eighteenth-century material followed by short work on postmodernism. Chapter two is more celebratory than polemic as the hymns of Isaac Watts are compared to the "postmodern worship" of the emerging church. Ritchie describes postmodern worship's emphasis on the experience of art and music alongside "doctrinal precision" and community (37). This chapter at least acknowledges a debt to Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy and explains postmodern worship as a corrective to the effects of the Enlightenment—represented by Locke in this chapter—on Evangelicalism.

Chapter three sets Jonathan Swift's "information machine" found in *Gulliver's Travels* alongside a number of different figures, as Ritchie finds the inhabitants of Swift's Lagado dispersed across contemporary western society in a number of forms. Condorcet stands in as a proponent of the Enlightenment, Jaron Lanier is something of a modern Lagadian, while James O'Donnell is the modern representative of a Lagadian educational model. Borges speaks briefly as a modern critic of that model. The chapter eventually congeals around the problems of applying technological and computational models to education, drawing from Wendell Berry's critiques of technology and holding up Plato's dialectical model as an ideal. Ritchie directly engages (in only a single page) Derrida's discussion of Plato's *Phaedrus* and his ideas about the subordination of writing to speech in Plato. Ritchie concludes by saying that the "transmission of knowledge must remain a fundamentally human process rather than a mechanical one," otherwise language will be reduced to "an impersonal system and knowledge to a commodity" (94). By the end of this rather busy chapter, Ritchie suggests insights that are timely and needed in the face of the growth of online teaching and increasingly ubiquitous for-profit educational models.

Chapter four reads Smart's *Jubilate Agno* and "A Song to David" as responses to "contemporary debates over knowledge" during Smart's day (96). Ritchie begins this chapter by describing four different responses to Newtonian physics: "conflict, integration, independence, and dialogue" (97), favoring the dialogic response suggested by Smart over the other three. Smart's dialogic approach "seeks for common ground between the presuppositions, methods, and conceptual models of science and theology, without trying to integrate the two into a single unity" (99). Ritchie here supports a fine model that will always yield inconclusive results proceeding from a vague methodology. Perhaps we should instead observe that there is no such thing as "pure" Biblical hermeneutics: any reading of Scripture is always guided by the presuppositions about the nature of the world that we hold prior to our reading of Scripture.

In this chapter, Ritchie introduces Richard Dawkins and Stephen Jay Gould as modern proponents of Enlightenment thought while criticizing Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, on the other hand, as inadequate because it does not acknowledge the ability of scientific language to make meaningful statements about objective reality. Closing comments about contemporary forms of these debates

occupy only about seven pages out of thirty, however. The bulk of the chapter is an engaging dialogue between Smart and Isaac Newton that illuminates both and impressively makes sense out of *Jubilate Agno*, a feat I had not yet been able to achieve until reading Ritchie's treatment of the poem.

Both chapters six and seven eschew polemic in their attempts to set postmodern authors alongside eighteenth-century ones. Chapter six brings Edmund Burke together with George Gadamer to consider how we ought to relate to past knowledge and the works of past authors, using both authors to support the idea of continued engagement with tradition. Chapter seven emphasizes the importance of the personal, rather than the purely objective, dimension of knowledge. Both of these chapters see close and meaningful connections between eighteenth-century authors and their contemporary counterparts while still devoting the bulk of their attention to eighteenth-century authors and texts.

Chapter five, "Festival and Discipline in Revolutionary France and Postmodern Times," is the book's weakest chapter, devoted largely to polemic against both Enlightenment thought and political correctness in U.S. universities. Its few qualifying statements do not ameliorate the overall impression that to Ritchie the most significant fact about the French Revolution is the Reign of Terror. Ritchie does not consider the impression that he is making when he claims that the modern PC movement provides a meaningful and direct parallel to Robespierre's France. He Archie Bunkerizes his subjects, making few distinctions between Girondins and Jacobins, Enlightenment figures and modern feminists, the few months of the Terror and the other nine years of the active Revolution. He significantly fails to note that supporters of the French Revolution congenial to Enlightenment thought both suffered from the Terror and ended it. And he does not consider the church's role in creating and supporting the oppressive conditions that led to the Revolution.

According to Ritchie, calendar reforms instituted by leaders of the French Revolution find modern-day equivalents in Vagina Day, Earth Day, and Kwanzaa, as both current reforms and their revolutionary counterparts were intended to "communicate a significant rejection of the past" (131). However, Ritchie's modern equivalents to French calendar reforms are easily ignored by most people even on most college campuses. Kwanzaa and other expressions of "Feminist, multiculturalist, [and] gay ideology" are to Ritchie the embodiment of "postmodern virtues" which universities promote through coercion (153). There are several conceptual failures at work here that surface occasionally in the rest of the book; e.g., "feminism" is not a single entity, and some kinds of feminism are more congenial to postmodernism than others. Since violence did not occur everywhere the Enlightenment took hold the Enlightenment cannot be directly blamed for the violence of the Terror. If it can, then Christianity can be directly blamed for most European wars preceding the rise of Enlightenment thought.

Overall, Ritchie's work is conceptually undisciplined in its treatment of both the Enlightenment and postmodernism, expanding the reach of both too far

by defining both terms too imprecisely. It does not question the usefulness of “postmodernism” as a term or the differences among the terms postmodernism, perspectivalism, and cultural relativism. If there are no substantial differences among them, why do we need the term “postmodernism”? Why is the current “age” postmodern when it seems characterized by a massive conservative reaction against liberalism? Ritchie’s book is an object lesson in the importance of *caritas* to the Christian scholar: where he extends *caritas* toward his subject, his scholarship is the strongest. Where he lacks it, his scholarship suffers both conceptually and factually. However, *The Fullness of Knowing* is still a useful book that undertakes an engaging, creative project and asks compelling questions, even if Ritchie’s attempts to answer these questions are uneven at times.

James Rovira
Tiffin University

Jane Austen’s Anglicanism. By Laura Mooneyham White. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011. ISBN 978-1409418634. Pp. xi + 215. \$89.95.

Of late, it seems, Jane Austen has become everyone’s favorite hobbyhorse. Where before the principal battle lines were drawn over whether or not she was a profeminist à la Mary Wollstonecraft or a dutiful and subservient daughter of the patriarchy, whether her underlying convictions were conservative or subversive, or even whether she wrote as a member of the eighteenth-century Neoclassical Enlightenment or as a fellow traveler of Romanticism’s Wordsworth and Coleridge, now she seems to have climbed in bed with zombies and sea monsters. Where on earth amid all the commotion, to say nothing of all the TV and movie versions, then, is Jane Austen the author to be found? For University of Nebraska Professor Laura Mooneyham White, the resolution to the controversies is simple: Austen is a Christian. Specifically, she argues, “Austen’s religious values are imprinted everywhere in the novels. The ordinary behavior of her characters shows their moral and spiritual status, and their ability as free creatures to change and grow into greater Christian maturity, an ability especially vouchsafed her heroines and heroes. The world of her novels is a Christian one in which worldliness competes against traditional orthodoxy and moral precepts. Living in the real world, Austen shows, is the best test of one’s Christian values, and the novels rest on this foundation of Christian purpose” (66). The book exquisitely and definitively establishes this position.

Jane Austen’s Anglicanism begins with a deep and careful scrutiny of the Georgian Anglican church, its people, its tenets, its practices, and its range and influence, focusing on the eighteenth century and the bases that that period laid for