

BOOK REVIEW

Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain. David Russell. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018. Pp. vii+200.

In his recent exploration of contemporary digital culture, *Picnic Comma Lightning* (2018), Laurence Scott relates how one of his friends was called out on Twitter when she celebrated the sight of snow falling in London. “Think of rough sleepers!” someone admonished her.¹ Scott takes this moment as exemplary of the dizzying way social media forces people to consider how their most apparently trivial statements might be weighed on global scales of justice. He goes on to muse: “Perhaps [the] challenge to find an ethical, common language will produce the mould for a new kind of moral individual, forged in the linguistic pressure to translate our private lives onto this expansive public stage. It is possible that tact, out of sheer necessity, will become the gateway virtue for a new kind of inclusive thinking.”²

In *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, David Russell suggests that tact has a distinguished history as a literary response to the demands of thinking inclusively. He makes a seductive case for tact as a modern, democratic virtue, one that emerges in the context of urbanization and in response to a sense of the fluidity of social values and hierarchies. For him, tact is not merely a matter of etiquette, but a kind of ethical agnosticism about the inner lives of others, and a radical patience with the complexity of modern life. Emphasizing the etymological association of tact with touch, he characterizes it as a gentle, unassuming way of handling people, one that responds as fully as possible to the contingen-

1. Laurence Scott, *Picnic Comma Lightning: In Search of a New Reality* (London: Heinemann, 2018), 202.

2. *Ibid.*, 206.

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cies of a given situation. He claims that this tactful ethos found its natural home in the personal essay, a form that lent itself to the free play of ideas and to experiments in feeling. Russell also links tact with nineteenth-century “aesthetic liberalism”—a tradition that evolved alongside the free-market, individualistic, and rationalist varieties of liberalism but often sought to critique them.

Tact is a contribution to a substantial body of recent literary criticism that interrogates Victorian liberalism with an eye to its contemporary legacies and resonances. To this end, it offers compelling reassessments of two key Victorian liberals, John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold. Focusing on Mill’s essays on aesthetics, Russell shows that aesthetic tact was a vital aspect of Mill’s thought, albeit one he ultimately repudiated. In the book’s longest and most densely argued chapter, he makes the case for a radically egalitarian Arnold, one whose thinking on education has affinities with Jacques Rancière’s call for a “redistribution of the sensible” (87). Russell’s choice of Walter Pater and George Eliot as the subjects of other chapters means that his genealogy of literary tact corresponds fairly closely to the traditional canon of Victorian sage writers (though he excludes, for obvious reasons, the often rhetorically violent Thomas Carlyle, and for perhaps less obvious reasons, John Ruskin). At the same time, the book breaks free of conventional accounts of both Victorian liberalism and sage discourse by starting with Charles Lamb’s “Elia” essays and concluding with Marion Milner’s psychoanalytic writings. These framing chapters serve to situate liberal tact between Romanticism and psychoanalysis and cast it as an ethics of the “encounter” (1, 19–20): it is defined by a willingness to suspend judgment and thereby create space for other people to both reveal and discover themselves. In the opening chapter on Lamb, tact manifests itself as a benign, flâneur-like curiosity about the social flux of the modern city; by the book’s final chapter on Milner, it is an infinitely demanding therapeutic practice, a kind of “stamina of hospitality” in the face of deep suffering (157). Over the course of the book, tact thus becomes something of a totalizing ideal, encompassing all the more minor arts of sociability as well as the most profound forms of compassion. Nonetheless, Russell’s expansive sense of tact enables him to trace subtle connections between style, politics, and ethics and to move fluidly among a rich range of ideas.

Russell seeks to fulfill the rigor expected of an academic monograph while also honoring the more contemplative, open-ended forms of analysis he praises in his chosen essayists. He balances these demands with remarkable deftness and throughout the book vindicates his ideal of critical tact by modeling it himself so persuasively. Nonetheless, it is clear that some of his chosen writers are easier to assimilate to his project than others. Pater, whose sought to make the critical essay a more imaginative form and who characteristically adopts an appreciative yet oblique atti-

tude to his subjects, is the book's most perfect example of nineteenth-century tact. This is the chapter where critic and subject are most fully aligned, and Pater almost seems to be making Russell's larger argument for him. The chapter on Arnold is more vigorously argued, since Russell must contend against a long tradition of reading Arnold as an elitist and authoritarian thinker. His recuperation of Arnold's writings on education and his late, neglected essay "Equality" (1878) is a refreshing corrective to the tendency to treat him as a straw man, though some may feel that Russell exposes the limits of his own generous, reparative mode of reading in relation to Arnold.

As Russell acknowledges, Arnold's finesse as a prose stylist—what Arnold himself called his "sinuous, easy, unpolemical mode of proceeding"—was partly what aroused the hostility of contemporary critics and was often read as the signature of a quasi-aristocratic sensibility.³ When Oscar Wilde defined the "Oxford temper" as the capacity to transcend the "violence of opinion" and "play gracefully with ideas," he was almost certainly thinking of Arnold and Pater, and there is clearly a close kinship between the notion of an "Oxford temper" and Russell's model of the tactful essay.⁴ At the start of the book, Russell claims that tact lost its associations with aristocratic manners in the early nineteenth century and became a strategy for dealing with the modern problem of encountering many unpredictable, socially indeterminate others. Russell suggests that this modernization of tact was fully accomplished from the start of the nineteenth century, and this means he tends to repress the extent to which it retained traces of old class hierarchies and distinctions. Although he readily locates ambivalence or contradictions in the work of his chosen essayists, these are not attributed to any instability or flaw in the political and ethical effects of tact itself. Yet the lingering association of what Russell calls tact with an aristocratic ideal of refinement is surely why Arnold's prose persona has often been read as a kind of *hauteur*; and Pater's insinuating style provoked a scandal in part because it seemed addressed not to the general public but to a secret coterie of queer intellectuals. Russell convincingly shows that Arnold and Pater believed, at least at times, that the Oxford temper was open to anyone, and that their visions of aesthetics could have a utopian inclusivity; yet he does not really probe the extent to which this itself might be a fantasy of privilege.

In order to fully recuperate nineteenth-century aesthetic tact as something more modern and egalitarian than the Oxford temper, Russell really

3. Matthew Arnold to Mary Penrose Arnold, December 7, 1864, in *Selected Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Clinton Machann and Forrest D. Burt (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), 166.

4. Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: De Profundis*, "Epistola: In carcere et vinculis," ed. Russell Jackson, Ian Small, and Joseph Bristow (Oxford University Press, 2000), 39.

needed to find an exemplar of it who did not write from a position of significant cultural privilege. The chapter on Eliot superficially promises to serve this purpose, but in fact it has some of the telling qualities of recalcitrant material. Eliot was clearly chosen as a Victorian moralist who must have interesting things to say about tact, but, as Russell acknowledges, she was actually a markedly untactful, even rebarbative essayist. Russell notes that Eliot seemed to relish assuming the authority of a male persona, including the ugly pleasures of misogyny and contempt, but he perhaps does not put enough pressure on this insight. The anonymity of Victorian reviews fostered some of the culture of vituperation that now flourishes online, even if Victorian critics were constrained by much higher standards of decorum. It is suggestive that when a young cultural outsider like Eliot strove to become a serious critic, she imagined that this meant adopting a magisterial voice and perfecting the art of the damning judgment. Russell's interesting if awkward chapter on Eliot's "rage" necessarily prompts the question of whether aesthetic tact is a kind of largesse that can be afforded only by those with cultural authority to spare.

Although the book's chapter on Milner forms a beautiful coda and clarifies the psychoanalytic cast of the preceding chapters, it is in some ways a shame that Russell did not choose to conclude with a contemporary essayist. He alludes several times to contemporary politics and technology, but his emphasis on the modernity of tact inevitably makes the reader wonder about its viability as a style in the present. When Scott suggests that a new ethics of tact might emerge from the crucible of social media, he presents it as a utopian wish. Although Russell's book is itself a luminous example of critical tact, the fact he does not consider the contemporary moment more directly gives his claims for the value of liberal aesthetics a similarly utopian wistfulness.

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QUERY TO THE AUTHOR

No Query.