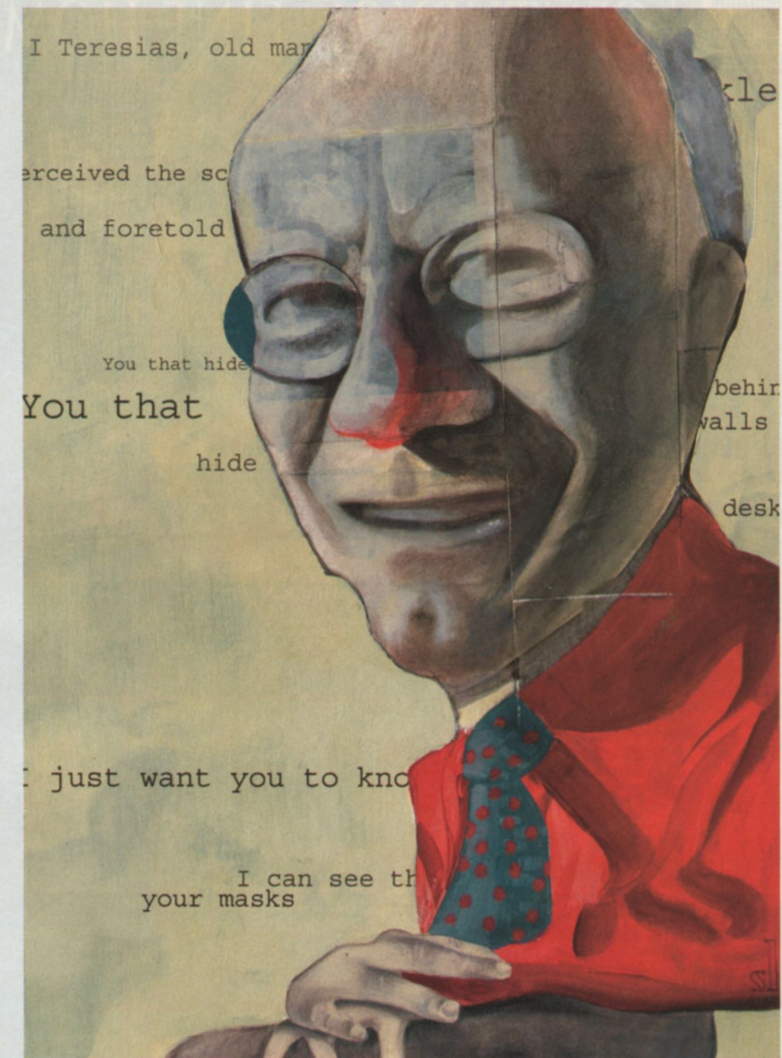
 By JOHN SEDGWICK

Well-Versed

One of Boston's great minds believes Bob Dylan is on a par with T. S. Eliot. Just watch out if you disagree.



YOU DON'T INTERVIEW Boston University humanities professor Christopher Ricks so much as sit in attendance with him in his vast office on the main floor of the Arts and Humanities building on Commonwealth Avenue. Ricks may well be the sharpest conversationalist in Boston—our very own Dr. Johnson—and I have not even formulated a question before he takes off at full gallop across the vast reaches of English literature. As an interviewer's quarry, Ricks is elusive because he is allusive. With his nearly total recall and his encyclopedic interests—from Anthony Eden's Suez Canal policy to the relative merits of Danny Boyle's films *Shallow Grave* and *Trainspotting*—everything suggests everything else. The conversation often progresses sideways, like a swift crab that occasionally pauses to scratch under the surface at something small and glittering.

Trying to understand Ricks is akin to dissecting a T. S. Eliot poem: It requires an attention to detail, a broad base of knowledge, and a readiness for the unexpected. After all, this is a man of wide contradictions, a man who considers Bob Dylan's singing on a par with Brando's acting, Picasso's painting, and Wagner's operas, yet derides Nobel Prize–winner William Butler Yeats as the "Joan Baez of English poetry"—all warble, no soul. He is both gushingly celebrated for his high-minded scholarship and quietly resented for his departmental politicking at the expense of some of his colleagues.

Ricks is the archetype of the old-school academic—perhaps a dying breed—pushing Boston's cognoscenti to think in new ways. "He constantly surprises," says colleague and poet Rosanna Warren. "This is a man who asks us to rethink the period, the quotation mark, the parenthesis. There is hardly anything in poetry that he *hasn't* caused us to rethink."

Yet he is also against contemporary political correctness, so much so that some of his colleagues allege he has attempted to punish those who disagreed with him.

A dogged and inventive critic, Ricks has put his stamp on most of the canon giants, offering insight into Keats (on shame), Beckett (on death), and Eliot (on prejudice). He's received critical raves, especially for *Inventions of the March Hare,* his edition of 50 of Eliot's previously unpublished poems. He has three more books out this year alone, and a long-awaited volume to come on Bob Dylan. "It's not just that it's different," Ricks says of Dylan's singing. "It's that it's new. It redefines what we think of as singing." Along with the poet Geoffrey Hill, Ricks has started up the new Editorial Institute at BU to orient graduate students toward small, publishable projects, such as an illustrated edition of *The Wind in the Willows* that shows the differences between the initial American and English versions. *[Continued on page 58]*

Illustration, SCOTT LAUMANN

Ivory Tower *[Continued from page 56]*

Small, precise, useful—that's the Ricksian way, which stands in contrast, he says, to the prevailing "giganticism" of dissertations on, say, the effects of industrialization on literature. "The good thing about choosing something impossible to do," Ricks dryly observes, "is that you cannot fail at it."

NOW IN HIS LATE SIXTIES, his bald head fringed by gray, Ricks remains brilliantly high-watt, tossing out zingy pronunciamentos that linger long after he's left. In his Cambridge home, he has usurped John Kenneth Galbraith as host of *the* 02138 salon, staging concerts, readings, and big, boisterous dinner parties where documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman, critic Helen Vendler, and poet David Ferry might be found among his guests.

But as he shifts from Brontë to Hardy to Eliot (again and again to Eliot—"not only a great artist, but really wise"), a theme emerges. It involves a phrase used by E. M. Forster at Oxford when Ricks was a student there. "He was talking about the uneducated heart," Ricks recalls. "And what he meant was that we tend to believe that we know what we feel but not what we think." To Forster, and now to Ricks, the reverse is true: We don't know what we feel because we have surrendered to the standard pieties, the sentimentality, the unconvincing smiles of the prevailing culture. "What do you really feel about the success enjoyed by a friend of yours?" he asks provocatively. "Let's not be cynical and say that all you feel is envy and competitiveness." But, he explains, such an occasion doesn't provoke unalloyed joy, either. Most people cannot maneuver between the two extremes; the result is a kind of fake feeling. "The ruling emotions at present are pseudo solicitude, pseudo concern, and pseudo caring."

Ricks wants to add a pinch of salt to these saccharine times. "In Augustan England and for the upper classes between the wars, there was this wonderful coolness," he says. He recalls Lord Chesterfield's admonition not to be seen smiling or laughing. "Only really vulgar people did that," Ricks says. He realizes such iciness is extreme—he himself can be genial to the point of solicitousness—but believes that a bit of chill can be useful. For example, he inveighs against the phony warmth of a university like BU calling itself a "family." "Let's not call it a family. But if we do, let's *[Continued on page 60]*

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recognize that families contain hatred, injustice, tyranny."

He knew it was absurd to think that September 11—a date that to him represented the release date of Dylan's long-awaited album, *Love and Theft*—would usher in a new age of harmony. "Maybe [the civility that followed the terrorist attacks] went on for a day or two; people didn't go through red lights with quite as much jubilation and aggressiveness. But it's all back to normal now, isn't it?"

AT FIRST GLANCE, SUCH REALISM—or is it cynicism?—would seem benign enough. But Ricks's rebuff of political correctness has led to whispers of controversy: Suggestions that Ricks's close ties to the BU administration have brought grief to some of his colleagues. The loudest accusations swirl around his long dispute with the English department's lefty "theorists" who see literature through a prism of political concerns like sexism and racism—unlike the more conservative and traditional-minded "formalists" like himself who regard literary truth as eternal. Several professors claim Ricks lobbied the administration to deny bonuses to four of these so-called theorists in the early '90s. In a 13-page internal memo from 1996, Ricks himself acknowledges the professors' accusations, but he also writes, "I did not discuss anyone's salary or bonuses with the provost."

Still, the rumors persist. In the BU land of "no comment," though, no one in

Ricks inveighs against BU's calling itself a family, "but if we do, let's recognize that families contain hatred, injustice, tyranny."

the English department, from acting chair Bonnie Costello on down, would speak on the record to clarify what, if anything, Ricks did. Relations became sufficiently strained, however, that he left the department and joined the broader humanities division. Even Ricks refuses to divulge reasons for his leaving. "I don't want anyone to pick at old scabs," he says.

Now that a measure of peace has settled over the once-riven department, neither does anyone else, apparently. Rosanna Warren insists that the study of literature at BU is much the better for having moved on from the old disputes. "It would be sick *[Continued on page 62]*

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simply to perpetuate the old pathologies," she says. "They're not interesting, and they're not fertile either to teaching or to the life of the mind."

In part, by calling for a removal of all the smiley faces, one suspects that Ricks is offering a defense of his own divisive behavior. He says he's calling for a new hardness to academics so that disputants can enter the intellectual battlefield without personalizing everything. He has helped start a new literary organization, the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, to break the hegemony of the "ism"-obsessed Modern Language Association, the established national organization for literary-minded academics.

Ricks's conversational and pedagogical style is to respond, "Yes, but . . ." He explains: "If it's only a 'yes,' that's the end

Several BU professors claim Ricks lobbied to block raises to some colleagues with whom he disagreed. Ricks angrily denies it.

of the matter." The "but" keeps the conversation going by offering an alternative view. Yet there are limits to acceptable opposition, even for him. "Why should it be that the right to speech should create a duty to listen?" he asks, his voice rising. "Well, I'm not listening to it."

Ricks and I talked for an hour and a half in his office—his Elba, if you will, a safe distance from the English department—and continued for another hour over the phone, both times interrupting his more important work of correcting galley proofs during what is supposed to be a term off. Clearly, he could have kept on and on, knocking Maya Angelou, hailing Henry James as a "great erotic writer," tracing the history of the phrase "life of the mind" through its appearances in Hemingway, Proust, and James, or ridiculing the "spilt religion" that makes recycled paper nearly an object of veneration. Talkers need listeners, after all. But perhaps the truest interview, the discussion that most exposes a contradictory man, occurs not among the faculty or in hallway whispers, but between a professor like Ricks and any students ready to take him on with their own "Yes, but . . ." **B**

John Sedgwick's new novel, The Education of Mrs. Bemis, *a psychological mystery set in Boston, was just published by HarperCollins.*