

Practical criticism in perspective: A journey from Cambridge to Reading

CRAIG MORRIS

Wellington College, Berkshire, England

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled;
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.
Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach"¹

ABSTRACT: The phenomenon of practical criticism is central to the subject of English at all levels and this article explores the personal journey of a student who became a teacher but who then took another five years to gain sufficient perspective to see practical criticism in context. This article explores the different interpretations of I. A. Richards' experiment in reading and puts them in a historical and literary perspective, moving from Richards, to Leavis, to New Criticism, finally offering Reader Response theory as an enabling, inspiring and more balanced way of constructing the dynamic between texts, readers and teachers.

KEYWORDS: I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, practical criticism, A-Level literature, English, New Criticism, English teaching, Reader Response, Rosenblatt.

INTRODUCTION

"Never such innocence again" (Larkin, 2001, p. 15).

My first experience of practical criticism was, as it must have been for many and I expect remains so for a significant number of A level English students, as a Year 12 pupil writing regular "prat. crit" essays: readings of texts which isolate the "words on the page" from their contexts and so focus on stylistic features, on form and meaning, rather than on larger theoretical questions, to produce an inductive and organic argument. At the time, the value of such a regular exercise was implicitly reinforced by its frequency and must have seemed obvious because I do not remember the question of its justification or merit ever being raised by learner or educator. Practical criticism was a process that helped us to develop the fundamental skill of close, rigorous, and what was assumed to be objective, analysis and our success in the subject would be judged based on the sophistication and depth of insights we were able to make and then communicate.

¹ Arnold, M. (1996), "Dover Beach". In M. Ferguson, M. Salter & J. Stallworthy (Eds.). *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (4th edition)(p. 1000). London: Norton.

While a testing experience, it was a positive and rewarding one as our confidence and ability to think and analyse for ourselves was carefully nurtured and the Head of Department balanced letting us explore texts for ourselves with suggesting and sometimes showing how much more could be said. Our apprenticeship and enculturation into the discipline of English had begun and as a class of surprisingly successful students from a school in the tenth decile of the academic results league table it was not in our interest, nor a habit I have often seen encouraged at any school, to question the method of our success. Eleven of our set of twelve obtained an A at A-Level English and three of our number went up to Cambridge, so, it was assumed, all was well.

Although pioneered as long ago as the early 1920s at Cambridge University, practical criticism, or unseen criticism as it is sometimes called, remains a compulsory element in a number of A-Level English courses, as it does in a significant number of undergraduate English and English Literature courses, and as one would expect, it was and still remains a compulsory part of the Cambridge University English Tripos. Its significance is perhaps made clearer by the fact that “Literary Criticism” or theory is compulsory in Part I but it is the “Practical Criticism” paper of Part II which is presented as the “ultimate” challenge to undergraduates. I won’t forget passing the photographs of I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis each time I entered the English Department Library, nor the strong emphasis on close reading and analysis during such a formative period both in terms of my identity and what has now become my professional knowledge.

Such experiences as those outlined above are relevant, not simply because they are typical of the study of English at Cambridge², but in the degree to which they reflect accepted practice more widely. As Dixon (1991) makes the point, prior to *Practical Criticism*, I. A. Richards’ 1929 experiment in improving reading, studying English literature at Cambridge, and so by implication elsewhere (as best practice would have been shared, not least because universities set the examinations by which entry to universities was determined), was simply about “learning a body of knowledge about the author and his books” (p. 143).

As such, and given the longevity and widespread use of practical criticism, not only in the United Kingdom but in the United States, it would be churlish to disagree with Tillyard (1958), the chronicler of the revisions to the English tripos at Cambridge, that the school’s “greatest single achievement” may have been the introduction “into the more advanced of the two purely literary sections a whole, compulsory paper on practical criticism”. His justification as to why is more problematic and dated in its assumption of male undergraduates, and in its paradoxical assertion that this exercise is the “ultimate” and most “advanced” test of training in the discipline of English and yet that it operates from the student’s “own resources”. “Here at last we could confront the men with the actual texts and test their ultimate literary insight, making them use their own resources entirely” (1958, pp. 82-3). Crucially then, the result was a shift from highly subjective appreciation towards increasingly critical reading and

² In “Memories of Cambridge English”, the Right Honourable Chris Smith (Pembroke College, Cambridge, 1969-1974) recalls “The thrill of close reading and analysis in the best I. A. Richards Cambridge tradition” (2005, p. 1).

analysis and it is in such a spirit of critical reflection that this account of a personal journey was born.

The purpose of this article based on the phenomenon of practical criticism, as propounded by I.A. Richards and after him F.R. Leavis, has been to create the space for critical reflection on a practice undoubtedly at the heart of English but one which has until recently seemed almost entirely unproblematic. The above paragraphs begin the argument that, somewhat ironically for a practice grounded on the isolation of a text from its contexts, practical criticism has a particular history and is the product of a particular time. It is my contention that through a consideration of these particularities, and via an acknowledgement of the different readers and texts concerned with the discipline of English, the implications of Richards' experiment can be more fully understood.

Thus in contrast to Arnold's fearful and melancholic lamentation of the waning of the "Sea of Faith" and high culture and the waxing of popular culture, I anticipate a celebration of the growth of interest in, and a liberating acknowledgement of, the increasing diversity and particularity of readers and texts that Richards experiment begins and what has become known as Reader Response Theory develops. The journey referred to in the title is both literal and a metaphor for a shift of emphasis away from the text to the reader that I detect is increasingly significant in educational circles, not least in the context of The English 21 project in England (QCA, 2005) – a discussion about how the subject English should develop in the next ten years. It is a literal journey in the sense that I am no longer training to be an elite literary critic at Cambridge University but collaborating with fellow educators who recognize the extraordinary nature of their training to explore, increasingly reflectively, both in theory and practice, how best to improve reading, and how to engage diverse readers with an increasingly broad range of texts and strategies, at Reading University – a place full of avid readers.

I.A. RICHARDS, PRACTICAL CRITICISM AND THE SUBJECT OF ENGLISH

Literature is not just a subject for academic study, but one of the chief temples of the Human Spirit, in which all should worship (*Newbolt Report* of 1921, cited in Eaglestone, 2000, p. 14).

The critical reading of poetry is an arduous discipline; few exercises reveal to us more clearly the limitations under which, from moment to moment we suffer. But, equally, the immense extension of our capacities that follows a summoning of our resources is made plain. The lesson of all criticism is that we have nothing to rely upon in making our choices but ourselves. The lesson of good poetry seems to be that, when we have understood it, in the degree in which we can order ourselves, we need nothing more (Richards, 1964, pp. 350-1).

Writing in the spirit of Arnoldian humanism, and at a time when the argument for the value of the establishment of the discipline of English was still very much needed, a young, scientifically minded English teacher at Cambridge called Ivor Armstrong Richards published the results of three years of research into reading and ushered into literary theory and practice the age of analysis. Coleridge may have coined the term

“practical criticism” (1997, p. 186), but it was Richards’ method for analysing language, particularly literary language, developed during the 1920s but culminating in the publication of *Practical Criticism* in 1929, which, to echo the words of the ambitious and as yet not fully realised Newbolt Report, helped establish English as a rigorously academic discipline “at least the equal of any [other]” (1921, p. 392) and made it clear how and why literature, and poetry in particular, could save us and fill the increasingly felt gap left by the receding of the “Sea of Faith” that Arnold traces above. Reading was to be not just textual but cultural analysis and a source of self-knowledge.

His experiment, through its sustained and critical attention to language and the process of reading, unleashed a series of fundamental questions that lead to a break away from the dogma, philology, biography and literary history that had come to dominate the subject of English. It also played its part in the shift of taste from the age of Tennyson to the age of Eliot; from the Georgian poets to the more self-reflexive and deliberately difficult poetry of the Modernists, which his method of close reading was shown to be capable of probing.

[Protocol number] 182 Good on the whole, though it is doubtful if life really seems longer to the good than to the wicked or to the merely passive....The lines are worth reading twice because they really do express something instead of just drivelling on like those of number II (Richards, 1964, p. 26).

We should be better advised to acknowledge frankly that, when people put poems in our hands (point to pictures, or play us music), what we say, in nine cases out of ten, has nothing to do with the poem, but arises from politeness or spleen or some other social motive... It would be an excellent thing if all the critical chitchat which we produce on these occasions were universally recognised to be what it is, social gesture, “phatic communion” (Richards, 1964, p. 318).

Determined to challenge the idea that English was a subject for cultured English gentlemen in which they could pursue their interests and demonstrate their superior tastes and sensibilities, Richards confronted the conservatism and elitism and the weight of tradition under which the institution and many more beyond it were suffocating. Although chosen for their assertive nature, the confident generalisations of the hand-picked three hundred and eighty seven protocols that Richards published (of the one-thousand or so written) demonstrate the often social and limited nature of the textual responses that, arguably, the best minds of the time were producing.

They underline Richards’ point that “most of our responses are not real, are not our own” (1964, p. 349) and of the danger of a method where such vagaries as those in Protocol 182 are acceptable. As he writes, “The real danger of *dictionary understanding* is that it so easily prevents us from perceiving the limitations of our understanding” (1964, p. 327), and while “stock responses” and indulgent sentimentality may have been understandable if conservative reactions in the face of a worrying increase in the influence of the mass-media and the rise of fascism, Richards’ powerfully inspiring if over-dramatised solution to the social disintegration he blamed on the rise of mass culture was to be found in reading. His message for readers, and in particular educators, was that a much more practical, sophisticated, analytical and democratic response and “training” was necessary:

We defend ourselves from the chaos that threatens us by stereotyping and standardising both our utterances and our interpretations. And this threat, it must be insisted, can only grow greater as world communications, through the wireless and otherwise, improve...a more conscious and deliberate effort to master language is imperative....We must make ourselves more aware of how the language we so much depend upon works (Richards, 1964, p. 340).

“Bad training” (Richards, 1964, p. 309) at Cambridge, and by implication elsewhere, had created a situation whereby a transmission model of teaching was used to present students with knowledge that they would simply be required to reproduce in exams. Richards’ experience as a teacher and his empirically derived model of the reading process, founded on an understanding that teaching should be based on knowledge of what readers actually do when they read, led him to encourage more active reading and analysis by individuals who wished “to discover for themselves what they think and feel about poetry (and cognate matters)” (1964, p. 3). “We continually talk as though things possess qualities, when what we ought to say is that they cause effects in us of one kind or another” (1926, p. 16).

By rejecting the concept of definitive answers and an objective text (“There is, of course, no such thing as *the* effect of a word or a sound...” [1926, p. 124; my italics]) and acknowledging the creative role of the reader (“Thanks to their complexity, the resultant effect, the imagined form of the statue, will vary greatly from individual to individual and in the same individual from time to time” [1926, p. 144]), Richards unlocked creative intelligence, and his democratic shift of focus from author to reader made space for readers and gave students a voice. By all accounts, students flocked to him, and Russo (2005) reports that in the 1920s at Cambridge, he was so popular that at times lectures had to be held in the streets.

Similarly, Richards placed equal faith in teaching. The practical criticism experiment was to be a means of devising “educational methods more efficient than we now use in developing discrimination and the power to understand what we hear and read” (1964, p. 3). By rejecting a hierarchical model that presented the teacher as ultimate arbiter of meaning, he liberated not only students but teachers, putting both parties, at least in theory if not always in practice, on a more equal footing as they joined together in a collaborative and so perhaps less predictable voyage of discovery. Moreover, it was certainly not to the detriment of his cause that at the time he was writing *Practical Criticism* Richards was lecturing on Eliot and Yeats. Not just on the back of his empirical research was he charting new theoretical and pedagogical territory but new content in the deliberately new and difficult challenges that literary modernism presented.

For Richards, the value of poetry, in its challenging tendency to paradox, ambiguity and, in a word, difficulty, lay in its power to undermine comfortable assumptions and certainties and to force readers to think increasingly precisely and actively for themselves (1926, p. 244). He was not the first to make this insight. As Knight (1996, p. 34) and others have documented, from the Nineteenth Century, the majority of the nation’s secondary-aged pupils received instruction in English language and literature because of the civilising influence and “moral wealth” that such teaching was expected to produce.

Richards' originality comes from the particular context he was reacting to: a concern with the rise in power and influence of the mass media and of fascism in Europe; his emphasis that *reading* was to be a method of social and cultural critique; and in the technical and positive information his method would offer examiners that was lacking when the campaign to establish a Chair in English at Oxford in 1887 failed, largely because of the criticisms of Professor of History, Edward Freeman: "We are told that the study of literature 'cultivates the taste, educates the sympathies and enlarges the mind'. These are all excellent things, only we cannot examine tastes and sympathies. Examiners must have technical and positive information to examine" (cited in Barry, 1995, p. 14).

The result of Freeman's criticism was that when the English course was set up at Oxford in 1894, it contained a very heavy element of historical language study, something from which it has still not managed to free itself. As an educator reflecting on the structure of the Cambridge English course, I would have to say that while thanks to *Practical Criticism* it is less weighed down by philology, the compulsory weighting given to Medieval English and foreign language study, at the cost of time that might be, for the majority, better spent focusing on the process of reading or on mastering language, on the more linguistic focus for example developed by Empson (1930) or what is today often referred to as stylistics, is also anachronistic.

One of the remarkable characteristics of *Practical Criticism* is the fine balance that Richards was able to strike in it between empiricism and creative intelligence, paradoxically treating both subjective response and works of art as objective; on the one hand, the text was to be read as an autonomous work of art, and yet it was also to be read as a cultural product, determining and determined by its context, at once an antidote to the real world and a means of changing it.

In his experimental focus on "the words on the page" and interest in how readers fill hermeneutic gaps, the seeds of American New Criticism and of Reader Response theory were sown. But as Richards left for America, it was Leavis, a student whose doctoral dissertation he had supervised, who would decide what would become of practical criticism.

F.R. LEAVIS: DISCRIMINATION AND RESISTANCE

The fact remains that English students in England today are "Leavisites" whether they know it or not, irremediably altered by that historic invention (Eagleton, 1996, p. 43).

In contrast to the deliberately radical and subversive nature of Richards' practical criticism experiment, in which readers were allowed to challenge the value and status of canonical texts, Leavis' approach to literature involved a less flexible, Arnoldian revulsion against the crude philistinism of an increasingly technological and impersonal age. The stakes were so high and the effect of popular culture already so insidious that the committed and discriminating few would have to lead the many to the "correct" response: "We cannot, as we might in a healthy state of culture, leave the citizen to be formed unconsciously by his environment; if anything like a worthy idea of satisfactory living is to be saved, he must be trained to discriminate and

resist... a critical habit must be systematically inculcated” (Leavis & Thompson, 1933, p. 1).

The literary cause Leavis propounded, therefore, assumed the character of a crusade, and he gathered around him a band of enthusiastic disciples. His belief that an educated public could be produced only by a minority of people who spread the word only strengthened the cult-consciousness among his disciples and was a very effective way of evangelising teachers (Mathieson, 1975; Blamires, 1991, p. 340). Richards’ theories, therefore, were reduced to recognising the moral superiority of the canon and so practical criticism was to become less concerned with the way language is used in literature to invite responses than to develop into a method for gaining access to the moral thoughts of a select few authors. There was no room for dissent: “The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad” (Leavis, 1948, p. 9) and, he tells us, they are great because of their serious moral concern: “they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life” (1948, p. 10).

Peck and Coyle are mostly right to credit Leavis’ influential and inspiring interpretation of practical criticism with establishing the dominant pattern of modern British criticism until the 1970s (2002, p. 190), but the narrowness of his judgement and authoritarian style, as exemplified in the quotations above from *The Great Tradition*, served eventually to produce a backlash against the preaching of culture and a particular set of values. Looking at texts in isolation from their contexts, Leavis stressed what he saw as the universal moral qualities that the texts could be said to endorse, but it is equally arguable that such an overtly non-political position hides a political agenda – that Leavis wanted to play down differences and to interpret the whole of experience in terms of British, white, liberal humanist values.

Leavis’ concern with how the term “practical criticism” came to be equated with a “specialized kind of gymnastic skill to be cultivated and practised as something apart” and was no longer used to describe “criticism in practice: a socially engaged exercise of judgement and analysis” (Leavis, 1975, cited in Murray, 2005, p. 1) is telling and suggestive of how practical criticism came to be adapted. And yet, although practical criticism courses are ostensibly practical in the sense of applying a specific theory or set of principles, the idea that training in the techniques of close reading will equip students both for further literary study and for life persists. Perhaps it is also its seemingly “scientific” rigour and “practicality” in terms of suitability for the large classes of the post World War II period that have ensured its institutionalisation through the “unseen” practical criticism paper.

NEW CRITICISM AND “THE WORDS ON THE PAGE”

...the net effect of his [I. A. Richards’] criticism has been to emphasize the need of a more careful reading of poetry and to regard the poem as an organic thing (Brooks, 1968, p. 60).

For many of the reasons discussed above that practical criticism changed the study of English literature in Britain permanently, New Criticism, which built on one facet of Richards’ work, must have felt like a clean wind blowing through American

universities in the 1930s and 1940s. Having shed the psychological theories which originally underpinned practical criticism, unobstructed by preconceived or received beliefs about a text, freed from history, ideology, the author and biography, critics, in a much more exclusive and self-conscious way than Richards, were able to withdraw behind the boundaries of the text to study “the words on the page” (or more often and more narrowly, “the poem itself”), so as to determine the objective meaning of particular words and poems. The possibility of such certainty and simplicity (because of the exclusion of context) is appealing. It is appealing for young adults, as Appleyard reminds us. “Jung, Erikson and others have pointed out that the need for intellectual clarity and certainty is often a mark of young adulthood” (1991, p. 173). In equal measure it is also appealing for relatively new disciplines and, I must admit, for relatively new teachers: not least because in treating literature as a sphere of activity of its own increases its importance and the activities of those who choose to work within it. Such faith in an ultimate source of order and meaning in life, however, while inspiring, is blinkered and perhaps better left to those with religious conviction.

Until recently, most specialist English teachers have themselves been educated in a literary critical tradition stemming from Cambridge and the New Criticism....To see the text as part of Leavis’ Great Tradition, or as Eliot’s autonomous artefact, is to cast the teacher in the roles of custodian or informed explicator, and the student-reader as a sort of cultural *tabula rasa* or embryonic critic (Corcoran & Evans, 1987, pp. 1-2)

I wanted them to think about how books and poems were structured and how they worked, what values they implied, how they reflected or criticized the culture in which they were produced. The students seemed to want to discover messages about the meaning of their lives, to find interesting characters they could identify with in their fantasies, or to use the ideas of the author to bolster their own beliefs and prejudices. This discrepancy began to puzzle me more and more (Appleyard, 1991, p. 1 [my italics]).

Until recently, under the enchanting spell of the idea of the objective meaning of words that New Criticism offers, it has taken a number of encounters with less specialised readers in the classroom for my own blinkers to be shaken off. There have been since the 1960s richer conceptual frameworks available for reflecting on literature than that offered by New Criticism. Post-structuralists, for example, would point out that interpretation and evaluation of texts cannot be objective because they concern subjective interactions between works and their readers. Yet I think that it is my interactions with non-specialist readers (those without a literature degree), my belief in student-centred learning and the value of the personal growth model of English teaching (Cox, 1989), and the confidence to trust in the instinct that I have gained as I become an increasingly skilled practitioner, that have made me increasingly uncomfortable with a limited and authoritarian method of teaching in which readers are cast as relatively passive recipients of a correct response.

How ironic, then, that it was Richards, who so long ago clearly demonstrated that reading can never be neutral (“most of our responses are not real, are not our own” [1964, p. 349]), was such a strong advocate of readers “discovering for themselves what they think and feel” about literature (1964, p. 3), and who showed himself to be more interested in understanding the reading process than in imposing his view of how literary and cultural judgements are formed.

READER RESPONSE THEORY AND THE WHOLE SCENE: AUTHOR, TEXT AND READER

In spite of the fact that I specialised in literary theory in my final year as an undergraduate English student at Cambridge I must admit that until studying reading at Reading as part of a Masters course I knew nothing more of Reader Response theory than its name. Consulting my colleagues at school, I find that my case is fairly typical – for the majority of literature specialists, close reading of works as autonomous entities remains a rarely questioned orthodoxy. As a consequence of the hegemony of text-orientated criticism in past decades it is important to acknowledge the resultant paucity of attention to the role of the reader that this has caused until quite recently.

Research in response to literature dates back to Richards' work in the 1920s, but the extraordinary dominance of New Criticism in university and critical circles has meant that few have given the reader much thought. One who has done so, however, is Louise Rosenblatt, who, as early as 1938, wrote that: "The reading of any work of literature is, of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of a particular reader" (1978, p. xii). Her argument is disarmingly simple but profoundly significant, particularly for educators, and even more so for educators who believe that practical criticism enables objective truths to be uncovered:

The premise of this book is that a text, once it leaves its author's hands, is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes from it a literary work – sometimes, even, a literary work of art....A specific reader and a specific text at a specific time and place: change any of these, and there occurs a different circuit, a different event – a different poem....The finding of meanings involves both the author's text and what the reader brings to it (Rosenblatt, 1978, pp. ix, 14).

Much criticism that has ignored the reader has been brilliant; but ultimately its isolation makes it sterile. Rosenblatt's experience in the classroom, on the other hand, enables her to articulate an inspiringly broad, democratic, dynamic and challenging goal for educators: the fostering of "the growth of the capacity for personally meaningful, self-critical literary experience" in all our students (Rosenblatt, 1990, p. 107).

Rosenblatt offers a theoretical foundation for revising the teaching of literature, a foundation for setting up a process that, as she says "would make personal response the basis for growth toward more and more balanced, self-critical, knowledgeable interpretation" (Rosenblatt, 1990, p. 100) and her contribution can make a significant difference to the way English literature is taught. "Rosenblatt's interactionist viewpoint has been a pillar of light to those who have valued, examined and urged the importance of what growing readers have had to say about texts and about understanding them" (Meek, 1990, p. 1). This is not least because of the plurality of meaning, plurality of response forms and focuses on the reading process of which reader-response theorists are ensuring we are increasingly aware (Corcoran & Evans, 1987, p. 6).

In contrast to more academic theories that tend to emphasize one aspect at the expense of the others, Rosenblatt and other reader response theorists and practitioners are conscious of the interplay between reader, text and author, and this consciousness can

only productively reinforce interest in the dynamics of relationships that are extraordinarily complex and not yet fully understood. An awareness of this situation can be productive for teachers and students, not only because it puts them on a more equal footing as they explore different texts, but because it encourages them to develop their metacognitive capacity and to explore different ways of reading and interpreting. Thus, Figure 1 below (Corcoran, 1990, p. 134) is included here to suggest some of the various possibilities in a literature classroom.

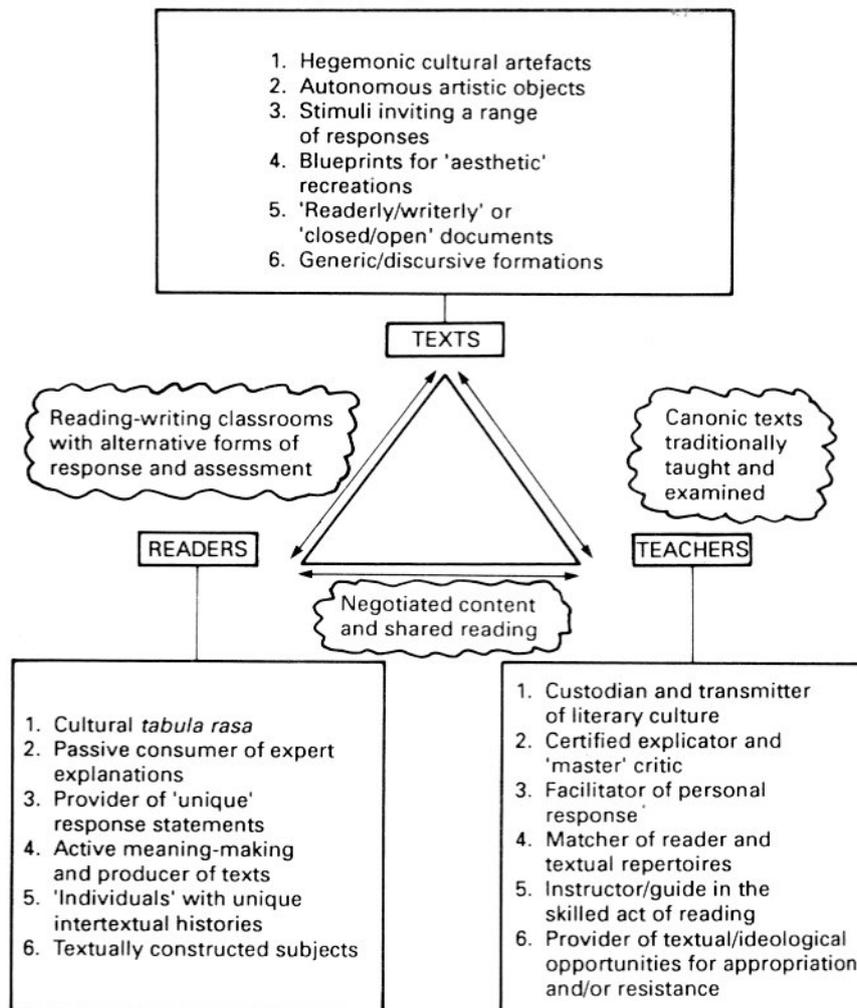


Figure 1. Readers, texts and teachers: The possibilities in a literature classroom

CONCLUSION: STRIKING A BALANCE

Myths abound and it is often convenient to leave them unexplored. However, the phenomenon of practical criticism is so central to the discipline of English at all levels that its ideology and various different incarnations must be seen in context and explored. The training that specialist English literature teachers undergo gives us a particular way of seeing at least literature, if not the world, but it is not the only way, and while practical criticism is undoubtedly a successful way of identifying and developing the most able readers, I hope that its use in the new year might be a little more problematic than it has been to date.

To conclude, literature speaks to us personally and individually, and our responses to it are also personal and individual. Thus each learner in the classroom has something unique to offer: their point of view. And what a luxury that, rather than trying to pin down the meaning of a text to a single definitive interpretation, learners can enjoy the challenge of exploring the range of meanings that a text can support. In this context, then, the brave new world that Arnold feared is less controllable than we may at times feel we want it to be, and is sometimes dizzyingly diverse. But in acknowledging that it is so, we are already better able to cater for the needs of its inhabitants – as we should for, as Richards’ experiment reminds us, there is still much more that we can learn about reading.

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