

Practical Criticism in English Literature Studies and the Transition to University: Developing Crafty or Creative Readers?

Scott Annett
Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge
sa410@cam.ac.uk

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Abstract

This article has been developed from an oral presentation delivered at the 11th Kaleidoscope Conference at the University of Cambridge in June 2014. It is an exploration of the critical field in which I discuss the difficulties faced by students when making the transition from secondary school to higher education. I focus in particular on the study of ‘practical criticism’ within English literature studies. As such, I am attempting to outline some of the key theoretical questions posed by researchers working in this area, while at the same time relating these questions to my own experiences as a practical criticism teacher.

Dating back to the experiments conducted by I.A. Richards at the University of Cambridge throughout the 1920s, ‘practical criticism’ is a discipline that prioritises attention to the ‘words on the page’ when engaging in literary study. Practical criticism remains a compulsory paper in most secondary English syllabuses (particularly A-levels) and considerable research has been conducted in recent years as classroom teachers attempt to improve the close reading skills of their students in preparation for both examinations and later university study. By thinking carefully about practical criticism, questions are raised about the types of readers we are hoping to develop, including the differences between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ reading, as well as the difficulty of assessment in examinations. In this article, I propose two possibilities, the first being ‘crafty readers’, based on the work of Robert Scholes (*The Crafty Reader*, 2001), and the second being ‘creative readers’. In the conclusion I explain some of the ways in which my work could be expanded in the future.

Keywords: Practical criticism, creative readers, crafty readers, transition to university, assessment objectives

1. Making The Transition

Carol Atherton has observed that the “problem of transition from school to university has dominated many recent debates in the UK about the teaching of

English Literature in higher education,” debates which have themselves been brought “into particularly sharp focus” by the “introduction of Curriculum 2000 and the promise of further revisions to the post-16 curriculum” (2006, pp. 65–66). For many students, the “process of understanding and coming to terms with higher education study” is neither smooth nor straightforward (Green, 2006, p. 125), as they struggle to overcome “the difficulties [faced] when their expectations of university English, based on their experiences at A-level, are confounded” (Nightingale, 2007, p. 136). These difficulties have been identified variously as increased independent study, heightened academic demands and a greater emphasis on secondary reading, all of which are said to contribute to the sense in which the study of English – and the criteria for success in examination – undergo a disorientating shift as students progress from secondary to tertiary education. It is the contention of this article that a more significant reason for the difficulties experienced by students lies in the ways in which they are taught to read, and the underlying assumptions informing those practices.

The terms of the question articulated in my title (‘Developing Crafty or Creative Readers?’) are in response to the work of Robert Scholes and his book *The Crafty Reader* (2001), in which Scholes claims that “[o]ne becomes a crafty reader by learning the craft of reading” (2001, p. xiii). Reading is, in Scholes’ view, a practice: “I have been trying to sharpen my own command of the craft of reading – to become a craftier reader – and to make the practice of the craft – the tricks of the trade, so to speak – more open to use by those who, like myself, still hope to improve as readers” (2001, p. xv). At their most straightforward, practical criticism classes ought to enhance precisely this kind of “craftiness”: English teachers at both secondary and tertiary level are working to impart some of the “tricks of the trade,” as well as hoping to inspire the kind of willingness to “improve” described by Scholes. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Scholes’ emphasis on craftiness is at the expense of the personal responses of students, ‘personal’ referring to the immediate, often keenly felt articulations of students for whom texts relate to aspects of their intellectual and emotional lives. To put the question directly, and as if addressing a group of secondary and tertiary English teachers: are we attempting to develop “crafty readers” or “creative readers”, which is to say readers engaged with developing a critical (and perhaps measurable) skillset or those capable of reading with more subjective (or personal) priorities?

The majority of English teachers would no doubt claim that they are looking for a balance, encouraging skill development whilst also supporting personal engagement with texts. This may well be the case, but there are tensions beneath the surface. For instance, while the changes introduced through Curriculum 2000 were intended to render explicit the criteria by which English literature at A-level was assessed, Anne Barnes (2001), Gary Snapper and Paul Nightingale have all “noted teachers’ antipathy to the AOs” (Assessment Objectives) (Nightingale, 2007, pp. 136–137), on the basis that the changes would “constitute a tokenistic and superficial approach to knowledge of the social and historical contexts of set texts” (Snapper, 2007, p. 111). At the same time, Nightingale argues that “changes to English studies within HE have left school English unmoved” (2007, pp. 136–137), leading to a widening gap between the academic demands of A-level and higher education English literature studies. For Atherton, the complexity of this situation, and the diversity of arguments proposed, “invites a much more sustained examination of what the discipline of English literature involves: of what it is that teachers mean when they refer to the study of ‘English’” (2006, p. 66). This article concentrates on the challenges faced by both undergraduate students and their teachers when taking the compulsory ‘Practical Criticism’ paper (part 1, paper 1) as part of the English Tripos at the University of Cambridge. As such, it accepts Atherton’s invitation, taking the “study of ‘English’” to mean (at its broadest) the practice of students as they develop their own critical voices through the study of literary texts, whilst also acknowledging the fact that “the benchmarking statement for English in higher education recognises the ‘diverse pedagogical approaches and intellectual emphases’ that the subject encompasses (QAA, 2000: paragraph 1.4)” (Atherton, 2006, p. 67). Having said this, and in the spirit of beginning a “more sustained examination of what the discipline of English literature involves” (Atherton, 2006, p. 66), there are two further questions to pose to my imagined secondary and tertiary English teachers: first, can the pedagogical approaches and intellectual emphases be too diverse; and second, what are the implications of such diversity for students?

2. Practical Criticism

Dating back to the experiments conducted by I.A. Richards at the University of Cambridge throughout the 1920s, ‘practical criticism’ is a discipline that prioritises attention to the ‘words on the page’ when engaging in literary study, as opposed to

relying on established critical consensus, historical context or pre-conceived beliefs. Students were encouraged to submit written responses sensitive to the various threads of meaning within texts, as well as the complexity of their own personal responses; Richards' second aim for the study was to "provide a new technique for those who wish to discover for themselves what they think and feel about poetry" (1929, p. 3). Richards' influence was pervasive, although there was considerable disagreement amongst several of his former students regarding the best way forwards for the practice. William Empson transformed the activity into the basis for an entire critical method, publishing *Seven Types of Ambiguity* in 1930, while in F.R. Leavis's hands, close reading became a moral activity "in which a critic would bring the whole of his sensibility to bear on a literary text and test its sincerity and moral seriousness" (University of Cambridge, English Faculty website, 2013).

It is hardly surprising that practical criticism continues to stimulate debate, not least, as John Lennard writes, because it remains "a compulsory paper in most English Literature A-levels and Scottish Highers," as well as "most undergraduate courses" in universities throughout the UK (1996, p. xiii). At both secondary and tertiary level, close reading is a key component of the study of literature; in the QCA's document, *English: The National Curriculum for England*, Assessment Objective 3 (AO3) requires students to "show detailed understanding of the ways in which writers' choices of form, structure and language shape meanings" (1999, paragraph 5.4), while the QAA insist that university students demonstrate "critical skills in the close reading and analysis of texts" (2000, paragraphs 3.1 and 3.2). At the University of Cambridge, the 'Practical Criticism' paper is intended to encourage "reflective and close reading of individual texts", indeed a kind of reading which "dwells upon the artistry of particular passages and that artistry's implications, or which (in the case of more discursive works) examines those works' arguments and rhetoric" (University of Cambridge, English Faculty website, 2013).

The innovations of the Cambridge school were so far-reaching that, in 1983, Terry Eagleton argued that "English students in England today are 'Leavisites' whether they know it or not" (1996, p. 31), a claim that Ben Knights acknowledges was, "at the time, hardly an exaggeration" (2005, p. 38). By 1999, Robert Eaglestone had observed a change:

Doing English now means looking at issues such as postcolonialism, different forms of feminism and philosophical and historical approaches to literature [...] Until recently, A-level has been very resistant to these changes. The list of set texts is slightly wider, but the form, content and assumptions behind the questions is very much the same (1999, p. 4).

Practical criticism was no longer necessarily at the center of literary studies, as it had been, for example, for Craig Morris, who remembered that his “first experience of practical criticism was [...] as a Year 12 pupil writing regular ‘prac. crit’ essays” (2006, p. 161). Instead, Eaglestone implies, students were being increasingly exposed to a variety of theoretical approaches with the intention of encouraging them to move beyond their own personal responses to the ‘words on the page’. By placing the text within a range of theoretical and historical contexts, the students were asked to contextualise their own responses, balancing their personal reading of the text (the ways in which the text was significant to them as an individual reader) with an appreciation of the text’s wider implications.

Curriculum 2000 was intended to assist further with this transition. Writing with reference to the 2003 study of Hodgson and Spours, Snapper claims:

Following a period in which the curriculum had been strongly influenced by the reactionary right-wing Centre for Policy Studies, Curriculum 2000 was to encourage greater breadth of study for A-level students, provide a more flexible and accessible system, and formulate a balanced, modern, challenging and skills-based curriculum which took into account both the needs of students and the requirements of universities and employers (Hodgson & Spours, 2003) (2007, p. 110).

Unfortunately, some teachers “found the whole thing a threat to ‘personal response’ and Leavisite modes of study,” believing, as I have already mentioned, that the changes would “constitute a tokenistic and superficial approach to knowledge of the social and historical contexts of set texts” (Snapper, 2007, p. 111). Nevertheless, despite the disagreements, teachers on both sides of the debate were agreed that A-level English Literature needed to change: “both were opposed to a traditional cultural heritage model of the course; both recognised the dangers of transmission modes of pedagogy, and the limitations of the terminal examination in drawing out genuine response” (Snapper, 2007, p. 113).

In fact, Snapper's turn of phrase draws attention to one of the most recurrent issues raised when addressing the role of practical criticism in literary studies, which is to say, the difficulty of "drawing out genuine response" from students, rather than relying on transmitted knowledge and what I.A. Richards described as "*Stock Responses*" (1929, p. 15). Describing his methods, Richards observed: "After a week's interval I would collect these comments, taking certain obvious precautions to preserve the anonymity of the commentators, since only through anonymity could complete liberty to express their genuine opinions be secured for the writers" (1929, p. 3). Richards found that at times the responses he received could be rather disconcertingly genuine. He records the following response to poem IV:

4.61. As

(1) I am only 19.

(2) I have never been in love

(3) I do not know what a dog-rose is.

(4) I consider that spring has no rapture.

(5) ----- the alliteration is bad and unnecessary.

(6) ----- the symbolism utterly worthless.

I will declare the whole poem to be sentimental rubbish. More detailed criticism would be foolish and futile. One reading gave me this opinion.

I never hope to read it again.

This excerpt, and there are a number of similar examples throughout Richards' book, prompts further questions. What is the relationship between a 'personal' response to a text and a 'genuine' response? What is inherently 'genuine' about the act of close reading, as opposed to, say, a feminist or post-colonial reading of a text? If the limitations of the responses above are neither a result of their personal nature nor their genuineness, then what is the issue? In what ways are they lacking?

In practice, and to take a very specific example, I have found that students are often faced with such questions when discussing the use of personal pronouns in their own critical writing. In a surprisingly large number of cases, students admit confusion as to whether they should use either the first person singular or the first person plural when expressing their opinions in critical essays, the latter generally being favoured (and encouraged in schools) because it creates a sense of 'objectivity'. However, this

decision is not simply a matter of stylistic taste, as some students have been led to believe. Rather, it points to several fundamental tensions within literary criticism, and in particular the degree of ‘personal’ response desired in a critical essay. David Bleich argues that “[s]ubjective criticism” is a “part of a major intellectual shift of assumptions that has been growing in our century and that has substantially affected almost every major branch of knowledge” (1976, p. 455). Yet as Morris remembers it, practical criticism was actually intended “to develop the fundamental skill of close, rigorous, and what was assumed to be objective, analysis” (2006, p. 161). Morris’s identification of the assumptions inherent to this approach implies skepticism regarding the objectivity of practical criticism, while he also points to a common assumption made about the practice, often articulated metaphorically in the language of law: by reading closely, you are able to gather ‘evidence’ and as such you can ‘put your case’ more strongly.

3. A Personal Response?

This tension between objective and subjective reading has also been discussed in terms of the uniqueness of the act of reading and so the difficulty of agreeing upon an interpretation. Louise Rosenblatt writes:

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 (1978, pp. ix, 14).

It is precisely this kind of thinking to which Martindale and Dailey were responding when they returned to Richards’ experiment and came to the conclusion that “[i]f [his] data were anything like ours, one can only conclude that he completely misinterpreted them” (1995, p. 299). They recognise that for “deconstructionist theorists, such as J. Hillis Miller (1977), disagreement is a natural consequence of the indeterminacy or lack of stable meaning of texts”, while for “reader-reception theorists, such as Iser (1978) or Fish (1980), lack of agreement is ascribed to the fact that texts are underdetermined” (1995, p. 299). In positioning themselves against such arguments, Martindale and Dailey offer a reminder that “people in fact agree quite well in their

interpretations of literary texts” (1995, p. 308). This in turn takes us back to the necessary balance between craftiness and creativity mentioned at the outset of this article: a theoretical position is required that accommodates both the unique nature of the reader’s experience of the text, as well as the fact that they are not the text’s only (possible) reader, while the text itself was produced within its own social, historical and intellectual moment.

In a classroom filled with multiple differences of opinion, it is helpful for a teacher to bear in mind what Richards describes as the “*plain sense* of poetry” (1929, p. 13). In these terms, the study concluded by Martindale and Dailey is valuable because it is a quantitative reminder that readers are not isolated within their own personal responses: there are basic building blocks of meaning which can be agreed upon when developing interpretations. And yet failure to agree upon a poem’s “*plain sense*” is often a major stumbling block within the classroom. Richards writes:

First must come the difficulty of *making out the plain sense* of poetry.

The most disturbing and impressive fact brought out by this experiment is that a large proportion of average-to-good (and in some cases, certainly, devoted) readers of poetry frequently and repeatedly *fail to understand it*, both as a statement and as an expression. They fail to make out its prose sense, its plain, overt meaning, as a set of ordinary, intelligible, English sentences, taken quite apart from any further poetic significance (1929, pp. 13–14).

Despite alterations to the curriculum and advances in teacher training, many of the observations made by Richards remain all too familiar. Indeed, Richards’ assessment has been corroborated by Kenneth Bennett, who found that “[m]any of the same problems uncovered by Richards still crop up in contemporary classrooms,” the most “obvious” of which is “the inability to make out the prose sense of a poem, sometimes even a fairly simple poem” (1977, p. 571). In my own experience as a teacher of practical criticism, the struggle to agree upon “*plain sense*” when confronted by a literary text is certainly familiar.

Following his attempt to reproduce Richards’ experiments, Bennett notes that “[d]uring the course of the discussions on the thirteen poems, the students were forced to defend their judgments in a more serious and logical fashion than most critical discussions ever demand” (1977, p. 577). This is a side effect of sorts, at least in the

sense that Richards does not explicitly identify it as one of the results of his method, yet within a classroom context it is undoubtedly of the utmost value. Bennett goes on to argue:

[F]or students, experiencing Richards' method is more important than simply reading him, however valuable that is, [as both] students and teachers can learn much not only about criticism but about poetry, aesthetic values, and even themselves through this essentially simple but very effective technique (1977, p. 578).

Learning to evaluate and assess the "reasoning" of other readers is central to the activity of literary criticism, just as central, it might be argued, as the practice of reading primary texts (Bennett, 1977, p. 577). In experiencing Richards' method, both students and teachers encounter the differentness of other readers' "reasoning" as they are encouraged to explain their own responses within the context of a conversation (Bennett, 1977, p. 577).

To return to Lennard, rather than being "a critical theory, to be taught alongside psychoanalytical, feminist, Marxist, and structuralist theories" (1996, p. xiii), practical criticism might be better understood as a foundational 'craft', a skill through which readers can explore texts. This is how Lennard approaches the activity, arguing: "I do not believe that a craft-based practical criticism is either incompatible with or opposed to theoretical approaches; but rather, that it is a helpful precursor of them all, a foundation course in reading". In short, as far as he is concerned, what is to be taught is the "value and uses of the tools of the poet's trade: and knowing that makes it clear that the method must be their itemization, description, and demonstration" (1996, p. xiv). There is merit to such a position, but Lennard's approach also leads to one of the most common problems that I have experienced as a practical criticism teacher: the tendency of students to write essays containing a series of technical observations with little attempt being made to place those observations within the context of a wider 'argument' or 'reading'. As Bennett puts it, "[w]hen confronted with a poem, students are apt to think that they must first try to scan it, and if they can determine that the meter is trochaic trimeter that it means they have unlocked the secret of the poem" (1977, p. 571).

Lennard argues that the "problem" is to find a way to avoid "losing the richness and diversity of thought which, at its best, practical criticism can foster; or, to

put it another way, what are the basics? and how may they be taught?” (1996, p. xiii). I would certainly agree with the first part of Lennard’s statement, acknowledging that one challenge facing teachers of practical criticism is to communicate the rich potential of close reading, but Lennard’s rephrasing (“or, to put it another way”) masks a simplification: the “richness and diversity of thought” fostered by practical criticism amounts to more than “the basics”, which are later defined by Lennard as “an understanding of, and an ability to judge, the elements of a poet’s craft” (1996, p. xiii). In Lennard’s hands, practical criticism is an act of appreciation, and while Bennett is correct in his assessment that “few [students] are able to go that far without faltering”, he is also correct to note that “simple accuracy in determining traditional verse forms therefore receives in the classroom applause all out of proportion to its merit” (1977, p. 571). To borrow Richards’ phrase, we are in danger of developing generations of “surface-gazers” (1929, p. 67).

As such, the kind of reading advocated by Lennard is undoubtedly important but it can only take a reader so far. Moreover, and as Morris notes, such an approach does a disservice to Richards’ innovations:

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; Morris’ 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’ (2006, p. 165).

The challenge facing teachers of practical criticism, at either secondary or tertiary level, is to encourage students to appreciate this “shift of focus,” to provide them with the skills necessary to make both ‘genuine’ and ‘personal’ responses, including enough attention to detail and linguistic nuance to support their own ‘reading’. Students need to be encouraged to describe not simply the workings of the text from a distance, but the complex interactions between themselves (as readers) and the texts before them.

4. The Role of the Teacher

Richards would not have been surprised that the challenges presented by his experiments were ultimately pedagogical. He had, as Morris (2006) puts it, “equal faith in teaching” and his practical criticism experiment was intended to be a means of developing teaching practice (p. 165). Morris continues:

‘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. (1964, p. 3) (2006, p. 165).

If, as Green claims, “[p]edagogic practices need to take account not only of the content learning of courses, but also of students’ needs in learning to learn” (2007, p. 126), then it is also important to acknowledge the extent to which those pedagogic practices depend upon literary critical scholarship: pedagogic practices are positioned along the very fault-lines that run through the heart of literary studies as an academic discipline. Moreover, there are a number of significant challenges facing both teachers and students within a practical criticism class, which despite appearing amongst the most self-evident of literary critical activities, is in reality amongst the slipperiest and most perplexing of courses available to students.

Green is clear that the “data demonstrate” the fact that “most students do not expect university English to be the same as A-level English,” instead expecting “new challenges and demands.” Furthermore, “[c]oming to terms with these demands may be a difficult, even a painful process for students, but it also represents a useful rite of passage into academia” (2007, p. 125). The shift in demands, coupled with an increased emphasis on the student to take responsibility as an adult learner, may be a challenge but it is not in and of itself a problem. However, having said this, and as Green explains, teachers have a greater responsibility to appreciate the difficulty of this transition:

The foregoing discussion is evidently not meant to suggest that intervention by university teaching staff is unnecessary. On the contrary, staff input into coming to terms with the cognitive,

metacognitive and paradigmatic shifts intrinsic to the transition from school to university is essential (2007, pp. 125–126).

Unfortunately, as Green demonstrates, such “staff input” is all too rare: despite “awareness of the changing nature of students emerging from A-level study,” “41% of lecturers responding indicated that there had been little change, and 53% that there had been no change in their pedagogic practice” (2007, p. 129). As correct as Nightingale may have been to suggest that “changes to English studies within HE have left school English unmoved” (2007, pp. 136–137), the reverse could also be argued. Are teachers at tertiary level as attentive as they could be to the difficulties of transition? Are they as informed as they could be regarding the variety of environments from which students are coming? Are they willing to alter their “pedagogic practice” in order to support the needs of their students?

This is not to suggest that sole responsibility should be placed on the shoulders of tertiary level teachers, many of who are undoubtedly excellent at guiding students through their university studies. Nightingale notes that “the expectations of HE teachers do not match those of A-level teachers” (2007, p. 139), suggesting that tertiary teachers may have different standards in class, and outcomes in mind, when interacting with their students. In Green’s opinion, one point of difference can be identified quite clearly as the absence of Assessment Objectives at university level, for “[m]any students have a highly pragmatic view of study predicated on assessment” and some students acknowledge “that they struggle to define their studies without the structuring Assessment Objectives that hold sway at A-level and delineate students’ experiences of English” (2007, p. 124).

This is not to say that Assessment Objectives at tertiary level are the answer, although it is of course important for universities to be clear when articulating the criteria according to which they will examine students, but rather to note that students feel the loss of Assessment Objectives keenly, even if those same Objectives are actually detrimental to their development. Ballinger expands upon this idea, observing that while “A-level is obviously goal-orientated, with students being taught how to fulfill the relevant criteria,” there should be “room for ‘intellectual free play’ within its parameters,” which will in turn “help students prepare for the more independent thinking they will need when completing their degrees” (2003, p. 107).

However, the assumption that A-level is conservative and “goal-orientated” in contrast to the ““intellectual free play”” valued at university level is itself a simplification. Green is right to remind us that the “study of English at A-level is not and never can be the same as the study of English in higher education” (2007, p. 124). In other words, and as I suggest above, the transition itself may not be the problem, so much as the confusing and contradictory demands made (often implicitly) of students. Lennard observes:

[T]eachers at school and (if they go on to read English) at university may contradict one another, and too rarely seem to put the problem of differing viewpoints and frameworks for analysis in perspective; important aspects of the subject are often omitted in the confusion; and as a result many students who are otherwise more than competent have little or no idea of what they are being asked to do (1996, p. xiii).

Having an understanding as to what you “are being asked to do” is not the same as pining for the safety of Assessment Objectives, nor can it be too much to ask for a teacher to present “the problem of differing viewpoints and frameworks for analysis” in such a way as to empower students and demonstrate the richness and diversity of the field. As most teachers would probably acknowledge, a great deal comes down to *how* you teach rather than *what* you teach.

In my experience as a study skills teacher, working with students who are struggling to adjust to undergraduate courses at the University of Cambridge, this is a recurrent cause for concern amongst those students wrestling with practical criticism: having recently and informally asked a group of students if they were clear what they were doing in practical criticism classes, their response was that “it depends on who your teacher is” and that this is “the big problem.” Knights has cautioned that very often the development of practical criticism skills requires as “a necessary stage” the “interpellation of the student or learner through a practice of critical apprenticeship” (2005, p. 41). In the words of some of my students, this manifests itself as a tendency for practical criticism to become a ‘greatest hits’ course in which the teacher discusses material with which he or she is very familiar. Practical criticism then becomes, as Leavis himself was aware, a “specialized kind of gymnastic skill” (Leavis, 1975, p. 16). Teachers encourage students to develop readings of texts in line with their own; the student-apprentice learns to ape the tics of the teacher-mentor.

5. Implications for Future Research

It could be argued that it is right and proper for a student to use their teacher's reading habits as a model when developing their own interpretations, and it could also be added that a teacher will inevitably teach familiar material with greater confidence and insight. Yet this ought to be balanced by an explicit acknowledgement (on the teacher's part) that the students should develop their own readings (and ways of reading). Morris observes:

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 (2006, p. 168).

Within the context of a practical criticism class, the balance of power remains all too often weighted in the direction of the teacher, while students are often content to make either local observations about the text, in the hope that the teacher will 'put it together', or else very general comments along the lines of the "'This poem makes me feel sad' school of literary criticism" (Bickley, 2000, also cited in Atherton, 2006, p. 68). Unlike Leavis, for whom "literary and cultural judgements" were of primary importance, Richards emphasised the particularity of a reader's response, coupled with the possibility of developing that response, that is to say, the possibility of learning to read in a more nuanced or sensitive manner. Indeed, in this respect, and with the writing of Heidegger (2010) in mind, close reading is a tool of undoubted potential: if 'text' is taken more loosely as an artwork, then Richards' method could be applied as productively to Picasso's *Guernica* or Beethoven's 9th Symphony as it has been to Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, with the personal response of each viewer or listener being developed as a result of close attention to the details of the piece before them.

Looking forward, there are a number of possible studies that could be conducted to pick up on some of the questions raised thus far, including small scale studies based on deriving qualitative evidence from both students and teachers

working at the University of Cambridge. However, at the moment, the area in which I am most interested involves the relationship between the manner in which we teach our students to read, and the impact that this has on their writing. In *The Crafty Reader*, Scholes distinguishes between “crafty readers” and “virtuoso readers, who produce readings that are breathtakingly original.” Indeed he even claims that “the more original these readers become, the less they remain readers”; their “readings become new works, writings, if you will, for which the originals were only pretexts, and those who create them become authors” (2001, pp. xiii–xiv). This corresponds to Roland Barthes’ distinction between readerly texts and writerly texts (1975), in which the writerly text encourages a plurality of interpretations.

One question worth reflecting upon is if, in the cases of texts where “readings become new works,” it is because of the potential offered by the text or as a result of the creativity of its readers (Scholes, 2001, p. xiv)? Certainly, where Scholes emphasises craftiness, I would like to re-assert the importance of creativity, which is a term that Scholes addresses fleetingly. I would like to suggest that a ‘creative’ reader could be understood as a reader attentive to the various possibilities within a text – that is to say, a reader able to imagine readings alternative to their own, deriving those readings (it could be said) from their crafty reading skills. Finally, and having said all of this, I am also conscious of the fact that such creativity is a result of the potential of the text: put simply, some texts accommodate more creativity than others.

It is my view that teachers of practical criticism should help students to develop tools to articulate their responses to the texts before them, while in doing so encouraging them to reflect upon their critical activities, interrogating the assumptions and values intrinsic to the practice. In other words, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the challenge for teachers is to make the learning experience genuinely student-centered. Green writes:

In stating that they expect students to develop individual and personal responses to texts and theory, however, we must question how far teachers of English genuinely seek to develop individualism and autonomy, and how far they rather require students to conform to pre-established programmes, norms and expectations (2007, p. 127).

This statement applies as equally to tertiary education as it does to secondary. Moreover, in terms of pedagogical practice, the task of the teacher could be

understood as follows: “What is first required of a teacher in order to raise fundamental questions about interpretative knowledge is to keep asking how we know what we say we know” (Bleich, 1976, p. 458). Practical criticism enhances a student’s core skills as a reader, their ability to read ‘craftily,’ encouraging them to articulate their own responses with clarity and nuance. However, at its most effective it also inspires them to read with creativity, to imagine and appreciate the various possibilities held both within and without a text. Such ‘creative’ reading will help students to develop the subtlety of their own readings, but it will also help them as they learn to take their place within a community of readers, reflecting upon the diversity of “what we say we know” and assessing the opinions of those around them.

Finally, Scholes’ suggestion that creative readers become authors, springboarding from the “pre-texts” to their own creations, also perhaps raises the question of the types of *writers* we might be attempting to develop in our classrooms. For me, this has prompted an engagement with a less obvious, but no less fascinating area of study, that of “a/r/tographic” research. As Patricia Leavy writes, in a/r/tographical work, “A/r/t is a metaphor for artist-researcher-teacher” (2009, p. 7) and as such is a way of pointing to the complexity of identities, to the “*third space*” or “in-between” spaces occupied as part of practice (Pinar, 2004, p. 7).

This type of work might open the possibility of enquiring further into the experiences of teachers and students, exploring the degree to which tertiary education might have something to learn from the teaching practice and research produced in other educational areas. It might also attend to the moments when both teachers and students feel themselves to be either a crafty or creative reader (or writer). It might also reinforce the extent to which the ivory tower of academia, which is to say the scholarly practice of reader-writers, both influences and is influenced by the voices and perceptions of the specific student reader-writers with whom they are in conversation. And ultimately this may even begin to verge upon an ethical argument, for it is perhaps simply a reminder that we, as teachers, are attempting to assist particular students to learn to both read and write as unique individuals.

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