



TWO CONTRASTING APPROACHES TO TEACHING LITERATURE

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The first part of this paper will compare and contrast a text-oriented approach to teaching literature with a reader-oriented approach, namely New Criticism with Reader-Response theories. This could be argued to set up a dichotomy (at the risk of being reductive) between Britton's spectator and participant role. To conjure an image, New Criticism involves the excavation of solidified, intrinsic meaning while Reader-Response involves the active *production* of meaning, thus transforming the reader from *object* or receptor of text's meaning to a *subject* or constituter of it.

New Criticism disapproves of what are termed the *affective fallacy* and the *intentional fallacy* in traditional analyses of texts. The term affective fallacy stigmatizes interpretive procedures which take into account the emotional reaction of the reader. New Criticism does away with the use of ungrounded subjective emotional responses caused by lyrical texts as an analytical 'tool'. In order to maintain an objective stance, the critic must focus solely on textual idiosyncrasies. The term intentional fallacy is applied by interpretive methods which try to recover the original intention or motivation of an author while writing a particular text. Hence the aim of New Criticism is the analysis of a text based solely on the text's intrinsic dimensions.

A precursor of New Criticism was the work of I.A. Richards, who developed the approach known as Practical Criticism. According to practical critics, the *what* and *how* of what is said in literary texts will be mutually supportive and attention is therefore devoted to showing how different formal techniques of writing serve to underscore or 'express' meaning. There is usually a discussion of *tone* and *balance*.



The practitioners of New Criticism took Richards' ideas further, particularly in developing in a more theoretical fashion the notion of the text as an object in itself without any necessary reference to its origins or history, or to the situation of the actual reader. They argued that the poem stands on its own, that is, a critical reading of it is not dependent on knowledge of its author or the circumstances of its writing or production; and second, that it is a unity in itself and cannot be reduced to paraphrase- or at any rate, that to paraphrase is a profoundly reductive exercise, in the process of which the true poem is lost. The unity of the poem seems, from this point of view, to be an undisputed given, and the critics' task is to show how, often very precariously and with much difficulty, this unity is achieved in the poem by means of paradox, ambiguity and irony; these are poetic devices of tension, which, when skilfully deployed, produce a sense of delicately achieved balance. The *a priori* assumption of such a critical approach is that the literary text is a coherent unity, which is produced by a kind of internal textual conflict leading to an internal textual resolution. New Critics raised the status of text as text, that is, significant in itself without reference to context, but together with this they implicitly rejected any concern with its social and ideological relations. In doing so, these practitioners failed to recognize their own ideological premises, which were fundamentally those of liberal humanism, together with the assumption that certain values are universal. This arguably instituted a certain Western hegemony in literature which is potentially alienating for local students. Hence this leads to the call for the revival of 'national', 'post-colonial' and 'world' literature in our curriculum.

In its analyses, New Criticism focuses on phenomena such as multiple meaning, paradox, irony, word-play, puns, or rhetorical figures, which, as the smallest distinguishable elements of a literary work- form interdependent links with the overall context. Pedagogically thus, a New Critical approach would entail close reading. It denotes the meticulous analysis of these elementary features, which mirror larger structures of a text. A famous example of New Critical analyses are a number of readings of John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn". In this poem, Keats describes an ancient vase whose round and self-contained form functions as a symbol for the closed unity of the ideal poem. A new critical interpretation therefore tries to explain the different metrical, rhetorical, stylistic and thematic features as partial aspects of the poems' unity. Among the formalist schools, New Criticism is particularly distinguished by the rigidity of its rules for textual analysis. In New Criticism, meaning



is a form objectively contained in the text and teachers should thus guide students towards *recovering* this form. Skills involved would be Neo's decoding skills, which involve recovering meaning from texts on two levels, the denotative meaning of texts ('making out the plain sense' – I.A. Richards) and the inference of connotative meaning through identifying unusual features of language use, observing patterns fore grounded in the text and noting the presence of technical devices. Carter and Long have noted that practical criticism and new criticism are highly teacher-centred approaches as there is no clear *method* to practical criticism; it being hard to discern *how* students learn how to work out for themselves the relationship between narrative form and literary meaning. As such students fall into the trap of trying to learn the judgements required of them or at least learn to play a critical game sufficiently well to pass an examination. This I think is true of many local literature students.

As a reaction to the dominant position of text-oriented New Criticism, a reader-oriented approach developed in the 1960s called Reception Theory, Reader-Response Theory or Aesthetics of Reception. All three terms are used almost synonymously to summarize those approaches which focus on the reader's point of view. Some of these approaches do not postulate a single objective text, but rather assume that there are as many texts as readers. This attitude implies that a new individual 'text' evolves with every individual reading process.

With the focus on the effect of a text on the recipient or reader, reception theory is obviously opposed to New Criticism's dogma of *affective fallacy*, which demands an interpretation free of subjective contributions by the reader. In contrast to the New Critics who focused primarily on the text as an object, Reader-Response critics were interested in the relation between reader and text. They also examine certain reading practices of social, ethnic or national groups. They examined, often in minute detail, both the relationship between text and reader in terms of the process required by a particular text, and the place of the reader as the interpreter of the text. First they wanted to find out, by close examination of particular texts, how the reader is 'implied' or constructed by the text itself, and second, how real people read texts (the reading process) and what they make of them (the interpretation). To some extent developments in reader response criticism reflected the broad move in the sciences and social sciences away from the myth of objectivity towards the recognition that the observer (or reader) is inescapably involved and has an effect on that which he or she observes.



Wolfgang Iser tried to show how the text actually forces readers into becoming active, into creating the text that they are reading, arguing that every text contains numerous gaps, omissions and what he calls indeterminacies, where the reader has to fill in the gap or interpret what is indeterminant.

A more radical view of the role of the reader was developed by Stanley Fish. His argument is that meaning lies, not in the text, but in the reader, that we should be concerned with the structure of the reader's experience rather than any structures available on the page. His view is that a poem does not possess its meaning immanent to itself, but that the reader may read out of it whatever meanings he wishes. Taken to the logical extreme, this seems like a recipe for interpretative anarchy; Fish, however, sets some boundaries to this dizzying prospect of endlessly multiplying interpretations by positing the notion of the interpretive community. In terms of our pedagogic situation, we could take Fish's view of interpretive community to mean the group of students in any classroom. That is to say, we are not seeking to encourage a solipsistic individualism in reading, but to develop individual responses, followed by a sharing and to some extent an accommodation of our varying interpretations.

The Reader-Response approach has empowered the reader and entailed a paradigm shift from a teacher-centred to student-centred pedagogy. No longer could students' individual responses to texts be considered 'mnemonic irrelevancies,' as I.A. Richards had claimed. Instead, the reader was the creator of meaning through a 'never to be duplicated transaction' between the reader and the text. As Appleman notes, "knowledge of the text was still important, but personal knowledge seemed in many cases to be privileged over textual knowledge". Teachers relate textual experiences to students' personal experiences by spending time finding personal hooks into texts with questions to open literature discussions that began, "Have you ever...?" At the same time she warns of dangers to a wholesale adoption of such an approach, such as the approach being rather limiting in trivializing the importance of real differences that exist between the students' world and the world of the text. Appleman quotes Pirie who warns against valorising individual responses in the literature classroom as the focus on individuals is reductive and does not acknowledge the contextual factors that help make us individuals. An advantage I note over New Criticism however is that Reader-Response is an arguably post-humanist approach that opens up a space for the expression of *difference* in



interpretation and liberates meaning by rendering it more fluid, no longer a fixed entity or secret to be unlocked by analyzing internal structure but something to be created and supplemented by the reader. A shift from foreclosure and uniformity in approaches to reading to open-ness and multiplicity has been made. This also has implications for inter-cultural or trans-cultural readings as the reader's situation, ideology and background can now be taken into account. Beaugrande notes that working in Asia with Singaporeans has confronted him with unfamiliar responses to well-known texts. For instance, in T.S. Eliot's Morning at the Window, which, to him conjures up images of foggy London, the line about 'a passerby to muddy skirts' led several respondents to visualize the situational setting as a rural Asian village. Reader-Response pedagogy allows for such *difference* as indeterminacy in meaning is presupposed.

I would thus argue for a balance between efferent and aesthetic readings in Rosenblatt's terms. However, as Marcia Liu notes teaching literature in the local context exerts certain constraints on teachers. Teaching tends towards a didactic approach where literature lessons tend to be largely a form of lecture, with pupils called on to supply information on plot and character. Literature becomes comprehension at best, and history at worst, due to the exam-oriented nature of the system which places emphasis on quantifiable results. This is due to teachers succumbing to the system and the belief that the 'safest' way to achieve grades is to guide students towards a 'correct' reading of the text, thus veering towards the Formalist approach. If teachers are to do justice to the current spirit of literature that celebrates deconstructive and contextual readings or informed personal response however, they would do well to bring Reader-Response approaches back into the picture or at least inject a balance between teacher-centred and student-centred approaches into their pedagogy.

Part II:

The first book I will review is Teaching Literature 9 to 14, by Benton, M and Fox, G. I will be addressing the teaching of narrative fiction. The three main requirements I will be considering are language ability, cultural knowledge, attitude and aptitude for literature. The first approach they propose is the transmission approach, which is heavily teacher-centred and lecture style, where personal response is minimized. Pragmatically speaking, in the context of many neighbourhood schools where the language capabilities of students are weak, it is a realistic choice as this approach



prioritizes comprehension, which is indeed what many of these weaker students struggle with. However in this model 'appropriate response' is prioritized (thus bearing formalist undertones) and may alienate brighter and more precocious students.

Next is the thematic approach which is interdisciplinary in identifying certain subjects in the novel taught and illuminating such subjects to deepen understanding of the novel; for instance lines from Seamus Heaney's 'Trout' might be included in a project on 'River Creatures'. As the authors themselves qualify, this may reduce fiction or poetry to resource material or textbooks in thin disguise. Yet considering cultural barriers that students face when confronted with western or canonical texts, as seen in the idiosyncratic responses to the Eliot poem mentioned in the first section, this may again help to render literature more accessible.

Third is the 'springboard' approach which involves enrichment activities such as a wide range of talking, writing, music, drama and work in the visual arts arising from the novels. The authors argue that such an approach may distract students' attention from the text itself and does not foster a response to the text, and recommend such activity being deferred until textual comprehension is strong. These are pertinent doubts, but I would think that such activities would serve to stimulate interest in a text bringing it alive, introducing other dimensions to interpretation and presentation, while also catering to students who may be less academically inclined and more aesthetically or musically gifted. This is where the attitude and aptitude factor applies. When students dread literature or are intimidated by it, such an approach may well do wonders for student motivation.

The second book I shall review is Teaching Literature in the secondary school by Beach, R.W. & Marshall, J.D. Firstly, they propose a textual perspective to novel teaching. This involves teaching students to define how the separate parts of a text are related to its overall form and overall meaning. They recommend the keeping of student logs for tracking development and their response to these developments, deciphering the meaning of events for themselves. Teachers then guide students towards inferring motivation for events by drawing knowledge from personal experience or general knowledge. In my opinion, this is a very teleological approach that best suits the realist novel. It presupposes linearity in plot and character development as well as progressiveness in the author's



craft that may be revealed upon investigation. It is quite student-centred however and applicable to a range of abilities, with the teacher providing greater or less scaffolding accordingly.

Second is the social perspective which involves getting students to define their social relationship with the novel as well as understand the social relationships among the characters. This involves getting students to articulate their responses to the novel by identifying or differentiating their experiences from the fictional world. Defining social relationships with the characters involves identifying and empathizing with characters or distancing and pronouncing judgement upon them. Again this is a very Reader-Response based approach, in allowing students to bring diverse personal experiences to bear upon reading. This is ideal for the literature classroom, provided students possess certain literacy competencies as much interpretive independence is presupposed. It is best pitched at keen and above average students. A space for multicultural perspectives is opened by allowing students room for identification or differentiation, and this is quite an advantage for students encountering foreign texts.

Thirdly is the cultural perspective which involves getting students to conceive of characters' development as shaped by social institutions that reflect and embody cultural values. This is quite Foucauldian with undertones of deconstruction. This approach would foreground ideologies and political tensions. I think it is best pitched at Junior College level as students would then be of sufficient maturity to appreciate ideological issues and cultural contexts that inform texts as well as deconstruct tensions between differing systems of value.

Finally is the topical perspective which involves getting students to apply what they know about certain topics or disciplines to their reading. This involves students assuming perspectives from multiple disciplines. This is quite inter-textual and presupposes a certain parallelism between our world and the fictional world in applying the lens of various professions; it assumes that the same rules apply. I think this approach has value as long as we assume that literature is Heideggerean in communicating messages to us about the 'everyday', but is potentially confining in super-imposing the assumptions of other disciplines such as psychology or history onto the text, thus undermining its 'literariness'. Also disciplines such as psychology and history tend to be considerably more scientific and empirical than literature, which is, after all, in the distinct sphere of 'art'. Again I think this



approach presupposes a certain maturity and competency in requiring students to draw insights from other disciplines to apply to the text. It should thus be pitched at above average students or Junior College level.

The following are strategies or adaptations which I think are appropriate for the local classroom. Firstly, I would recommend a language-based approach for weaker students where comprehension and grasp of an 'efferent' reading is the goal. This would involve a linear and structured approach, somewhat Formalist, to approaching the text. Worksheets that structure and guide response should be provided. Secondly I would recommend an activity based approach for classes who are lacking interest in the subject. Dramatic adaptations, recitals, musicals, artistic renditions would enliven the text for bored and struggling students who may be less verbally or linguistically intelligent than musical or artistic. Thirdly I recommend a contextual-studies approach for classes of above average competency. This would help render the text less humanist and absolute by specifying its socio-historical, politico-ideological and cultural background, making it a contingent entity; as such questions like 'Why is this relevant?' will hopefully fade into the background by making literature more of a window into other cultures and times. Fourthly I recommend a guided response-based approach similar to Beach's, allowing students to keep journals or draw concept maps that chart the progression of their response to the text with the caveat that it should be guided and scaffolded so that interpretive anarchy will not ensue as the students do have examinations to sit for after all. Finally I recommend the topical or inter-textual approach for students of sufficient capability as we do inhabit an increasingly post-modern and multicultural world with dissolving boundaries. This will also stimulate the interest of students who tend to read more non-fiction and are interested in other aspects of literature such as the politics or history involved. The level that these ideas are pitched at is from Secondary Four to Junior College.

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