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## Navigating Richards, Exploring Rosenblatt: Practical Criticism and Reader-Response

by

Robert J. Graham and Cathrine Wall

Although many teachers have come to associate Louise Rosenblatt's name with a "reader-response" approach to the teaching of literature, there is an equally vocal number who are beginning to express a certain frustration when it comes to translating Rosenblatt's ideas into both a defensible and workable classroom method. As Ben Nelms describes this trend, "our instincts as educators involve us in empowering students to move beyond the bounds of a narrow personalism in their responses to reading, to expand their repertory of response" (1993, p. 13). It seems that, like me, many teachers are torn; while my heart tells me that Rosenblatt's theory appears to make possible a more humane and student-centered approach to the study of literature, my head tells me we still want students to move beyond the narrowly personal. Faced with this dilemma, I believe English teachers would do well to revisit the term "reader-response" itself to see what is actually being invoked in Louise Rosenblatt's name. But as they do, I contend that another figure will loom just as large from out of the shadows of this inquiry. The name of I. A. Richards is very seldom, if ever, mentioned in the current pages of much of our professional literature, since his name has become irretrievably linked with New Criticism and all of its attendant ills. Yet although his name is scarcely mentioned, it is implied each time we evoke the term "New Criticism" as a catch-all category to denounce every practice in the English classroom that robs students of their voice. For example, Faust characterizes New Criticism as dictating "that English teachers cast their students as passive receivers of the wisdom 'contained' in literary masterpieces" (1992, p. 44). Having declared his allegiance to reader-response instead, Faust offers his version of the current dilemma:

No doubt, teaching students to be responsive readers was preferable to the passive, pseudo-analytical stance that for years had been drummed into my brain. Nonetheless, and for some time now, I have been searching for ways to extend my notion of responsive reading in order to better help students reflect upon and revise their reading (p. 45).

Now while at first glance it is tempting to cast Richards and Rosenblatt as warriors ranged against each other in this literary-theoretical battle, the image is too narrow to capture the many points of correspondence between these two figures and the models of teaching each has come to represent. For as I show, a close look at Richards' *Practical Criticism* will reveal how far we have strayed from his original conception of this then "new" approach to the teaching of literary interpretation. By failing to reflect on the many *similarities* between their two approaches, we thereby oversimplify the very complex relationship between reader and text that both Richards and Rosenblatt acknowledge. When we carry this over-simplification into the classroom, we limit our expectations of our students and their potential for social, emotional, and intellectual growth. For after we grant that there are clearly significant differences in their conceptions of the process when readers engage with literature, a close look at some key moments in both *Practical Criticism* and *Literature as Exploration* will reveal more areas of agreement between the two than many of us remember or might have expected. It is these areas of agreement that I will address here as a way of thinking through the current dilemma of moving students beyond the narrowly personal in order to help restore a sense of legitimacy to the study of literature in an era that perceives such study as increasingly unnecessary.

## Correct Understanding, Full Interpretation

In *Readings and Feelings*, David Bleich identifies I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* as "the first important modern study of literary response" (1975, p. 111). Drawing on hundreds of responses to poetry from his literature students at Cambridge, Richards compiled and analyzed them with "a view to advancing our knowledge of what may be called the natural history of human opinions and feelings" (1929, p. 6). Richards also saw his book as "prepar[ing] the way for educational methods more efficient than those we use now in developing discrimination and the power to understand what we hear and read" (p. 3). From the opening pages, his dual purpose is clear: he will examine "the art and science of intellectual and emotional navigation" (p. 11) through literature. As he charts this perilous journey through a painstaking analysis of students' responses to poetry, he hopes to illuminate those areas of danger for the reader and map a new territory for subsequent readers and teachers to follow. And as Louise Rosenblatt herself points out, Richards was one of the first to rescue "the literary work from being studied mainly as an historical or biographical document" (1983, p. xi). Until the advent of *Practical Criticism*, the study of poetry was not so much a discipline as it was an "appreciation," the text itself having little validity unless viewed in its historical or biographical context.

For Richards, his students' often desperate attempts to find meaning were all, ironically, detours or dead-ends caused by students' inability to let the poem itself guide them to their true destination. He organized these detours and dead-ends into ten categories: (1) failure to make out the plain sense of poetry, (2) difficulties of sensuous apprehension, (3) imagery, (4) mnemonic irrelevances, (5) stock responses, (6) sentimentality, (7) inhibition, (8) doctrinal adhesions, (9) technical presuppositions, and (10) general critical preconceptions. A perilous journey indeed. However, one point is evident when considering Richards' list: he expected that there was a true destination, or "a successful interpretation, a correct understanding" (p. 336) of the poems he offered for his students' consideration, or of any poem for that matter. Richards advocated a close reading of literature and the application of a "reasoned general technique for construing" (p. 313), a technique which would lead the reader to this correct understanding.

In this context, one can't help but compare the metaphor Rosenblatt employs to describe the process of a reader's transaction with literature to the navigational metaphor Richards uses. Instead of navigation, which implies the movement toward some clear and preordained destination, she uses the metaphor of exploration, "to suggest primarily that the experience of literature, far from being for the reader a passive process of absorption, is a form of intense personal activity" (1983, p. v). While both Richards and Rosenblatt conceived of an active and thoughtful interaction between the reader and the text, the term exploration connotes a certain freedom that the term navigation does not. According to Rosenblatt, there are as many "poems" as there are readers; for Richards there can only be one, and all readers can arrive at this true reading if they are trained to avoid the pitfalls he describes.

For example, in Chapter Four of *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt refers directly to some of Richards' ten categories to support her own point that "in the molding of any specific literary experience, what the student brings to literature is as important as the literary text itself" (1983, p. 82). Where Richards sees the reader's personal feelings and experiences primarily as roadblocks to understanding, though, Rosenblatt makes the point that a reader's "past experience and present preoccupations" may just as often "conduce to a full and balanced reaction to the work" (p. 79). She frames Richards' ten categories within a particular context that allows her to



discuss students' incomplete or distorted interpretations without invalidating their personal experiences and feelings:

Just as in medicine much of the knowledge about normal physiological processes is derived from the study of pathological conditions, so in literature understanding of what goes on when an individual reads a poem or a novel or a play is illuminated by study of the causes for inadequate responses (p. 106).

Richards, then, is the pathologist whose work points to the ways that students can misread a poem. But according to Rosenblatt, it does not follow that all the personal involvement with a poem constitutes a misreading. Her discussion of mnemonic irrelevances and stock responses helps to illustrate how closely she comes to agreeing with Richards without relinquishing her central point.

In *Practical Criticism*, Richards had defined mnemonic irrelevances as "misleading effects of the reader's being reminded of some personal scene or adventure, erratic associations, the interference of emotional reverberations from a past which may have nothing to do with the poem" (1929, p. 15). In *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt cites several examples from Richards' work and her own research to show how students had misunderstood "the idea or the effect that the poem was aiming at" (1983, p. 97). Even so, Rosenblatt points out that "the reader's fund of relevant memories makes possible any reading at all" (p. 81). She returns to this in her later work, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, when she rephrases Richards' term to affirm the value of "mnemonic relevances" (1978, p. 144, emphasis added) in the creation of meaning. The job of the reader is to be able to discriminate between those associations that are relevant and irrelevant to his or her evocation of a work of literature. It is a difficult and dynamic process according to both Richards and Rosenblatt and demands that the reader examine not only the text itself but his or her own emotional response to the text.

In the case of stock responses, we see again that the reader must attend not only to the text itself, but to the emotional triggers that the text may evoke. According to Richards, "these have their opportunity whenever a poem seems to, or does, involve views and emotions already fully prepared in the reader's mind, so that what happens appears to be more of the reader's doing than the poet's" (p. 15). Rosenblatt discusses how certain emotion-laden words like "home," "mother," or "my country" may "possess whole constellations of fixed attitudes and automatic emotional reflexes" (1983, pp. 97-98) that can color the reader's understanding of a particular work of literature. The reader's problem, according to Rosenblatt, "is to be aware of how much his [*sic*] own preconceptions enter into his interpretation" (p. 99). The job of the teacher is to help students "develop the flexibility of mind, a freedom from rigid emotional habits" (p. 104) which can prevent them from experiencing a full and meaningful transaction with literature. Any bias, attitude, or preconception a reader holds "should not be a screen between the reader and his evocation of the work" (p. 100). The distinction between Rosenblatt's discussion of stock responses and Richards' is, admittedly, a fine one. Where Richards seems to ask readers to guard against any personal feelings or attitudes that may obscure the meaning of a piece of literature, Rosenblatt sees a fruitful opportunity here for reflection on one's attitudes and values.

Throughout *Literature as Exploration*, even in her discussion of ways students can misread poetry, Rosenblatt never fails to celebrate the unique creation which results from the transactional reading experience. Never does she use the words "wrong," or "incorrect" to describe a misreading. Readings can be limited, distorted, or incomplete, but never wrong. Each one is a

“never-to-be-duplicated” (1983, p. 30) experience which she likens at the end of the book to a performance of music. Regardless of the skill or maturity of the reader, each reading is a performance of the reader’s transaction with literature. Yet one wonders how wide the margin is between Richards’ understanding of a “correct” interpretation and Rosenblatt’s understanding of a “full” and “complete” one. Perhaps it is mainly one of semantics. In *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt asserts that “though a free, uninhibited emotional reaction to a work of art or literature is an absolutely necessary condition of sound literary judgment, it is not ... a sufficient condition” (p. 75) because “[t]he student still needs to acquire the mental habits that will lead to literary insight, critical judgment, and ethical and social understanding” (p. 75). Those who see Rosenblatt’s theory as advocating that students respond to a text “any way at all” have missed this essential point. The work only begins here for both Rosenblatt and Richards. Or as Richards says, “We must cease to regard a misinterpretation as a mere unlucky accident. We must treat it as the normal and probable event” (p. 336).

### Means and Methods

Having seen how a reader’s first response to a work of literature is only a starting point in the process of interpretation, it remains for me to discuss the means and methods Richards and Rosenblatt advocate to move students to an acquisition of the mental habits that will lead to literary insight and critical judgment. Richards’ experimental model may give us an idea of the methods he advanced for the study of poetry. Once students had been given the anonymous and untitled poems, four at a time, they were allowed a week to read and respond to them. Richards suggested that his students give each poem more than one reading—“few gave less than four attacks to any of the poems and some gave up to a dozen” (1929, p. 4). Richards hoped for “a growing response to the poem” (p. 4) over these successive readings, and not simply a first reaction. The following week, Richards “lectured ... partly upon the poems, but rather more upon the comments” (p. 4) of his students. Judging from the samples provided in his book, the substance of these lectures consisted of a discussion of the ten categories of problems students encountered in their readings and ways these problems could be avoided through a close and careful reading of the poem. Much as we may now bridle at this aspect of his method, the main point is instructive: Richards used **the responses themselves** as the subject matter in his classes in order to illuminate for students the relationship between reader and text.

In the concluding summary of his book, Richards makes recommendations for the teaching of English based on his experiment. He suggests that “practice in such analysis could possibly lead to improvement in the capacity to discern” (p. 333), and he is quick to point out what he means and doesn’t mean by analysis: “Exercises in parsing and paraphrasing are not the kind of analyses I have in view” (p. 334). Rather, Richards proposes that we attempt to make “a systematic discussion of the forms of meaning and the psychology of understanding” (p. 334) part of our classroom method. Ultimately, he calls for “a closer study of meaning and of the causes of unnecessary misunderstanding” (p. 337). By “meaning,” Richards is referring to more than a literal understanding of a poem, although the first of his ten problems in criticism is the failure of students to “make out the plain sense” of a poem. A sound mastery of language would involve “systematic training in multiple definition” (p. 345), or the variable meanings words take on within the context of a poetic reading. Such systematic training would imply an understanding of the techniques and elements of poetic language, including imagery, form, and tone. Richards also insists that students must learn to put aside their presumptions about what poetry ought to do, the “critical preconceptions” which Richards says “intervene endlessly ... between the reader and the poem” (p. 17), and consider the poem itself.



We are by now familiar with some of the ways these recommendations were (mis)translated into classroom practice; for example, with the lecture format where the teacher performs a close reading at the front of the room, prodding students with questions whose answers have been predetermined by the teacher, to fill in the blanks, as it were, in the teacher's own reading. Or, teachers will "guide" students through a poem with a list of questions asking them to identify and discuss various poetic techniques employed in the poem. This is the "pseudo-analytical" approach that teachers decry when they think of New Criticism. Yet Richards did none of those things in his own classroom and we would maintain that the original intent of his training in practical criticism differs markedly from our understanding of and experience with, subsequent versions of New Critical practice. Ironically, the process in his Cambridge English classes was truly "new," exciting, and demanding of the reader: it called for an active and open discussion of the students' growing responses to poetry. And the poetry itself was a mixture of traditional and new work, none of the standard, oft-anthologized fare that students had come to expect in a literature class. At that time, then, Richards' practical criticism was indeed new: a deliberate break from tradition and a conscious breaking-free from the constraints imposed on the study of literature through its packaging into periods, styles, and genres, all in an attempt by Richards to bring about a closer connection between the reader and the poem. Consequently, I would argue that teachers might do well to emulate the spirit of newness inherent in Richards' practical criticism in our English classes today, and not abandon altogether the process of close reading/response he advanced because of its unfortunate association with the New Critics and the subsequent ends to which they used it.

In a similar vein, I believe Louise Rosenblatt's method of reader-response has been similarly misunderstood. When we look closely at what Rosenblatt says, both in *Literature as Exploration* and in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, we see that the methods she proposes have much in common with Richards', and although she expresses some serious misgivings about what New Criticism had become, she makes a careful distinction between the methods of the New Critics who invoked Richards to warrant their own practices, and Richards' own original ideas. As we have seen, the starting point for both Richards and Rosenblatt is the student's spontaneous response to literature. In *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt devotes much discussion to ways to set the stage for spontaneity of response in the classroom, first of all by precluding any predetermined response based on prior critical opinion of a work of literature. Like Richards, Rosenblatt cautions against telling students how to respond to a work or giving them any background on the author or period until the reader is actively engaged in the literature itself. She also advocates a break from the teaching of traditional, canonical material in the classroom in favor of literature more apt to elicit a genuine response from students. And, like Richards, she does not dictate the form students' initial responses should take. Once they have made their initial response, however, Rosenblatt becomes more directive, although perhaps not as directive as Richards. Her approach places much of the onus for modifying students' responses on the class itself. Through discussion between students either as a whole class or in smaller groups, they are led back to the text for confirmation or modification of their initial responses: "In the interchange of ideas the student will be led to compare his [*sic*] reactions with those of other students and of the teacher (later, if necessary, of established critics). He will see that a particular work may give rise to attitudes and judgments different from his own" (1983, pp. 78-79). Thus, "through a critical scrutiny of his response to literary works, he can come to understand his personal attitudes and gain the perspective needed for a fuller and sounder response to literature" (p. 108). This critical scrutiny, Rosenblatt maintains, "will suggest that perhaps he has not done justice to the text" and will need to "turn to it again" (p. 110).

Rosenblatt's conception of this process places the teacher in the role of a fellow responder in the interpretive community of the classroom. This position requires a special sensitivity on the part of the teacher to the dynamics of the classroom discussion, and it is primarily in this regard that Rosenblatt's ideas have been misunderstood. She does not promote a "hands off" approach by the teacher, and we will be seriously disillusioned with Rosenblatt's method if we expect the process to occur naturally without our direct involvement. Without telling readers what to think, our role is to direct them back to the corrective of the text itself: "... the reader's creation of a poem out of a text must be an active, self-ordering and self-corrective process. ... The text itself leads the reader toward this self-corrective process" (1978, p. 11). Is this not exactly what I. A. Richards was advocating?

For Rosenblatt, a reader can only do justice to the text by attending "closely" to the response that the text has evoked within him or her. This is perhaps her main quarrel with New Criticism. According to Rosenblatt, the New Critics who came after Richards failed to acknowledge the reader in the process of criticism. She takes pains to exempt Richards from this quarrel, however: "Ironically, the New Critics derived from Richards his high standards of interpretation, but in their effort to exorcise ... misreadings somehow focused on the text and ignored the reader" (1978, p. 63). And further, "I. A. Richards ... had indeed studied the performance of readers. The formalist critics, who set the dominant tone in the mid-century, rejected this interest and followed Richards mainly in developing their method of close literary analysis. But they insisted on 'the work itself' as a self-contained pattern of words, an autonomous structure of literary devices" (p. 3). In a sense, by reaffirming the vital role of the reader in the process of literary criticism, Rosenblatt is redressing the balance that Richards had originally struck.

### **Rescuing Readers for Democracy**

Richards and Rosenblatt both speak of the need for a close connection between the reader and the text in the creation of meaning. Anything that stands between the reader and the text lessens the validity and vitality of that experience. While Richards did much to clear away hindrances to this connection, the objective stance apparently required by close analysis can itself become a barrier between the reader and the text. Is there any way to achieve a close reading without adopting the objective or efferent stance? Both Richards and Rosenblatt recognize that such a stance is impossible to achieve, artificial when a semblance of such a stance is taken, and undesirable in any case. No discussion of poetry is valid unless it takes into account at every stage the genuine response of the reader. As Rosenblatt explains the process of close reading in a transactional context, it is possible to attend closely, not just to the words on the page, but to the actual poem as it is created in the transaction between reader and text. And within such a context there is much to discuss.

Neither I. A. Richards nor Louise Rosenblatt offer an easy formula for the teaching of literature, and any attempt to create such a formula is harmfully reductive. We cannot simply tell students what a text means, nor can we do the obverse and allow students the mistaken impression that a text can mean anything they want it to mean. Instead, we need to create opportunities for students to live through the experience of a close transaction with literature. We need to provide them with the tools to do this without hampering them with so much technique that we obstruct the very process we want to encourage. We need to foster opportunities for reading literature that will have value and relevance for our students; we need to allow time for reflection and thoughtful, open discussion, and above all, we need to affirm the value of this complex process for our students.



My final point of comparison between these two English teachers is the value each places on the unique and vital role literature can play in our students' growth and development. In *Practical Criticism*, Richards predicted that "sooner or later interpretation will have to be recognized as a key subject" (p. 338), and to the extent that our English language arts programs provide students with opportunities for interpretation, it has become one. But increasingly, there is so much else to be done under the umbrella subject of English language arts that we may be in danger of slighting our task of teaching students the "art and science" of interpretation, perhaps because it seems so out of fashion, tainted as it has been by the New Critical emphasis on microscopic objectivity, or perhaps because it is simply so difficult to do. But in an age that demands sound critical thinking skills from all our young people, Richards' comments on this subject have particular relevance. For Richards, language is the medium of our thought—it is our thought and the expression of our humanity. What shocked and distressed Richards throughout *Practical Criticism* was the inability of his students to perceive clearly that expression of humanity in the poetry he gave them, as well as their inability to talk about the poetry with any degree of insight. I believe his rather glum remarks still hold true today: "So long as we stay in the realm of things which can be counted, weighed and measured, or pointed to ... all goes well. ... But let an attempt at precision be made ..." and we behave like "a mixed assembly of half-wits and scamps" (1929, p. 341-342). And "as soon as metaphorical or figurative uses of speech are introduced ... these dangers become much increased" (p. 329). In 1929, Richards was afraid that we were losing the vital link between thought and language that makes purposive communication possible because we were losing the ability to speak and write with precision, a skill which requires our understanding of the multiple definitions inherent in language. Richards expressed a real fear that a young person "may be using words not because he knows with any precision what he means by them, but because he knows how they are ordinarily used, and does with them what he has heard other people do with them before" (pp. 324-325). Once language is divorced from thought, especially abstract and complex thought, our young people are particularly susceptible to the manipulation of their thoughts by those with the skill and desire to do so.

Rosenblatt is equally concerned with the unique role literature can play in the maintenance of civilization through its ability to refine students' sensibilities, a process which she sees as being coarsened by "such institutions as the newspaper or television" (1983, p. 93). She cautions that we "must do more than merely expose the student to great art" (p. 93), however. In order to help students resist the coarsening influences which surround them, we need to be aware of these influences and introduce students to literature that will truly serve to moderate such influences without alienating its audience. Although Richards talks about making poetry more accessible, the poetry he gave his students to respond to was perhaps somewhat inaccessible in the first place. For Rosenblatt, the first condition for a meaningful response would be a choice of literature that speaks to young people. Given this condition, literature has truly transformative powers. In the same way that the reader acts on the literature, the literature can act on readers and assist them in questioning and reflecting on their values and beliefs. Yet Rosenblatt is careful to point out that the purpose here is not to replace one set of dogma with another, but rather to help students resist the pull of dogma altogether. The goal of the English teacher is to supply the student "with the knowledge, the mental habits, and the emotional impetus that will enable him to independently solve his problems" (1983, p. 131). Like Richards, Rosenblatt expresses a fear that a citizenry which lacks the ability to think critically and independently is "ready prey to those enemies of democracy who hold the delusive bait of ready-made solutions to all problems" (p. 129).

The fears expressed by both I. A. Richards and Louise Rosenblatt posit a close connection between literature and society, a connection that we are in danger of neglecting in the modern



English classroom. Literature not only transmits the values and beliefs of a culture, but the close study of the language of literature itself promotes habits of mind that are also essential to the *transformation* of our culture. As Rosenblatt says, "I am concerned with the social and cultural role of literature above all in a democracy" (1983, p. xiii). We would do well to share her concern, for "only if we possess a philosophy of literature teaching can we justify the importance of literary experience, and make clear the criteria on which we base our classroom methods or curricular patterns" (p. x). I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* and Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* both serve us well in our quest for such a philosophy, a quest which Richards warns, "may well be a matter of some urgency" (1929, p. 320).

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