

One ❁ The Life of the Author

I READ THE POETS THAT CONCERN ME most in this book both before and while I became a practicing professional myself, over a long period of time. The advantage of this is that I have come to understand in a direct way the ultimately casual and temporary nature of the critical preferences that happen to be currently dominant and the modes of reading they promote. Criticism, it is clear to anyone who practices it over more than a generation or so, is always a historically produced, and therefore ideological, construction with a definable (in retrospect at least) life cycle (a period of gestation, a period of production, and a period of decline). It is all too easy, from outside the institutional matrix that generates and promulgates critical ideologies, to be blind to these machinations and to erroneously presume that the practices in vogue at the moment are in fact the natural ones by which humans are meant to process literary texts or, if not that, a better set than any of the recent competitors. While there may be no way to get fully outside of whatever happens to be the currently dominant system, we do not have to follow its precepts docilely and blindly. History is replete with

alternatives to the currency at hand. My course description for a History of Criticism seminar says this explicitly: “So, no matter how dominant the current critical system might seem to be, it is necessarily temporary, in process, always already well on its way to being replaced by the next new thing, before we even finish thinking and talking about it.” I have comparable language in my entry-level Critical Reading course description. Such statements get at what I see as the crux of the problem both of what poets have to teach and how they help us to learn it.

The whole system of “close reading,” for example, which dominated the way I learned in school to approach poetry, remained largely invisible to me (as system, that is) while I learned to practice it. That I found the way school read poets so boring and unprofitable, from early in my high school years and on through my college years was typical (everyone else in my classes did, too, as far I could tell) and understandable, given the difficulty of the method and the quotidian tedium of the environment. The fact that it didn’t ruin poets as figures of lifelong value for me was due to the happy accident that I started to read them before we began to study poetry in earnest. And I had already come up with another way of doing it.

It is not impossible to privately ignore the dominant system and cobble together a more agreeable alternative. It is, though, hard to become conscious of the current system as system—to see it in a broadly orchestral historical frame, as one option among many that are comparably powerful. From this perspective one can become vigilant to the potential limitations and excesses of criticism’s constitutive practices not simply at the transitional junctures, when the extant system begins to fray and fall apart as it is being replaced by a contrary alternative—all the seams become quite visible, then—but during the heydays, when the machine is powerful, seemingly faultless, and almost universally endorsed. One way to reach such a consciousness is to be around when one of the sea changes takes place. In the case of literary criticism, such upheavals took place in the 1920s (when text-based theories began to emerge) and the 1970s (when reader-based theories began to replace them), among others. Since the original and previously presumed-to-be natural system remains, in a sort of disabled state of partial erasure, as the new system replaces it, the duplicity of theory is forever exposed. One can, then, begin to study such ideological movements from a sort of anthropological perspective, which is what I’d like to do a bit of next: a quick sketch of one aspect of the last eighty years of critical theories and the methods of reading they promoted: the way the author, the poet, was sent to the sidelines of the reading process.

In 1929, I. A. Richards published *Practical Criticism*, in which he described this technique for teaching poetry:

For some years I have made the experiment of issuing printed sheets of poems—ranging in character from a poem by Shakespeare to a poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox—to audiences who were requested to comment freely in writing upon them. The authorship of the poems was not revealed, and with rare exceptions it was not recognised.

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. . . . I lectured the following week partly upon the poem, but rather more upon the comments, or protocols, as I call them.

Much astonishment both for the protocol-writers and for the Lecturer ensued from this procedure. (3–4)

The feeling of both anxious bafflement and sudden power—which may be what Richards means by “astonishment” here—that these various anonymous protocol-writers (the majority of whom “were undergraduates reading English with a view to an Honors Degree” in Richards’s class) must have experienced, in the mid-1920s, when first confronted by the similarly anonymous poems before them would be hard, I think, for us to imagine, let alone replicate, inured as we are by three generations of critical theory to a way of reading that valorizes text or reader over author as the dominant matrix of a poem’s meaning and merit. Most likely their first key to reading a poem for academic purposes would have been to look at the author’s name and then use it to cue into any number of ready-made discourses for casting responses in biographical, historical, or formulary terms. The nineteenth century was rife with such approaches to reading poets. One can see ample evidence of these predilections in the protocols that Richards excerpts for us in the first part of his book. There is, for example, the occasional guess at authorial provenance, or a quick recognition of form or genre, that allows a student-reader to regain a familiar critical purchase. And the overall tenor of the protocols, ranging by turns from the generically bland to the vaguely laudatory to the snidely dismissive suggest how well these student-writers had memorized the moods and moves of contemporaneous criticism.

Richards’s simple classroom “procedure” certainly signals toward, in a

most efficient way, what has been a century-long process of de-author-izing poetic criticism. Only in retrospect, though, does the excerpt from Richards seem meaningful in the way I have indicated. Richards had, at that time, as far as I can tell, no express project to dismantle author-based approaches to reading and writing. He seems himself hardly to notice, let alone follow up on, the novelty of his removing authors' names from their poems in his classroom. He makes no overt argument on behalf of this move as a counterweight to the author- or intention-oriented criticisms that dominated his day. He promotes his system simply as "new"—a "new kind of documentation," a "new technique"—which is the adjective that ultimately stuck to the mode of criticism his work helped to engender: the text-based method of reading that he and his British colleagues developed and exported to us, in America, to elaborate into the New Criticism (the capital letters provided by John Crowe Ransom's 1941 book of that title) over the next thirty years or so.

The rest of Richards's book is more an argument for a case-based, quasi-scientific approach to the study of student reading strategies and practices that are grounded in the sort of induction that the field of psychology was using to establish itself in disciplinary terms. Had the intellectual drift of the moment been slightly different, Richards's work might now be viewed not through the lens of the emergent text-based economy of critical reading (thus allowing me to make a big deal here out of what is, in his book, really only a passing remark about his technique) but through the lens of the reader-based approach that is also nascent in his work (especially in *Practical Criticism*), which did not emerge fully for a couple of generations. Louise Rosenblatt, for example, was, roughly, a contemporary of Richards. Her now-iconic book, *Literature as Exploration*, which helped to launch the reader-response movement in this country in the 1970s, was first published in 1938, less than a decade after *Practical Criticism*. But by then the momentum already had swung so strongly in favor of a text-based ideology that her voice would not be heard in any deeply resonant way for three decades.

In 1954, right around the time I was starting to read, Richards's simple gesture achieved its ultimate critical mandate, when William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley posited that the poem "is not the critic's own and not the author's" (750). Authorial intentions—whether express or tacit—are thereby exiled to the far outskirts of the interpretive process, as are the critic's affects. With reader and writer suitably disengaged from their immediate personal or historical circumstances, what remains is the text, which provides an "internal" evidence of its own by means of which its signifi-

cance can be “discovered” through an examination of the “semantics and syntax” that are the poem’s “public” face (753). These “intentional” and “affective” “fallacies,” having been in the marketplace less ostentatiously for a number of years, and as unnamed initiatives for much longer, were finally established as methodological linchpins for the New Criticism.

The progress away from the author that Richards signals in *Practical Criticism* reaches its apogee—one that Richards himself would likely be aghast at—just about forty years after his first classroom experiment, with Roland Barthes’s landmark essay “The Death of the Author,” first published in 1968, the year after I graduated from high school. Barthes does not make the concept of *an* author irrelevant to the activity of reading. Nor does Foucault shortly after him, in his comparably influential essay “What Is an Author?” which gave us the soon ubiquitous concept of the “author function.” What Barthes is concerned about is *the* Author, with a capital A, that antecedent force of imaginative creation, invented figurally by processes of commodification and canonization, and then rendered literally through successive acts of autobiography, biography, and explanation. He says: “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’—victory to the critic” (147).

I don’t think there are many among us these days who want to resurrect that particular version of the relationship between Author and critic. But death is a serious and final matter, and I’m beginning to think that in the case of the author, Barthes’s eulogy, Wimsatt and Beardsley’s fallacy, and even Richards’s simple elision were overstated. This is certainly so for the many poets I have spent my time re-reading, especially for the ones that have come most fully to life for me, as colleagues and friends, over the course of my life. The three poets to whom I will turn most often to make my case, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Walt Whitman, happened to enter my readerly life earlier than the others, before I “learned” how to read them in school, through the regimen of the New Criticism, which was how *I* first experienced the “death” of my authors.

Oddly enough, most of the American New Critics, those formidable theorists who seemed hell-bent on winching poetry away from the easy reach of casual readers, were themselves practicing poets. What could their motivation have been for such a seemingly self-defeating

agenda? We need to delve a little deeper into the background and history of the movement to begin to make sense of this apparent contradiction. The critical apparatus for a text-based approach to poetry was being assembled in the 1920s, as modernism began to clamber up from the shambles of post-World War I Europe, primarily through the work of an array of British theorists who were *not* poets: I. A. Richards, C. K. Ogden, F. R. Leavis, and William Empson most prominent among them.

At the same time, a group of “Fugitive Poets” was organizing itself at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee: John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and Robert Penn Warren were the most notable, but there were others, all with deep roots, at least initially, in Southern regionalist poetics. The primary organ of the group was their literary magazine, the *Fugitive*, which they published between 1922 and 1925. The aesthetic of the group was relatively austere, with an emphasis on craft and an aversion for sentimentality. But there was a much less visible cultural agenda here as well, promulgated by the Southern Agrarians, a movement that evolved from the Fugitive Poets and included all of the poets I mention above, among others. Their manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, by “12 Southerners,” was published in 1930. The various essays in the book promote a critique of American industrialism—quite an astute, radical, and cogent critique—offering as an alternative the traditional agrarian values of the Old South. One senses throughout this book the deep-seated, sometimes seething resentments of the Reconstruction era, a comparably deep-seated longing for a romanticized version of the antebellum South. The writers advocated a return to a traditional, land- and farming-based economy as a counter to the rootlessness and dehumanization of Northern, urban modernity. The politics underlying the system are consonant in many ways with traditional conservatism, organized as they are around regionalism, individualism, and anti-Communism. Tate even wanted the book to be titled *Tracts against Communism*. There are faint traces of racism here and there, an occasional hint toward the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. But these are more residual than central elements of the ideology.

What, if anything, could this possibly have to do with reading poetry? Well, for one thing, it imagines the ideal reader of a poem as a solitary reflective, spending considerable time in the evening, at leisure, ruminating patiently on great, ennobling texts, difficult texts that need to be savored, circulated through and around, repeatedly if necessary, until they yield their harvest. This may not be rendered in the book expressly as a plantation-based idyll, but it’s certainly not a sharecropper’s version of the agrarian life

either. What better method for insulating poetry from the vast, busy masses of the hectic workforce in the North than a method of close reading that required time, stability, pedigree, “cultivation,” the very odd sort of populist elitism that emerged more generally from a nostalgia for a world gone with the wind? Most of the poets in this group are not inordinately complex or dense. Some are quite accessible. But it was their political inclinations—even when they were at odds with their economic interest in reaching a broad audience, or even with their aesthetic—that seem to me to have led them to their critical conclusions. That a couple of generations of us had to learn to read poems according to this regimen is an interesting historical sidelight. And looked at that way, it argues precisely for an awareness of the historically contingent nature not only of critical theories but also of the seemingly more benign modes of reading they engender and that we tend to adopt without too much question. The agenda of the Southern Agrarians was largely overwritten by subsequent theorists such as Cleanth Brooks, the chief architect and exemplar of the New Critical method, whose work (some of it written in concert with Penn Warren) dominated criticism and pedagogy in English into the 1960s. In fact, by the time most critical ideologies arrive in the classroom, their politics have been pretty much bleached out. Which is a whole different thing from saying they were never there in the first place.



IN 1883, DECADES BEFORE RICHARDS was tinkering with poems in his classroom, Olive Schreiner wrote in *The Story of an African Farm*: “But there is another method—the method of life we all lead. Here nothing can be prophesied. There is a strange coming and going of feet. Men appear, act and react upon each other, and pass away” (29). I came across her work while I was writing my dissertation on John Berryman, who borrows the first phrase from this passage—“But there is another method”—as one of the epigraphs of his *Dream Songs* (385). Schreiner calls the first method the “stage method,” wherein “characters and their actions are completely subject to the overall aesthetic intent. They are always secondary to the logic of form, pre-determined, as it were, to follow out their courses in preconceived and predictable ways” (29). Berryman is clearly interested in writing poems orchestrated by “life,” with its “strange coming and going of feet,” rather than “aesthetic intent,” “preconceived and predictable.”

I bring this up here for two reasons: First of all, I want to start laying out “another method” for reading poets, using, roughly, a comparable distinc-

tion between “life” and “stage.” But there’s an equally important second matter that needs to be accounted for in the process: the role and status of the author in this transaction, a matter made problematic enough to require another method simply because so much of what I do as a reader of poets, and want to recommend, flies in the face of the previous century’s critical dynamic. In order for me to make the case I want to make on behalf of the “poet” as the complementary agent in a dyadic relationship, I have to find a way to re-involve the author in some sort of personal role in the dynamic of reading.

The relationships I have had over the years with the poets I will be discussing (though I could quite agreeably generalize this to include many, many others) have been as deep, full, complex, and durable as relationships I’ve had with actual people. The whole way of thinking about human relationships that sharply distinguishes those that are putatively actual from those that are merely textual makes no sense to me any longer, at least not in its most rigorous, commonsensical form. In some respects, I feel I have become better at getting to know the actual people present to me as complex and interesting in a deeply meaningful way *because* I’ve been able to develop such relationships with the absent poets who interest me. To be sure, the poets on the other side of their poems are my own concoctions, they can change drastically over time, and they often have only the barest connection to their biographical versions, which I knew almost nothing about at the outset in any case and have not taken undue pains to find out about in the meantime. But is this that much different, really, from the actual relationships we develop, where our “reading” of the other is often grounded in the barest bits of discourse and is refracted through an assortment of prior desires, needs, expectations, preferences, models, biases, and categories—sometimes personal, sometimes social, sometimes cultural—that pre-construct the other for us and over which we tend to assert very little conscious control? Getting past, or just seeing more clearly through, those prisms, to the extent that it’s possible, requires work and time, patience, and care, even imagination: a mode of reading and re-reading, I would argue, akin to the one I propose here for these other “others.” One way to define it, for both realms, is as “living conversation,” a term I borrow from Mikhail Bakhtin. In living conversation, we seek not *primarily* to decode our interlocutor’s “meaning” (as formalist approaches to reading tend to do), nor *primarily* to produce an appropriate “response” (as more recent approaches tend to do), but to hear a voice speaking and to listen to it in such a way that it “provokes an answer” (280).

As a teenager, during the time I was getting to know these poets for the first or second time, I spent huge tracts of time—an average, I'd guess now, of three or four hours a day—at a local hangout called The Sugar Bowl. It was the kind of place memorialized now in nostalgic treatments of the 1950s. For me, it was a most redeeming diversion from the otherwise featureless panoramas of the vast savanna of my adolescence. There were about eight high-back booths, a few tables, a counter with stools, anywhere from three to thirty people there at a time. I'd go up after dinner, camp out at one of those spots, by myself, just drinking coffee and thinking whatever I felt like thinking; then I'd shift to another and another spot over the course of the evening and just talk to people—about anything from school gossip to the existence of God. Thinking back now, I believe that it was because I was reading all these poets that I could and did imagine that everyone I interacted with, these collegial interlocutors, was animated by the same potential for living conversation, if only I could find ways to initiate it. I have the same feeling to this day, this welling up of excitement about the possibilities of sustained intellectual relationship, when I walk into a class on the first day, especially an entry-level class where the faces—that pleasant combination of (inspiring) hope for something great to happen and (challenging) deep skepticism that it can in such a venue—remind me of the faces I looked forward to encountering in The Sugar Bowl. Not all of those encounters went great. Some were painful and boring. Same now. But the fact that I can still feel a surge of motivation at such moments, well, that derives at least as much from my having read these poets as it does from any institutional structures I'm familiar with, or from my own moral fiber.



TO BE HONEST, I JUST CAN'T FIGURE OUT retrospectively why I started to read the poets who have accompanied me for over forty-five years when I first did, in my early teens. There is nothing leading up to it that can account for or explain this sudden, deep fascination poetry held for me. I do recall having to memorize a poem to recite to the class in the second grade. Mine was Tennyson's "The Brook."

I come from haunts of coot and hern,
I make a sudden sally,
And sparkle out among the fern,
To bicker down a valley.

I'm pretty sure that these lines I quote, from memory, are that poem's opening lines. When my turn came, I went to the front of the room, stood stiff as a board, and said my poem out as fast as I could, robotically, monotonically. Mrs. Zebrosky, my favorite elementary school teacher, chided me about that. I went back and sat down. That's what I knew about poetry—all of it bad, really, both the sing-songy poem and the embarrassment of my enactment of it—for most of my childhood. Then, all of sudden, five years later, I bought a book of poems and started reading them every night before I went to bed, secretly, memorizing poem after poem, reciting the lines over and over silently in my head. It was fantastic. And a big part of that had to do with the fact that it had nothing whatsoever to do with school. Until I got to high school, my English courses were almost entirely grammar-oriented. Year after year of it. I liked it. It was like math, which I was good at. I still diagram sentences in my head. But the main value of this was that I got to read poetry, and develop my own way for reading poets, for a couple of years without any intrusion from school. When we finally started reading literature in high school, the “day” poets I came across there seemed to have little to do with the “night” poets I spent my own time with, even when, from time to time, they went by exactly the same names. The ones at school became knowledge for me in much the same way that Tennyson's poem did. I memorized what I had to in order to recite it back in tests. The ones at home proffered knowledge of a much different order and kind, and I read them in an entirely different way because of that.

While reading my poets outside the institutional and disciplinary confines of school, I had a very specific idea in mind, an agenda, if you will, for what they would provide me. I honestly now, looking back, have no idea how I came up with the assumptions that guided my process. But they were very clear to me and I believed in them adamantly. First of all, as I framed out my overall project, its primary purpose was to broaden and deepen the range of my personal experience. I grew up in a small town in a typical family. I concluded that in my ordinary course of transit through my actual everyday life I could accumulate a limited number and only certain kinds of experiences, on the basis of which I could engender only a limited amount and only certain kinds of knowledge and wisdom. I wanted to think and feel simultaneously across as broad a spectrum as possible. The prism of my personal life could only deliver the visible light portion of that spectrum. I just knew, again for reasons I can't account for retrospectively, that there were something like the X-rays further down on one end and the

radio waves further up on the other end, and I wanted to tune myself to that extended range of frequencies.

Poetry, when I found it, looked to me like the perfect vehicle for that. I simply started to read the poets I liked in the ways that seemed comfortable and compelling to me, and on the basis of those practices, something that might fairly be called a “method,” this other method, emerged. The fact that most of those early practices, by happenstance, turned out (I later discovered) to be contrary to the general academic assumptions, at that historical moment, about the distinctive nature of poetic discourse may not be entirely coincidental, but it is certainly incidental. When I came later to study poetry in school under the more rigorous regime of the watered-down version of the New Criticism that informed most high school textbooks, I was a little taken aback by how mystifying it tended to make what had come to seem to me quite straightforward and simple.

The school approach, for example, assumed that poetry was hard to understand and difficult to read. My experience had already told me that, at least with the poets I was reading, quite the contrary was true. Poetry was no harder to read than anything else. It actually seemed much easier because poems were quite short relative to other kinds of creative and academic texts. And on a material level they were easier to assimilate. Rhythm, rhyme, and meter seemed to me to organize the reading experience in quite amenable ways, facilitating, even speeding up, the reading process.

The school approach assumed that the meanings of poetry were “hidden” within, or even “behind,” the surface of the poem and that they had to be ferreted out with a set of almost surgically precise critical instruments. My own experience had been quite the opposite: I felt that the poets I was reading were talking to me very casually, personally, openly, clearly, as if we were in the same room together, conversing. And the deep and immediate emotional and physical impact they had on me made me believe that poetic discourse was the most direct kind of verbal medium available, one which actually did carry the full weight of its meaning very efficiently right on the surface.

The school approach assumed that poems needed to be read slowly, assiduously. My own experience indicated that, at least initially, while I was getting a feel for the potential relationship to be developed with a poet, speed was the key. Read fast, read a lot, get into the poet’s inner workings, the rhythms of thinking, and ride them out into the worlds they engender. I strove toward the (then seemingly) impossible dream of absorbing a whole poem in an instant of time, at the speed of life as it were, just like lived sensation.

The differences here are not merely matters of technique. There are fundamental differences at the epistemic level, in terms of the nature and kind of knowledge a poet might be proffering and the manner in which it will be received. What I got from reading poets was a kind of experience that had significant status, comparable in many ways to my own and quite different from what I got from reading, say, a textbook or watching TV. I felt I was migrating into someone else's position without losing my own: a peculiar kind of interanimation.



A FEW YEARS AGO I WAS USING a sequence of assignments for my freshman writing course that revolved around the concept of "experience." The opening-day diagnostic assignment, which we use in my department to get a writing sample and make certain limited kinds of decisions about course placement, basically asked students to question, then reflect and comment upon, the commonplace: "Experience is the best teacher." During the time period I used this assignment, I probably read a hundred responses. They were all over the place, but they shared one thing: a very sharp divide between firsthand experience—life lessons, street-smarts, hard knocks, gut feelings, etc.—and book learning—school lessons, book smarts, ivory tower, logic, etc. A student might value one side somewhat or dramatically more than the other or both equally, but the difference between them was strict and strictly enforced. This was to be expected. The assignment almost invited it, as the course assignments thereafter invited many kinds of interrogations and complications of this underlying symmetry. The surprising thing to me was that, by the end of the course, while many students had in fact written pieces that demonstrated in one way or another that the difference between the kind of knowledge one acquires from reading and the kind one acquires from everyday living were not entirely distinct and separable species, very few of them seemed willing or able to expressly break the spell of the initial dichotomy they started with on day one.

In the *Meno*, Plato offers one wedge for working into, if not breaking, that spell.

SOCRATES: . . . If someone knows the way to Larissa, or anywhere else you like, then when he goes there and takes others with him he will be a good and capable guide, you would agree?

MENO: Of course.