

# What Do We Teach When We Teach Literature?

**Robert Eaglestone**

## **Introduction: Englishers?**

Teaching and learning a subject involves more than knowing about a list of texts, equations or processes: it teaches ways of thinking and approaching material, it teaches *habits of mind*. Because of this, a discipline also teaches an identity, a way to be. Maths teaches students to be mathematicians, history teaches them to be historians: indeed, so pronounced is this that one famous account describes disciplinary identities as ‘tribes’.<sup>1</sup> But what do we teach our students in English to be when we teach them literature? Possibly not ‘Englishers’, as some year 12s replied enthusiastically when I asked them what they were learning to be in their English periods. I’m not sure that being uncertain about our tribal denomination should be taken as a sign of weakness or confusion – indeed, as I’ll argue below, a discipline is healthy when it is thinking hard about what it is and what it’s for – but it’s certainly challenging that there seems to be no accepted name for what it is we are teaching students of literature to become.

Here, I want to argue we teach our students in the English literature class or seminar room to be *literary critics*. This is a term that has fallen into disfavour and so disuse in the last forty years or so, but the point of my argument is precisely to reclaim it in a contemporary way, without wishing for a return to a (fictional) ‘golden past’ and with a clear-eyed view of the English’s recent intellectual, institutional, cultural and social history, at least in relation to literature. Of course, reclaiming the term ‘literary critics’ for our students will not, in itself, meet the range of institutional and intellectual challenges the discipline faces at secondary and higher education but it would be part of a useful and important clarification about what we do as teachers of literature.

In thinking of English in this broader, more active sense as an identity, not simply a curriculum, specification or canon, I'm drawing on the work of Ben Knights, among others. Knights argues that disciplines in general, and English in particular, are not simply made up by knowing texts (we might call this 'knowing about', perhaps) but by 'communities of practice' ('knowing how to'), and that these communities embody knowledges and behaviours that cannot simply be written down or listed: Knights writes that English 'involves learning ... and identifying with the behaviours associated' with the subject. Some of these behaviours may seem tangential to English (ways of dressing, talking and other social behaviours) while others seem more centred on the subject: 'typical forms of argument' for example. (He suggests that many 'generations of English students recognized that, faced with two poems, they were going to have to choose one as the 'good' one and find more-or-less sophisticated ways of rubbishing the other').<sup>2</sup> But these clusters of behaviour make up the identity of the tribe: much more than simply 'knowing about' a text or period, they are part of 'knowing how to be' a critic. Another way to think about this is the sense that we learn how to master an activity by following or inhabiting someone's example more than by rules laid out for us; more by watching someone cook, or cooking with them, than just by reading a recipe book. And it seems to be the case in English that students are influenced quite as much by the teacher as by the texts on their A-level literature or university course. This seems true for teachers, too: for example, at a recent subject conference, a leading UK head teacher recalled his influential English teacher and said 'I wanted to be like him!' It also seems true for writers, as regular features in the press on 'Teachers that influenced me' seems to suggest.

However, before I go on to suggest why I think that we should feel empowered to use term 'literary critics', I want to sketch a very short history of why that term fell out of favour in the first place.

### **Losing 'Criticism'**

The word 'critic' has never been that popular: 'Criticism' in general has a negative connotation (I mean, who likes to be criticised?). A 'critic' too, is a journalist whose beat covers not politics or football, but, say, theatre, books or film: some of these are certainly excellent but some earn the living by proffering quick opinions which, say, suit a newspaper's overall agenda. The rise of the internet critic has produced some ground-breaking work, although some blogs (and other net fauna) seem keener on the

authors' own lives and obsessions than the artworks. And, of course, artists rarely like critics: Beckett famously lets 'Critic!' stand as the worst possible insult in *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>3</sup>

But within the discipline of English, the term 'critic' stems from a particular moment, and carries with it a series of associations. As books like Carol Atherton's *Defining Literary Criticism* show, what seem to be arcane historical debates over the subject directly shape pedagogy and assessment (which, in turn, play a role in shaping those arcane debates into the future). There has been quite a lot of recent research on the history of the discipline, aiming to analyse, as it were, our disciplinary DNA and explain how we got to where we are today, and here, I want to focus on a sketch of this history focussing on the label 'criticism'.

It's clear, for example, that some part of the roots of English lie in philology, the 'king of the sciences, the pride of the first great modern universities' in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>4</sup> Philology involved the study of texts, languages and speculation about the origins of language itself. The roots of our subject also lie in the teaching of rhetoric: learning to write, speak and argue well was a central part of education. But the subject also has roots in 'belles lettres', the more informal discussions of literature undertaken as much by poets and novelists as teachers and academics that grew up in the second half of the Nineteenth Century with the growth of periodicals. Journalistic critics and editors, like W. E. Henley (the model for Long John Silver), as well as discussions over contemporary fiction and poetry helped shape our disciplinary identity. These ideas combined with strong forms of nationalism, both within the then United Kingdom (in relation especially to Scotland, Wales and Ireland) and its wider colonies, especially India, to begin to establish a subject for which national identity became central: English was about being, or becoming English. This is why it's not called, for example, literary studies, or linguistics (and in this, at least, the reply 'Englischer' has a grain of accuracy, as well as a hint of contemporary Gove-ism).<sup>5</sup>

However, as the subject became established in British universities and after the First World War, it underwent a sea change. After much controversy, both the philological aspects and the focus on rhetoric began to decline. The more impressionistic (and cosmopolitan) belle lettrism, too, began to be considered amateur. These were replaced as a new and more formal, professional sense of criticism which began to develop in the 1920s. This was inspired in no small part by T. S. Eliot, and the reception of his work was part of what one academic called a 'revolution'

in Cambridge, though which a new form of 'English' emerged, 'freer than the scope of any School of English in any British University'.<sup>6</sup> Louis Menand argues that Eliot's influential 1919 essay, 'Tradition and the individual Talent' asks

What does a poet need to know? And the answer is: Poetry. The corollary to this is that the best way to understand poems is by their relation to other poems. This is the premise without which the enterprise of academic literary criticism would be unable to function.<sup>7</sup>

This idea led to the argument that (Menand again) 'there is such a thing as specifically literary language, and that literary criticism provides an analytical tool box for examining it'. Exploring this idea, I. A. Richards began what he called 'practical criticism', presenting a poem to a class without the name of the author, the date or any other information, and then letting the class respond and judge the poem as it stood by itself as an artwork. This in turn inspired critics like William Empson. Central to these developments in the UK were the Cambridge academics F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, and their journal *Scrutiny*. Not only did they teach students, but they taught people who went on to become teachers, both in schools and universities, and so influenced several generations of English students and scholars. For the Leavis' 'criticism' was a central term, although they famously refused to give a simple definition of it. Criticism was infused with the idea that English was itself a discipline of thought, that it was about evaluation, that it was about 'life' (another term central to his work which he declined to define). Criticism was to be done through the intense scrutiny of particulars, by critical appreciation or 'close reading'. For the Leavises, definitions fenced life in, close it off: criticism was an active practice rather than a set methodology.

These ideas came to dominate English – if not in research then certainly in teaching – until the 1970s and 80s. It was then that 'the culture wars' or 'theory wars' reached (or boomeranged back to, perhaps) debates in English. In the face of different forms of feminism, marxism, new ideas about literature from philosophy, sociology and politics, this older model of 'criticism', with its high regard for the literary and disinclination to define itself (in contrast to the sciences) looked not only elitist and exclusive but out of date. As the ideology of the older generation, it was attacked for being against progress and counter to forces of liberation. The *locus classicus* of this attack was Terry Eagleton's astonishingly influential

*Literary Theory* from 1983. Despite the fact that this book failed to discuss or explain its own theory (its marxism, which it took for granted) and the very polemical (and slightly non-sequitur) conclusion (which suggests that the state must take control of the free press and media), it helped changed the shape of English in the UK by killing 'criticism' and introducing the term 'theorist'. Indeed, the culture wars pitted 'criticism' against 'theory'. To claim that one was teaching one's students to be 'literary critics' was to mark oneself as a reactionary. Certainly, much was right about the attacks by Eagleton and others: one could not do 'criticism' in the same way as before.

The 'theory wars' rumbled to an exhausted close in the 1990s. One sign of this exhaustion was the hackneyed 'flash point' and well-worn argument, referred to and enacted on *Newsnight*, over 'who was better, Dylan or Keats?' In this, oddly (the older) Dylan stood for all that was contemporary and new, and Keats (who died at 26) stood for the ages past. The obvious answer was that one could love both for their different virtues: the act of competitive comparison and evaluation, which had seemed so important, had just stopped being relevant. In part, of course, this change stemmed in part from the natural churn of generations but it also shows how many battles, at least within the subject (over the need for evaluation, say) theorists had won. Most people in English were happy to let a thousand flowers bloom and found the discipline much wider and more open than it had been. Some, less keen on 'theory' often claimed to be doing 'cultural history' or 'literary history', or turned to the (more archive and evidence-based) 'history of the book'. Similarly, the term 'theorist' became less a description of someone's opposition to elitism in the discipline and more – as labels like 'Shakespearian' or 'Romanticism' are and were – a way of explaining one's interests. However, all this left the sense of what we taught fractured and uncertain. It was as if, while we knew what we did, we no longer knew how to describe it, not least because we knew that any definition or description was partial and exclusive of other views.

### **Finding 'Criticism'**

I suggest that it is time that to reclaim 'literary critic' as a description for our identity and for what we what we teach our students. This is *absolutely not* to hark back to a time 'before theory', before feminism and all the other social, political and intellectual concerns that theory embodied. Nor is it to insist on a focus on 'the aesthetic' or to demand

that studying literary texts is about explicitly evaluating them. Instead, it is to reflect a wider sense that criticism is a very broad field, which, like the literature it examines, is open to a huge range of influences, political, artistic, historical, cultural and philosophical. Although its aim is no longer principally evaluative, it cannot escape wider questions about value (to choose one text to teach or write about over another is a form of evaluation, after all). More, to reclaim 'criticism' is to escape the idea that 'theory' marked a sort of 'year zero' which wiped everything before it out, and to admit that many seemingly challenging theoretical ideas are now widely accepted in our discipline (if not outside it: while members of the government may insist on a very narrow canon, for example, we do not, or, in some cases perhaps, at least we recognise an authentic and complex debate on these matters).

To reclaim this term is to understand that a discipline is an evolving tradition. Integral to a healthy tradition is precisely debate and discussion about how that tradition works, what motivates it, its continuities and discontinuities and how it can change. More, everyone involved in that tradition (here, the discipline of English) should have access to those debates. (The idea of a tradition is not automatically a conservative one. Traditions can also be radical and confrontational to the status quo, for example.) Further, one of the issues in teaching English literature is that the subject is sometimes seen as 'just reading books': of course, it more than this. It is made up of a set of questions, ideas and approaches that structure and inform these readings. Thinking about the discipline a little in this historical sense offers a way of bringing this important aspect to the fore.

More, to say we are teaching 'criticism' need not imply that there is some kind of core or essential strand to what we do. Indeed, seeing 'criticism' as an evolving tradition means that we do not need all to agree on a common core to the study of literature. As Wittgenstein writes, 'the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres'.<sup>8</sup> We need not find one thing that 'is' criticism, but rather we can find a multi-vocal developing of tradition: a tradition that embodies debate and discussion about itself as well as over the texts studied.

Being clear that we are teaching our students to be literary critics has, in my view, powerful pedagogic benefits, too. Perhaps most importantly for our students is simply the sense of knowing what you are doing: sometimes educationalists refer to this as 'metacognition' or – in the case of John Hattie in his influential *Visible Learning for Teachers* – 'self-

regulation'. This is crucial for improving a student's work. After all, if you know *why* you are studying something, or why you are studying in that way, the subject becomes easier to understand and you become better at it. Of course, just giving a name to an activity does not explain it: but it does give it a sense of direction.

Again, the name 'criticism' is important because it draws attention to what we expect our students to produce. Generally we do not ask them to write sonnets or five act tragedies: what we ask for and assess are works of criticism, responding to the texts in ways that we recognise as 'literary critical'. Thinking as critics means that our students can read not only works of literature but see that the works of criticism they read are there as part of a continuum to help them learn to be writers and critics. Recent developments in this – forms of creative critical rewriting, for example – do not alter this basic principle and in fact support this enlarged idea of criticism: these are now part of our critical repertoire, often under different names (some name this fictocriticism, for example).

Finally, of course, 'criticism' is a collective enterprise, shared between people, arising out of conversation, argument, shared thought. Wayne Booth wrote about the activity of criticism not as induction or deduction, but 'co-duction', 'a process that is not mere argument for views already established, but a conversation, a kind of rereading that is an essential part of what will be a kind of continually shifting evaluation'.<sup>9</sup> This is a way of thinking about how we develop ideas about literature together. Thinking of oneself in this light opens up senses that one can talk, read, work with others doing criticism as a collaboration which – like a healthy democracy – asks to take regard of others but does not necessarily require total agreement. This collaboration can also be seen to work over time: debates and arguments over what *King Lear* is about can shift and change, and in this way, a student today can learn from critics in the past.

## Conclusion

Anybody encountering any literature (any art, in fact) has a response: literary criticism teaches ways to articulate, explain, analyse and discuss that response. This involves engaging with an often submerged tradition of thought about literature. Of course, no one expects students to know the whole history of criticism – that would be mad! But the traditions of thought about literature surface in the sort of questions that we, as critics, shaped by those traditions, ask about literary texts.

As many theorists pointed out, one of the problems of the idea of being a 'literary critic' before the 'theory wars' was that it seemed to presuppose that one agreed with the opinions and presuppositions of a white, educated literary, academic and metropolitan elite. (Whether this was actually the case is less clear.) Much of the progressive and beneficial work of literary theory has been to reveal these presuppositions, introduce new ideas and approaches and help us read literature in different ways, as well as asking new questions. While part of a much wider strategy to pin down and quantify learning across the whole national curriculum, the Assessment Objectives at A/AS level – which are seen as a bane for many teachers – also share something of this: a sense of trying to make the subject transparent (rather than hidden, confusing and 'passed down from master to student', as it were) as well as trying to introduce other ideas and voices. They were an attempt, within the remit of the machine-like curriculum and assessment regimes, to express what it is to think as a critic. Of course, they have often become much more of a tick-box exercise. One reason for that is that perhaps it is not easily possible to define what a discipline knows, its attitudes or approaches: I think that while this is true of all subjects, to some extent, it is even more so of the study of English literature. One cannot simply make a list of everything 'a critic' should know: an attitude is not a list, a map is not a territory. Precisely the forces that created this sort of approach to the curriculum are also part of the assault on the teaching of English literature from government and those interested only in short term employability. Being more upfront about what we call what we teach is not, of course, going to end this: but it is important, I think, if only to clarify in our own minds what we teach and the debates and history that have shaped that teaching.

### Notes

1. Becher, T and Trowler, P (2001) *Academic Tribes and Territories* (Maidenhead: Open University Press).
2. Knights, B (2005) 'Intelligence and Interrogation: The Identity of the English Student', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 4.1, pp. 34-35.
3. On this, for another view, see McDonald, R (2007) *The Death of the Critic* (London: Continuum).
4. Turner, J (2014) *Philology: the forgotten origins of the modern humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. x.

5. See among other accounts by Gardiner, M (2013) *The Constitution of English Literature: the state, the nation and the canon* (London: Bloomsbury); Underwood, T (2013) *Why Literary Periods Mattered: Historical contrast and the prestige of English Studies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press); Viswanathan, G (1989) *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press); Atherton, C (2005) *Defining Literary Criticism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan); Anderson, P (1968) 'Components of the National Culture', *New Left Review*, 50, pp. 3-57; Bell, M (1988) *F. R. Leavis* (London: Routledge); Inglis, F (1983) *Radical Earnestness: English Social Theory 1880-1980* (Oxford and Cambridge MA: Martin Robertson with Basil Blackwell); Baldick, C (1983) *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848-1932* (Oxford: Oxford English Monographs); Eagleton, T (1983), *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Bergonzi, B (1990) *Exploding English: Criticism, Theory, Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press); *The British Critical Tradition*, ed. Gary Day (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993); Mulhern, F (1979) *The Moment of Scrutiny* (London: New Left Books); *Re-reading English*, ed. Peter Widdowson (London: Methuen, 1982).
6. Tillyard, E. M. W. (1958) *The Muse Unchained*, (London: Bowes and Bowes), p. 11.
7. Menard, L (2010) *The Marketplace of Ideas* (New York: W. W. Norton), p. 114.
8. Wittgenstein, L (1963) *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell). p. 32e.
9. Booth, W (1988) *The Company We Keep*, London; University of California Press), p. 75.