

Three Old Books to Read By

by [James Como](#) (August 2021)



L'Arlésienne: Madame Joseph-Michel Ginoux, Vincent van Gogh, 1888

Even though no common reader 'deconstructs' a narrative through the prism of the Frankfurt School or the French avatars of anti-literary esoterica, those houyhnhnm-like pomposities still take up too much theoretical oxygen. An antidote is an older sort of literary thinking found in certain learned and useful books, companionable and (perhaps therefore) forgotten, but not refuted. Three are magisterial.

These are I. A. Richards's *Practical Criticism* (1929), Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), and C. S. Lewis's *An Experiment in Criticism* (also 1961). They share a high regard for the reader as central to a distinctively *literary*—not ideological, sociological, biographical, or didactic—experience, these days a transgressive notion. Richards's main concern is with a reader's interpretation and understanding of a piece of literature, Booth and Lewis, though differently, with the reader's belief, the former describing how an author wins it, the latter how a reader properly grants it. Worry not: none of them is a 'how-to', the classic of that category being Mortimer Adler's exhaustive *How to Read a Book*, with definitions, premises, guidelines, rules, some good advice ("a good book deserves an active reading") and some silliness ("scientists and philosophers do not think exactly alike").

Each of the three present paradigms (a word none of them ever uses) that are so sensible as to become habits of thought, ready pathways into and around a piece of literature. Taken together they can form (though best not pushed too far) a three-axis grid consisting of x/ types of meaning (Richards), y/ narrational strategies that impose upon the reader an imagined world (Booth), and z/ varieties of reading (Lewis).

By the time he wrote *Practical Criticism* Richards was already a heavyweight, having published (with C. K. Ogden) *The*

Meaning of Meaning (1923) and, more famously, *The Principles of Literary Criticism* (1930, to which he refers in *Practical Criticism*). The latter has an astonishing thirty-five chapters, plus two appendices, in just under three hundred pages. The chapter headings are enticing, to say the least, including *The Chaos of Critical Theories*, *A Sketch for Psychology*, *A Theory of Communication* (five pages!) and *The Two Uses of Language*. Not by-the-way and even more astonishing is the copy that belonged to C. S. Lewis. As much as with any book he read, Lewis made this one his own. His annotations, running head notes on every page, regular (and mostly ruled) underlining, chapter summaries, and arguments covering the insides of both boards (in very cramped script) amount to a second book, one so thorough that Richards, upon seeing it, is reported to have said he would have written a much better book had he seen Lewis's notes before writing it, a modesty that also runs through the book.

Richards calls the later book an 'experiment'. For "some years," he tells us, he would supply samples of poetry ranging widely in sensibility and assign students to comment on them. (These he calls 'protocols.') He is hunting the *psychology* of a reader's response to a piece of literature, which will make for a deep dive into literary (especially poetic) technique, its demands on readers, and into standards of judgment. Very near the beginning he provides "ten chief difficulties" of critical reading (e.g., sentimentality, doctrinal adhesions, general critical preconceptions) which become the bases of his diagnoses of the students' critical errors. (Surely Lewis knew this book, too, when he set out to write his own, very much shorter and more direct, *Experiment*.)

Then half way through the book Richards describes four types of meaning: *sense*, *tone*, *feeling* and *intention* which, if understood by the writers of the protocols, would have made for smoother sailing. About *sense* he says, "we speak to say

something. . . . We use words to direct our hearers' attention upon some state of affairs . . . to excite in them some thought." Tone and feeling are attitudes, the former the author's or speaker's stance towards the audience, the latter towards the material at hand. (Nowhere does he refer to narrational distance.) Finally intention:

. . . the author's aim, conscious or unconscious, the effect his is endeavoring to promote. Ordinarily [the author] speaks for a purpose, and his purpose modifies his [message]. The understanding of it is part of the whole business of apprehending this meaning. Unless we know what he is trying to do, we can hardly estimate the measure of his success.

When in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, for example (my own), Thornton Wilder has brother Juniper wonder over God's providence by trying to map design in the death of the unrelated victims who died when the Andean rope bridge broke, he is depicting a devout but misguided young man: his *sense*. With no irony readers are led to share in the brother's mission, until we behold the bizarre chart he has contrived, a moral calculus; then Wilder's *feeling* becomes evident as we are taken into the narrator's distanced view of his protagonist. But he never undercuts Juniper's innate goodness, even in the midst of futility: his *tone*. Ultimately Wilder is examining the dynamic of various types of love (almost always Wilder's meta-theme), including the mystery of *agape*, which we can behold but never penetrate: his *intention*. Our 'implied author' comments freely on that wonder, which brings us to Wayne C. Booth.

The application of Richards's typology is more than merely convenient, and though an avenue into a complex work it is no finish line: not even close. As our reading, along with some analytical appreciation (not judgment, which ought to be suspended), runs the course it does so in the company of a narrator, some 'voice'. Here the *plot* may not thicken, but the

story-telling certainly does, as Wayne Booth has shown. (A prolific scholar, his books include *Now Don't Try to Reason with Me* and *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*.)

The Rhetoric of Fiction is . . . monumental, its Table of Contents rivaling those of Adler and Richards in its taxonomical complexity (we will see a sharp contrast with Lewis). Booth sets his stage (as did Richards, as does Lewis) with a brilliantly concise patch of literary psychology. Three basic interests compel a typical reader. The first is cognitive, the excitement of discovery. The second is qualitative, an interest marked by a satisfaction that comes from completion (of, say, cause-effect or a fulfilled promise). The third is practical, our interest in the characters, our judgment of them, perhaps our struggles beside them. (Lewis, though differently, will say nearly the same.)

Booth shows that 'first person' and 'omniscient' are clumsy instruments for understanding the impact of a narrator. He asks, Does the narrator display or summarize the action? Is commentary ornamental, purposeful but detached, integral or dramatic? Moreover, we learn that behind the narrator is an 'implied author', the official scribe, so to speak. This is the hand that determines any number of distances (from the narrator, between narrator and characters, between that hand and the reader). Here his distinction between Proust and 'Marcel' is a marvel. In fact, his discussions of Austen, Fielding, Celine, Boccaccio and so many others; of argument, morality, sensibility, types of literary interest and so much else—all together is astonishingly encyclopedic *and* wise. Moreover, for a devoted reader, the book is a page-turner.

Booth's own example of the complexities involved in narration is Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. Is the governess nuts or is she both honest in her reporting and reliable as an observer? The controversy rages still. However, what the controversialists—and, unbelievably, Booth himself—miss is the enveloping scene of the telling of scary

stories. This story seems to be a complete contrivance. We become complicit in the dynamic of a meta-fiction. Remarkable—except it has been unremarked upon—is the fact that *James never takes his reader back to that opening scene*. The narrational deception—or is it? Is the recounting an actual event and knows the truth about the children and their haunting? —the envelopment, the imposition of narrational voices, has done its job of establishing a double-vision.

Noteworthy, I think, is that Wilder never resorts to metafiction. His omniscient implied author makes that unnecessary by explaining the origin of the text we've read and by lifting us to his level, all-knowing even if not all-telling. We see a similar omniscience in his penultimate novel, *The Eighth Day*. That narrator is routinely omniscient; but Wilder lets the cat out once, when that voice actually uses the first person singular.

The goings-on of reading are wrestled with by Richards and, though from the opposite (author's) end by Booth. Yet they never quite meet. Lewis's *An Experiment in Criticism* (eleven short chapters in fewer than thirty-four thousand words) rises above that gap and so closes it. His experiment is simple enough: "If all went ideally well, we should end by defining good literature as that which permits, invites, or even compels good reading; and bad as that which does the same for bad reading." That is, a literary work must not be read for its abstractions, such as culture, or treated as either an icon or a toy, but must be appreciated for its dual nature, as *logos* (something said) and as *poiema* (something made), *an appreciation accompanied by unconditional surrender*.

The unliterary reader reduces all to 'event', basking in sensations (e.g., of fear) and indulging in "castle-building" of various types, which take the reader "least out of himself." The literary reader, on the other hand, can lend himself to both a realism of presentation and a realism of content, if the literary object presents

the triumphant adjustment of two different kinds of order. On the one hand, the events (the mere plot) have their chronological and causal order. . . . On the other all scenes or other divisions of the work must be related to each other according to principles of design, like masses in a picture or the passages in a symphony. Our feelings and imaginations must be led through 'taste after taste, upheld with kindest change' [with] something like a balance, but never a too perfect symmetry. Yet this second order must never confuse the first.

Finally, the reader must bring to the table his own good habits. "We can find a book bad only by reading it as if it might, after all, be very good. We must empty our minds and lay ourselves open . . . no work . . . will succeed without a preliminary act of good will on the part of the reader." (Here we should recall Adler's good advice.)

Lewis's peroration—it is nothing less—is an apologia for good (that is, healthy) reading:

My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others. . . . I will see what others have invented. Even the eyes of all humanity are not enough. I regret that the brutes cannot write books. . . . Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality. There are mass emotions that heal the wound; but they destroy the privilege. . . . In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.

Lewis's great, neglected and only real novel, a 'modern' one at that, is *Till We Have Faces*. (Henry James would have loved it.) Its first-person narrator, Orual, queen of a small ancient land on the outskirts of the Greek empire,

is angry at the gods and is telling us why. Her complaint (a formal piece of rhetoric: she has been tutored by an educated Greek slave) rehearses her remembrance of things past, not least her loss of her mystical younger sister to the god of the mountain. Orual certainly should have known better than to emotionally blackmail the sister into disobedience, for she had felt—had known—the longing for a super-real, beckoning other world. But she “ruled herself.” And so she will learn the hard way that the reason God does not meet us face-to-face (her complaint) is that we don’t have faces of our own.

What is Lewis’s ‘plain sense’ here? Well, we cannot know, because Orual is unreliable: the only sense is the aggrieved, voluble queen and her assertions. For example, thinking herself physically ugly, she wears a veil that hides (from herself) how seriously ugly she is other than physically. We cannot like her, nor even feel for her, as our implied author gives his protagonist enough rope. Meanwhile Lewis is testing his reader: do you get it? This is you—and I.

We are excited to learn, not only what happens but what is real; and if the ending is ambiguous, denying us the satisfaction of a final major chord, that is because the queen talks too much (there’s the rhetoric) —a lesson in itself. Practical interest, too, is aborted, though not arbitrarily. We are no longer in any realm that invites such interest: realism of presentation has given way to the surreal representation of Orual’s psyche, which happens to be the name of the blessed younger sister.

Lewis has led us through a dance of curiosity, discovery, excitement, remorse and so on, and we have seen through the eyes of another. Or have we? Lewis’s intent seems to be to show us that Orual’s beclouded eyes are indeed ours, and that where we must look is outside of ourselves. There lies the authentic face.

Richards, Booth and Lewis, among others, are not mere

artifacts in the Museum of Literary Criticism, and, *because none was of a school*, taken together they are rather like three congenial colleagues talking over what happens—what does, should and should not happen—when one reads. They revivify that out-of-time experience, with no violation of its boundaries. Out of fashion? Certainly. But not therefore false.

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