

Quadrant II – Transcript and Related Materials

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Module Name: I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism*

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Name of the Presenter: Dr. Glenis Maria Mendonça

Notes on I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism*

Ivor Armstrong Richards – poet, dramatist, speculative philosopher, psychologist and semanticist, is among the first of the 20th century critics to bring to English criticism a scientific precision and objectivity. He is often referred to as the 'critical consciousness' of the modern age. New Criticism and the whole of modern poetics derive their strength and inspiration from the seminal writings of Richards such as *Principles of Literary Criticism*, *Practical Criticism*, *Coleridge on Imagination*, *The Foundation of Aesthetics* (with C.K.Ogden and James Wood) and *The Meaning of Meaning* (with Ogden). Together with T.S.Eliot, Richards was instrumental in steering Anglo-American criticism along a new path of scientific enquiry and observation.

Practical Criticism

Richard's influence rests primarily on his *Practical Criticism* (1929) which is based on his experiments conducted in Cambridge in which he distributed poems, stripped of all evidence of authorship and period, to his pupils and asked them to comment on them. He analyses factors responsible for misreading of poems. Even a "reputable scholar" is vulnerable to these problems. The objective of *Practical Criticism* was to encourage students to concentrate on 'the words on the page', rather than rely on preconceived or received beliefs about a text. This work was a landmark of twentieth-century criticism that provided new standards and new techniques for examining literature. Some of his interesting findings are as follows:

1) First is the difficulty of making out the plain sense of poetry. A large proportion of average-to-good readers of poetry simply fail to understand it. They fail to make out its prose sense, its plain, overt meaning. They misapprehend its feeling, its tone, and its intention.

2) Parallel to the difficulties of interpreting the meaning are the difficulties of sensuous apprehension. Words have a movement and may have a rhythm even when read silently. Many a reader of poetry cannot naturally perceive this.

3) There are difficulties presented by imagery, principally visual imagery, in poetic reading. Images aroused in one mind may not be similar to the ones stirred by the same line of poetry in another, and both may have nothing to do with the images that existed in the poet's mind.

4) Then comes the persuasive influence of mnemonic irrelevancies ie, the intrusion of private and personal associations.

5) Another is the critical trap called stock responses, based on privately established judgments. These happen when a poem seems to involve views and emotions already fully prepared in the reader's mind.

6) Sentimentality, ie, excessive emotions

7) inhibition , ie hardness of heart are also perils to understanding poetry.

8) Doctrinal adhesions present another troublesome problem. The views and beliefs about the world contained in poetry could become a fertile source of confusion and erratic judgment.

9) Technical presuppositions too can pose a difficulty. When something has once been done in a certain fashion we tend to expect similar things to be done in the future in the same fashion, and are disappointed or do not recognise them if they are done differently. This is to judge poetry from outside by technical details. We put means before ends.

10) Finally, general critical preconceptions resulting from theories about its nature and value come between the reader and the poem.

Through close analysis of poems and by responding to the emotion and meaning in them the students were to achieve what Richards called an 'organized response.' From this stems Richard's 'psychologism' which is concerned not with the poem per se but with the responses to it.

Poetry and Synaesthesia.

In *The Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), Richards establishes the nature and value of poetry. According to him, the science that unearths the secrets of literature is psychology. He first examines the working of the human mind itself to find out a psychological theory of value. He describes the human mind as a system of 'impulses', which may be defined as 'attitudes' or reactions motivated in us by 'stimuli', that culminate in an act. These impulses are conflicting instincts and desires and wants—or 'appetencies' as Richards calls them, as opposed to 'aversions' — in the human mind. They pull in different directions and cause uneasiness to the human mind which looks to achieve order or poise through the satisfaction of appetencies. The mind experiences a state of poise only when these emotions organize to follow a common course. But with each new experience, the whole system is disturbed and the human mind has to readjust the impulses in a new way to achieve the desired system or poise. To achieve this poise, some impulses are satisfied and some give way to others and are frustrated. The ideal state will be when all the impulses are fully satisfied, but since this is rarely possible, the next best state is when the maximum number of impulses are satisfied and the minimum are frustrated.

The value of art or poetry – and by poetry Richards means all imaginative literature – is that it enables the mind to achieve this poise or system more quickly and completely than it could do otherwise. In art there is a resolution and balancing of impulses. Poetry is a representation of this uniquely ordered state of mind in which the impulses respond to a stimulus in such a manner that the mind has a life's experience. The poet records this happy play of impulses on a particular occasion, though much that goes into the making of a poem is unconsciously done. It is to partake of this experience that the true reader reads poetry. Good poetry arouses the same experience in the reader too. Thus, poetry becomes a means by which we can gain emotional balance, mental equilibrium, peace and rest. Poetry organizes our impulses and gives our mind a certain order, renders us happy and makes our minds healthy. What is true of the individual is also true of society. A society in which arts are freely cultivated exhibits better mental and emotional tranquillity than the societies in which arts are not valued. This moral value of art proceeds from the working of the human

mind rather than from any ethical base. Art or poetry is valuable in that it integrates our activities, resolves our mental conflicts and tensions and leads us to a liberated state. Richards calls this harmonized state, this balancing of conflicting impulses “synaesthesia”. It is the simultaneous harmonious experience of diverse sensations and impulses resulting in a fusion of opposites or unification of differences. Synaesthesia is a condition in which one experiences equilibrium of harmonious elements. In the experience of synaesthesia, there is a sense of detachment that is conducive to the formation of a completely coordinated personality.

Four Kinds of Meaning

In *Practical Criticism*, *The Meaning of Meaning* and *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Richards advocates a close textual and verbal analysis of poetry. Language is made up of words and hence the study of words is of paramount importance in the understanding of a work of art. Words, according to Richards, communicate four kinds of meaning. Or, the total meaning of a word is a combination of four contributory aspects — Sense, Feeling, Tone, and Intention. Poetry communicates through the interplay of these four types of meanings.

Sense is that which is communicated by the plain literal meanings of the words. When the writer makes an utterance, he directs his hearers’ attention upon some state of affairs, some items for their thought and consideration. Feeling refers to the feelings of the writer or speaker about these items, about the state of affairs he is referring to. He has an attitude towards it, some special bias, or interest, some personal flavour or colouring of it, and he uses language to express these feelings. In poetry, sense and feeling have a mutual dependence. “The sound of a word has much to do with the feeling it evokes.” Tone means the attitude of the writer towards his readers. The writer or the speaker chooses and arranges the words differently as his audience varies, depending on his relation to them. Besides these, the speaker’s intention or aim, conscious or unconscious, should also be taken into account. Intention refers to the effect one tries to produce, which modifies one’s expression. It controls the emphasis and shapes the arrangement. ‘It may govern the stress laid upon points in an argument. It controls the ‘plot’ in the larger sense of the word.’ The understanding of all these aspects is part of the whole business of apprehending the meaning of poetry.

Generally, sense predominates in the scientific language and feeling in the poetic language. The figurative language used by poets conveys emotions effectively and forcefully. Words also acquire a rich associative

value in different contexts. The meaning of words is also determined by rhythm and metre. Just as the eye reading print unconsciously expects the spelling to be as usual, the mind after reading a line or two of verse begins to anticipate the flow of poetry. This anticipation becomes precise when there is regularity of sound created through rhythm and metre.

For the purpose of communication, the use of metaphoric language is all important. "A metaphor is a shift, a carrying over of a word from its normal use to a new use". Metaphors may be of two kinds : (1) sense-metaphors, and (2) emotive-metaphors. In a sense-metaphor the shift is due to a similarity between the original object and the new one. In an emotive metaphor the shift is due to a similarity between the feelings the new situation and the normal situation arouse. The same word in different contexts may be a sense-metaphor or an emotive one. Metaphor, says Richards, is a method by which the writer can crowd into the poem much more than would be possible otherwise. The metaphorical meaning arises from the inter-relations of sense, tone, feeling and intention. "A metaphor is a point at which many different influences may cross or unite. Hence its dangers in prose discussions and its treacherousness for careless readers of poetry, but hence, at the same time, its peculiar quasi-magical sway in the hands of a master." In poetry, I.A. Richards sums up, statements turn out to be the indirect expressions of Feeling, Tone and Intention.

To sum up in the words of George Watson, "Richards is simply the most influential theorist of the century, as Eliot is the most influential of descriptive critics." Richards' laid the strong foundation of Anglo-American New Criticism of the thirties and forties. He provided the theoretical foundations on which the technique of verbal analysis was built. He turned criticism into a science, and considered knowledge of psychology necessary for literary criticism. He inspired a host of followers, the most notable of whom is William Empson. With him, textual analysis came to dominate academic criticism. This anti-historical criticism became New Criticism. Undoubtedly, Richards is one of its primary founding fathers.

Glossary

- **Synesthesia**: Synaesthesia is defined as our readiness "to take any direction we choose", but in synaesthesia evidently, we do not choose.

- **Stock-response:** some undifferentiated responses to images and symbols whenever they occur, irrespective of context.
- **Ambiguity:** Empson uses the term ambiguity 'in an extended sense', to refer to 'any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language'.
- **Pseudo-statement:** statement in poetry (unlike in science) which uses emotive language. It is not governed by logic and facts, but by emotions.