I. A. RICHARDS PRACTICAL CRITICISM (1929)

The influence of Arnold on Richards and, in turn, Richards on the study of literature in the first half of the twentieth century at least is incalculable. Richards is the founding figure of what is today called 'reader-response criticism' in that for him the meaning of a poem is entirely tied up with the reader's experience of and response to it. Like Arnold and others before him, he accepts that literature has an impact on the reader. What literature does to readers is very important. However, like Arnold, he is also concerned with what the reader does to a work, to be precise, the ways in which readers interpret works and as a result of which misunderstandings occur. Richards is of the view that a literary work has a single meaning (derived from what the speaker / writer put there) but that there are obstacles which stand between the reader and his / her grasp of this meaning. Today, by contrast to the views of Arnold and Richards, the view predominates among reader-response theorists that meaning is not simply found in a work but is imposed upon it by the reader in the light of his personal inclinations and predispositions. Reading, in short, is not thought today to be an objective and passive process but an entirely subjective and creative affair.

In this extract from Practical Criticism (chapter 1), Richards takes up where Arnold leaves off his discussion of the necessity of objectivity on the part of the reader by tackling the linguistic obstacles to be found in the way of such objectivity. In Practical Criticism, Richards recounts how as a lecturer at Cambridge he became fascinated with the fact that responses to the same work could be so widely divergent, even on the part of the intelligent and highly educated. This stimulated him to give out poems to his students without titles or names on it which he then asked them to analyse. He collected their equally anonymous comments (what he called 'protocols') and then compared them in an effort to understand why sometimes their interpretations could be accurate and sometimes wrong. After pondering for a long while on the causes of these misunderstandings, he came up with the view that there are four different components by which the meaning of any use of language is communicated. As listeners and readers, he writes, the "total meaning we are engaged with is, almost always, a blend, a combination of several contributory meanings of different types" (827). There are four "types of function, four kinds of meaning" (827):

- *Sense*: we speak "to *say something*, . . . to direct our hearer's attention upon some state of affairs" (827).
- *Feeling*: Richards writes that

  > we also, as a rule, have some feelings *about these items*, about the state of affairs we are referring to. We have an attitude towards it, some special direction, bias, or accentuation of interest towards it, some personal flavour or colouring of feeling; and we use language to express these feelings, this nuance of interest. Equally when we listen we pick it up. (827)

- *Tone*: Richards argues that the

  > speaker ordinarily has *an attitude to his listener*. He chooses or arranges his words differently as his audience varies. . . . The tone of his utterance reflects his awareness of this relation, his sense of how he stands towards those he is addressing. (827)

- *Intention*: this is the speaker's or writer's

  > aim, *conscious or unconscious*, the effect he is endeavouring to promote. Ordinarily he speaks for a purpose, and his purpose modifies his speech. The understanding of it is part of the whole business of apprehending his meaning. (828)

  The intention may govern the "stress laid upon points in an argument for example, shape the arrangement" (827); it "controls the plot . . . and is at work whenever the author is 'hiding his hand'" (828).

Different uses of language emphasise some of these various components more than others according to their function, as a result of which "at times, now one now another of the functions become predominant" (828). Scientific treatises, for example, would emphasise sense but downplay feeling. By contrast, these

four constituent elements of meaning would be arranged differently in work designed to popularise scientific research rather be addressed solely to an academic elite. In political speeches, intentionality or purpose would normally predominate, etc.

Richards is of the view that listeners and readers misunderstand the meaning of a particular statement when they emphasise that function or kind of meaning which is not meant to be predominant in that type of statement. This is especially true of poetry. He argues that the "statements" (829) which appear in poetry are there "for the sake of their effects upon feelings, not for their own sake" (829). Many, he argues, "if not most, of the statements in poetry are there *as a means* to the manipulation and expression of feelings and attitudes, not as contributions to any body of doctrine of any type whatever" (829). All in all, what occurs is a "subjugation of statement to emotive purposes" (829). (Elsewhere, in another famous book of his called Science and Poetry [1926], he for this reason calls the claims made by poetry *pseudo-statements*.) Therefore, to "challenge their truth or to question whether they deserve serious attention *as statements claiming truth*, is to mistake their function" (829). Hence, the confusion which surrounds what exactly Keats meant when he wrote mysteriously that 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' or when another poet describes his soul as a 'ship in full sail.' In short, we must not look primarily for truth-claims in poetry but for what texts do to the reader, their impact on our emotions. (He deals with the effect of literature on the reader in greater detail in another famous book of his: Principles of Literary Criticism [1924]). Richards's student William Empson carried all this one step further when he wrote his own equally famous Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930) in which he explores the various ambiguities found in language which contribute to misunderstandings.