

I. A. RICHARDS PRACTICAL CRITICISM (1929)

Richards, I. A. Practical Criticism: a Study of Literary Judgment. London: Kegan Paul, 1929.

In this seminal work, Richards' thesis is that the reader-critic should strive to be objective. This is not, however, a straightforward undertaking given the numerous obstacles of a linguistic nature strewn in the way of all aspirations towards such objectivity. Richards' methodology is a scientific one. His approach is, specifically, *inductive*. That is, he does not start from certain a priori principles or assumptions concerning the nature of literary interpretation and how objectivity may accordingly be attained (this would be a *deductive* approach). Rather, he starts as any good scientist would by seeking to assemble certain *empirical* facts. In this case, he gathers the actual responses offered by real undergraduate students in a class room setting at the university of Cambridge the accuracy of which he then attempts to assess. The next step is to analyse the results and come up with a theory designed to explain these results. The final step is to provide a remedy by which to circumvent the faulty interpretive strategies responsible for these false readings and to implement, by contrast, correct interpretive strategies designed to lead one to an accurate reading of the meaning of the work in question. Of course, notwithstanding the inductive approach which he applies, it should be pointed out that Richards is not without his presuppositions. To be precise, his main assumption is that works have a single, correct meaning and that it is possible to grasp this meaning. It is on this basis that he proceeds to explore why this meaning is often so difficult to arrive at.

PART I : INTRODUCTORY (1-16)

Here, Richards recounts how as a lecturer at the university of Cambridge he became fascinated with the fact that responses to the same literary work could be so widely divergent, even on the part of students who were supposed to be very intelligent and highly educated. Why, he wondered, did students respond in such divergent ways to the very same works? This stimulated him to give out poems to his students without titles or names on it – he did this so that students would not be swayed by any assumptions which they may have already possessed concerning the author or the work in question (see Appendices C and D). He then asked the students to interpret these poems, collected their comments (what he called 'protocols'), and compared them.

PART II : DOCUMENTATION (19-170)

Here, Richard lays out the 13 poems together with the students' responses to them, all this with a view to documenting the sheer variety and divergence of their interpretations of the very same works.

PART III : ANALYSIS (173-291)

Chapter 1 "The Four Kinds of Meaning"

Richards is left with much to ponder after collecting and collating the students' responses: "a hundred verdicts from a hundred readers . . . a result at the very opposite pole from my hope and intention" (173). He notes that the *original* difficulty of all reading, the problem of *making out the meaning*, is

our obvious starting-point. The answers to these apparently simple questions: 'What is a meaning?' 'What are we doing when we endeavour to make it out?' 'What is it we are making out?' are the master-keys to all problems of criticism. If we can make use of them the locked chambers and corridors of theory of poetry open to us, and a new and impressive order is discovered even in the most erratic twists of the protocols. (174)

Richards comes up with the view that "there are several kinds of meaning" (174). 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" (174). This is because "language as it is used in poetry . . . has not one but several tasks to perform simultaneously" (174). For this reason, "we shall misconceive most of the difficulties of criticism unless we understand this point and take note of the difference between these functions" (174). There are four "types of function, four kinds of meaning" (175) found in all uses of language:

- *Sense*: we speak "to say something, . . . to direct our hearer's attention upon some state of affairs, to present to them some items for consideration, and to excite in them some thoughts about these items" (175). To put this another way, words must communicate to some degree a claim of some sort about the world (Richards is alluding here to the 'correspondence' theory of language).
 - *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, rightly or wrongly; it seems inextricably part of what we receive. (175)
- Under the term 'feeling,' he clarifies in a footnote, he groups the "whole conative-affective aspect of life – emotions, emotional attitudes, the will, desire, pleasure-unpleasure, and the rest. 'Feeling' is shorthand for any or all of this" (175).
- *Tone*: moreover, 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. (175)
 - *Intention*: Richards distinguishes the speaker's 'intention' from "what he says (Sense), his attitudes to what he is talking about (Feeling), and his attitude to his listener (Tone)" (176). Intention 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. (176)

Sometimes the speaker's intention is merely to "state his thoughts" (176) (hence, an emphasis on Sense), or "express his feelings about what he is thinking" (176) (Feeling), or to "express his attitude to his listener" (176). Frequently, in other words, his intention "operates through and satisfies itself in a combination of other functions" (176). However, it is "not reducible to their effects" (176). For example, it may "govern the stress laid upon points in an argument. . . , shape the arrangement" (176), "call attention to itself in such phrases as 'for contrast's sake'

or 'lest it be supposed'" (176), and so on; it also "controls the plot . . . and is at work whenever the author is 'hiding his hand'" (176).

The protocols reveal copious examples of the "failure on the part of one or other of these functions. Sometimes all four fail together . . . and often a partial collapse of one function entail aberrations in the others" (177). The "possibilities of human misunderstanding make up indeed a formidable subject for study" (177).

Richards proceeds to argue that different uses of language emphasise one or more than one of these components more than others as a result of which "at times, now one now another of the functions become predominant" (177). Scientific treatises, for example, would emphasise 'sense' but downplay 'feeling,' while the 'tone' would be "settled . . . by academic convention" (177): he will, Richards, asserts, "indicate respect for his readers and a moderate anxiety to be understood accurately" (177). The scientist's 'intention' would normally be "confined to the clearest and most adequate statement of what he has to say" (177) or, in some circumstances, to the desire to "reorient opinion, to direct attention to new aspects, or to encourage or discourage certain methods of work or ways of approach" (177). By contrast, these four constituent elements of meaning would be arranged differently in work designed to popularise scientific research rather than addressed solely to an academic elite. For example, a "precise and adequate statement of the sense may have to be sacrificed, to some degree, in the interests of general intelligibility" (178), a "much more lively exhibition of feelings on the part of the author towards his subject-matter is usually appropriate and desirable" (177), and greater "tact" (178) should inform his tone. Richards then turns his attention to political speeches where, he avers, the "furtherance of intentions . . . is unmistakable predominant" (178) but relies on the "expression of feelings about causes, policies, leaders and opponents" (178) as well as the 'establishment of favourable relations with the audience" (178). In such discourses, sense, the "presentation of facts" (178), is often "subordinated" (178) to the other functions.

The "statements" (180) which "appear" (180) in poetry, Richards' real concern, are there "for the sake of their effects upon feelings, not for their own sake" (180). 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" (180). All in all, what occurs is a "subjugation of statement to emotive purposes" (180). (He argues elsewhere, in another famous book of his called Science and Poetry [1926], the truth-claims made by poetry are really *pseudo-statements*.) Therefore, to "challenge their truth or to question whether they deserve serious attention *as statements claiming truth*, is to mistake their function" (180). Hence, the confusion which surrounds what exactly the Romantic poet Keats meant when he wrote mysteriously at the end of his famous "Ode on a Grecian Urn" 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 the poet's feelings which are expressed therein and which in turn have an impact on the reader's own feelings. He deals with the effect of literature on the reader in greater detail in yet 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.

All in all, 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. From this perspective, misunderstanding is always a possibility but it can be avoided.

Chapter 2 "Figurative Language"

Chapter 3 "Sense and Feeling"

Chapter 4 "Poetic Form"

Chapter 5 "Irrelevant Associations and Stock Responses"

Chapter 6 "Sentimentality and Inhibition"

Chapter 7 "Doctrine in Poetry"

Chapter 8 "Technical Presuppositions and Critical Preconceptions"

PART IV: SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS (292-329)

I "Culture in the Protocols"

II "The Services of Psychology"

III "Suggestions Towards a Remedy"