

Paper 10: Module No 19: E Text

MHRD-UGC ePG Pathshala - English

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Paper No & Title: Literary Criticism and Theory (Paper 10)

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Module Number & Title: I A Richards and Practical Criticism (19)

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Introduction – What is Practical Criticism?

I have set three aims before me, in constructing this book. First, to introduce a new kind of documentation to those who are interested in the contemporary state of culture ... Secondly, to provide a new technique for those who wish to discover for themselves what they think and feel about poetry (and cognate matters) and why they should like or dislike it. Thirdly, to prepare the way for educational methods more efficient than those we use now in developing discrimination and the power to understand what we hear and read.

- I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism*

The technique of Practical Criticism and the name originates in I.A. Richards' book *Practical Criticism* (1929), in which he described an experiment wherein undergraduate students of English were given unfamiliar poems, and were asked to read and to submit written comments upon them. With these student documentations or 'protocols', Richards theorized a model of literary criticism that would do two things. First, it would treat literary texts as behaviours, as external phenomena without reference to internal mental states. Second, it would record how the stimuli of poems affected readers physiologically and use these results to ground analyses of meaning and form. Practical Criticism, as conceived by Richards, pays attention to very small units of language in short lyric poems in a way that leads directly to the New Critics' emphasis on 'the poem in itself', and their associated rejection of the analysis of any kind of historical or political context.

The objective of Richards' experiment was to encourage students to concentrate on 'the words on the page', rather than relying on preconceived ideas about a text. Richards classified the student-responses into the following categories: inability to understand the author's meaning - sense, feeling, tone and intention; problems with the capacity to visualize and therefore understand imagery; dependence on stock or sentimental response; confusion

when a reader's beliefs conflict with those in a poem; being misled by personal associations: confusion resulting from a reliance on critical preconception and technical prejudgments. For Richards, the chief cause of these "ill-appropriate, stereotyped reactions is withdrawal from experience". The students did not read the poem, but understood the poem based on what others had told them. Following this, Practical Criticism may be defined as a close textual, verbal analysis of a work of art. The study is pragmatic and empirical, and makes literary criticism factual and scientific analysis.

As against to a teacher reading a poem and lecturing on the verses, Richards devised an alternative method that encouraged independent reading and thinking of students. He was preoccupied with the following questions - how does a piece of writing communicate to the reader? How is the reader able to explain what is communicated? Can this type of communication be done in a precise way? Do poems look different if they are presented in isolation from the circumstances in which they were written or circulated? Do critical responses change if the reader is aware of some contextual information? How do we read a literary work without knowing its context — a period, a chronology, a social, political, religious, and intellectual background, a body of similar and contrasting works, works by the same and by related authors, linguistic and stylistic conventions, the relevant conceptions of art and literature and their role in the world.

Richards is critical of the framework of literature-classrooms and argues that "The idle hours of most lives are filled with reveries that are simply bad private poetry" (320). For Richards, practical criticism — the close and attentive reading of the words of the poem — is "an opening up of the poem for what it can really be for us: a unique and fascinating experience, carefully wrought by its maker, and fully available only to those with the patience, as well as the sensibility, to recreate" (5). However, the results of Richards' experiment "was horrifying. Magazine poetasters were extravagantly praised, Donne, Hopkins, and Christina

Rossetti firmly damned; every felicity was ridiculed, and every absurdity praised, by large minorities and even majorities.” Without the intellectual history, the opinion and background of a literary work, the ideal meeting of an isolated mind with an isolated text, then, does not happen. Richards’ project, practical criticism, is a means to train the literary community and create conditions favourable to commune effectively with the poem.

Theoretical framework of Practical Criticism

Richards lists three aims for Practical Criticism:

to introduce a new kind of documentation to those who are interested in the contemporary state culture whether as critics, as philosophers, as teachers, as psychologists, or merely as curious persons.

to provide a new technique for those who wish to discover for themselves what they think and feel about poetry, and why should like or dislike it

to prepare way for educational methods more efficient than those who use now in developing discrimination and the power to understand what we hear and read. (3)

The heart of Richards’ framework of Practical Criticism is the idea that poetry is essentially a private experience. Practical Criticism as a technique of reading appears in Richards’ earlier work *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924). Richards’ practical criticism is an exercise that is presupposed on the working of a mind as part of the nervous system, as part of impulses. In *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Richards defines a poet is one who can order his experiences and connect his disconnected impulses into “a single ordered response” (245). Language has to be used in a special “emotive” way so that the poet’s experiences can be stimulated in the mind of the reader. Reading a poem, then, is a process that will culminate in stimulating “equilibrium of opposed impulses” (251). There is no need of any context. The words of the

poem ought to produce these impulses in the mind of the reader. The reader must understand the meaning based on the immediate impulses produced.

Meaning is of four kinds – *sense* is the state/object to which the words direct the reader's attention; *feeling* is the way the author sees these objects/states; *tone* is the author's attitude towards the reader; *intention* is the effect which the author is trying to bring about by his words. "Understanding meaning", therefore, is a complicated process, requiring a grasp not only of each of the four kinds of meaning, but also of their interrelations in the text. Also, a poem must produce in the reader appropriate responses to meter, rhythm, and the visual and aural character of words. Richards claims in *Practical Criticism*: "The only proper attitude is to look upon a successful interpretation, a correct understanding, as a triumph against odds. We must cease to regard a misinterpretation as a mere unlucky accident. We must treat it as the normal and probable event" (336).

Richards sees a poem and the poetic experience as an isolated subjective experience. The poem is not an object in its own right, but an experience. Ideally it is an experience first of the speaker, and then communicated and induced in the reader. In either case, the poem is not an object existing outside of and independently of the mind. Richards suggests in *Principles of Literary Criticism*: "Let us mean by *Westminster Bridge* not the actual experience which led Wordsworth on a certain morning about a century ago to write what he did, but the class composed of all actual experiences, occasioned by the words, which do not differ within certain limits from that experience" (226). A mind is part of the nervous system, and a mind can influence other minds through the mediation of the stimuli. Then, the experience of reading a poem is a private process which is produced in a particular state of mind — a state of equilibrium. Reading and interpreting the poem induces a similar state of stimulus in the minds of the readers. Reading a poem becomes a private experience, part of transient

equilibrium state of the nervous system, as Richards puts it, “the most delicate of all possible undertakings”:

We have to gather millions of fleeting semi-independent impulses into a momentary structure of fabulous complexity, whose core or germ only is given us in the words. What we ‘make up’, that momentary trembling order in our minds, is exposed to countless irrelevant influences (317).

It has to be noted that Richards does not negate the social character of a literary work. Richards stresses that the purpose of this training in practical criticism is not to acquire a heritage of literary wisdom, but to get rid of the preconceptions and stock responses; not to acquire membership of a literary community, but to commune with poetry – “Our feelings ... are in the end the whole matter” (301). A poetic experience is conducted in the privacy of an individual mind; a discourse on poetry is merely an adjunct and not integral to the understanding of the poem.

Richards rejects the existence of a special ‘aesthetic state’— a mode of experience radically divorced from practical matters such as inquiring and desiring:

When we look at a picture, or read a poem, or listen to music, we are not doing something quite unlike what we were doing on our way to the gallery or when we dressed in the morning. The fashion in which the experience is caused in us is different, and as a rule the experience is more complex and, if we are successful, more unified. But our activity is not of a fundamentally different kind. To assume that it is, puts difficulties in the way of describing and explaining it, which are unnecessary and which no one has yet succeeded in overcoming. (12)

Richards's theoretical project was to insert the aesthetic into the everyday material experience. Without the poems' titles, dates of publication, the poets' names, Richards 'close reading' was a way to intervene in the context of reception, which is to say, the minds of actual, living readers. Criticism, as Richards saw it, was to be a project of aesthetic education.

Key ideas in Richards' Practical Criticism

Richards argues that the relation of text to the author, to cultural roots and background, to other texts are not relational properties of the poem, but only of its stimulus. Knowledge of context merely helps the stimuli to stimulate the minds of the readers and enables the poem to come into existence. Knowledge of context helps the poem to become an experience in the reader's mind, but is not itself part of that experience. The historical and biographical data are not intrinsic to the meaning of the poem. The words of the poem are its individual units of meaning.

Following this, a poem ceases to be a public document, and can be experienced in isolation. The words of the poem may have references, but these references only serve as conditions for provoking the correct response in the reader's mind. Richards denies that poems have an objective existence, or that there is an objective truth embodied in literature. There is no correct interpretation of a poem, and poems are private reveries. Richards considers the correct interpretation of poetry to be difficult and rare. Poetic experiences are a transient event in the individual consciousness, private and isolated, and always threatened by distractions.

Richards departs from the earlier critical method of reading literature, and sees texts less as an example of the primacy of consciousness than as an illusion of language use. As Richards wrote in *Practical Criticism*, language-use is frequently mistaken for introspective self-knowledge:

We do somehow manage to discuss our feelings, sometimes with remarkable facility and success. We say things that seem to be subtle and recondite, and yet true. We do this in spite of our feebleness in introspection and our ignorance of the general nature of feelings. How do we come to be so knowledgeable and clever? . . . Put shortly, the answer seems to be that this knowledge is lying dormant in the dictionary. Language has become its repository, a record, a reflection, as it were, human nature (208).

Richards critiques the idea that a poem is a public object, and its vocabulary and syntax are part of a common literary heritage. Richards dissuades reading poetry as a social and cognitive enterprise. By emphasising that a literary work is a stimulant of personal feeling, Richards dissociates literature from its context. The meaning of a poem is determined by its reader. In this sense, the reader need not be rooted in the intellectual and spiritual concerns of the poet and his society. In Richards' scheme of reading, the reader's encounter with a poem requires him to 'see' the words of the poem, and not listen to the mediators who introduce an author to him. Richards envisions a literary practise where students read the poem, and are trained to realise the fullest potential of a literary work based on the words of the given text.

A work of literature is important for its aesthetic potential. For Richards, aesthetic beauty is not formal beauty as an end in itself, but in its ability to act as means by which readers can develop their practical faculties: "It is less important to like 'good' poetry and dislike 'bad,' than to be able to use them both as a means of ordering our minds" (327). The work of literature, for Richards, was to be therapeutic. It was on the basis of this kind of aesthetic thinking, which sees the aesthetic as a mode of instrumental, rather than final value that Richards develops the methodological innovations of reading practises. Richards seeks to answer the fundamental question - "What is the value of the arts, why are they worth the devotions of the keenest hours of the best minds, and what is their place in the system of human endeavours?" (3)

Afterlife of Practical Criticism

It is never what a poem *says* which matters but what it *is* (30).

Richards has been extraordinarily influential both on literary theory and on critical practice. Richards' dissociation of the poem and the context eventually emerge as the intentional fallacy; and his separation of readers from one another emerge as the affective fallacy. Following Richards' critical methodology, introspection becomes an unreliable literary tool of reading; there is a need to analyse overt behaviours rather than covert mental states of readers; a literary consciousness is seen irrelevant to psychological study of a literary work; and the mental states of poets and readers are seen as neurological actions and conditioning. Richards has an indelible mark on literary concepts such as genre, form, structure, and meaning.

First, when Richards rejects the need of knowing an author's mind, he inaugurates a critical methodology that abnegates the authorial consciousness. The critic's knowledge of the poet's mind is unnecessary. Any attempt to ascertain the mind of the author would compromise the critic's objectivity. Second, Richards describes the cognitive mechanisms by which humans infer semantic meaning. According to Richards, readers "overlook the mind" behind the utterance unless "some very special circumstance calls us back" (6–7). This approach to language based on behavioural psychology reduces the readers' consciousness to reflexes and automatic behaviours. Third, for Richards, poetry cannot be a public text because poetic form transmits data that cannot be logically abstracted. Poetry comprises a range of physiological stimuli. This approach to reading poetic language, production and perception of poetic meaning, becomes a prototype of the literary technique of 'close-reading'. Finally, Richards' translation of poetic language into an aesthetic experience provides a neurological perspective of literary experience – a reading that is enormously critiqued in 1930s.

Critique of Practical Criticism

Allen Tate argued in “The Present Function of Criticism” (1940) that Richards’s bore “the elaborate charts of nerves and nerve-systems that purport to show how the ‘stimuli’ of poems elicit ‘responses’.... How many innocent young men—myself among them—thought, in 1924, that laboratory jargon meant laboratory demonstration!” (24) Even William Empson, Richards’s most influential student, argued in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) that literary criticism should remain separate from science and psychology. One of the central flaws of Richards’s project, Empson explained, was that it understood itself as illuminating psychology through the analysis of literature. Poetry could not be studied as behaviour. Empson explains –

It would be tempting to say I was concerned with science rather than with beauty; to treat poetry as a branch of applied psychology. But, so far as poetry can be regarded altogether dispassionately, so far as it is an external object for examination, it is dead poetry and not worth examining; further, so far as a critic has made himself dispassionate about it, so far as he has repressed sympathy in favour of curiosity, he has made himself incapable of examining it (248).

Cleanth Brooks, William Wimsatt, and Monroe Beardsley borrow Richards’ methodology to develop New Criticism, but critique Richards’ reliance on literature’s cognitive effects to the neuro-physiological composition of the human body. These New Critics attributed these same effects to poetic language and form.

Practical Criticism to New Criticism

Brooks’s *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) and Wimsatt and Beardsley’s 1946 essay “The Intentional Fallacy” borrow Richards’ subjective and experiential model of reading poetry.

These critics, however, accused Richards's physio-affective poetics of perpetuating an affective or genetic fallacy. Richards's attempt to make literary criticism more objective, they concluded, had made the path to objectivity more difficult. Unlike Richards, they argued that literature cannot posit any objective knowledge. While Richards deploys a physiological understanding of language, these critics develop a theory of poetic language that is exclusively semantic, non-affective and wholly removed from Richards's behaviourism. It is poetry not of feeling but of meaning. This eventually becomes a critical movement called the New Criticism.

Richards' identification of a poem with the experience of it, and the distinction of poem from text, William Empson argues, provided the basis for an entire critical method. In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) Empson developed his undergraduate essays for Richards into a study of the complex and multiple meanings of poems. His work had a profound impact on the 'New Criticism', the exponents of which tended to see poems as elaborate structures of complex meanings. New Critics would usually pay relatively little attention to the historical setting of the works which they analysed, treating literature as a sphere of activity of its own. In the work of F.R. Leavis the close analysis of texts became a moral activity, in which a critic would bring the whole of his sensibility to bear on a literary text and test its sincerity and moral seriousness. For New Critics, to speak of experience and effect was to distort the nature of poetic language. Poetry induced emotions in the minds of the readers, but it did so through the transmission of semantic meaning. Poetic language is not affective, nor does it elicit a physiological response. Rather, for New Critics, poetry is a formal composition that is a semantic phenomenon.

Conclusion

The 'practical' in *Practical Criticism* meant technique that is directed towards the practical end of training readers. With the New Criticism, it becomes a method directed towards the 'practical' end of assessing the value of poems against that of other poems. The latter became a critical method used, not to educate the reader, but to adulate the text. For the New Critics, aesthetic value resided in the text. For Richards, aesthetics and poetic experience was a function of the mind of the reader.

Practical criticism today is treated more as an ancillary skill rather than the foundation of a critical method. It is a part of many examinations in literature at almost all levels, and is used to test students' responsiveness to what they read, as well as their knowledge of verse forms and of the technical language for describing the way poems create their effects. The technique of close reading, which is the default method of teaching literature at present, originates in Richards' method of Practical Criticism.

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