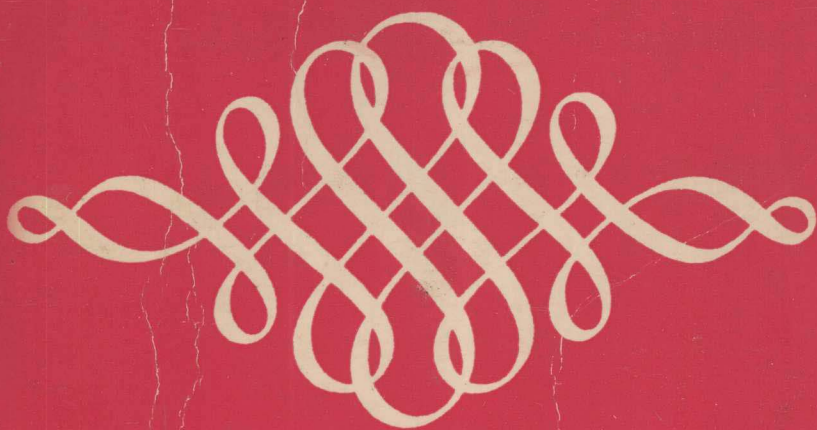


PRACTICAL CRITICISM



I. A. RICHARDS

PRACTICAL CRITICISM

A Study of
LITERARY JUDGMENT

BY

I. A. RICHARDS



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PREFACE

A CONVENIENT arrangement for the parts of this book has not been easy to find. A friendly reader will, I think, soon see why. Those who are curious to discern what motives prompted me to write it will be satisfied most quickly if they begin by glancing through Part IV, which might indeed have been placed as an Introduction.

The length of Part II, and a certain unavoidable monotony, may prove a stumbling-block. I have included very little there, however, that I do not discuss again in Part III, and it need not be read through continuously. A reader who feels some impatience will prudently pass on at once to my attempted elucidations, returning to consult the facts when a renewed contact with actuality is desired.

The later chapters of Part III will be found to have more general interest than the earlier.

I am deeply indebted to the living authors of some of the poems I have used for their permission to print them; a permission which, in view of the peculiar conditions of this experiment, witnesses to no slight generosity of spirit. Some contemporary poems were necessary for my purpose, to avoid the perplexities which 'dated' styles would introduce here. But in making the selection I had originally no thought of publication. The interest of the material supplied me by my commentators and the desire that as many types of poetry as possible should be represented have been the only reasons for my choice. But in those instances in which I have not

been able to form a high opinion of the poems I must ask the forgiveness of the authors and plead as excuse a motive which we have in common, the advancement of poetry.

My acknowledgments are due also to the publishers of these poems. Details of these obligations will be found in Appendix C, in which I have hidden away, as far as I could, particulars as to the authorship and date of the poems. For obvious reasons the interest of these pages will be enhanced if the reader remains unaware of the authorship of the poems until his own opinions of them have been formed and tested by comparison with the many other opinions here given. I would, therefore, earnestly counsel an intending reader not to consult Appendix C until a late stage in his reading.

I. A. R

CAMBRIDGE,

April 1929.

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The reader is recommended not to consult this Appendix until he has read through Part II.

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PART ONE
INTRODUCTORY

INTRODUCTORY

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 whether as critics, as philosophers, as teachers, as psychologists, or merely as curious persons. 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.

For the first purpose I have used copious quotations from material supplied to me as a Lecturer at Cambridge and elsewhere. For some years I have made the experiment of issuing printed sheets of poems—ranging in character from a poem by Shakespeare to a poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox—to audiences who were requested to comment freely in writing upon them. The authorship of the poems was not revealed, and with rare exceptions it was not recognised.

After a week's interval I would collect these comments, taking certain obvious precautions to preserve the anonymity of the commentators, since only through anonymity could complete liberty to express their genuine opinions be secured for the writers. Care was taken to refrain from influencing them either for or against any poem. Four poems were issued at a time in groupings indicated in the

Appendix, in which the poems I am here using will be found. I would, as a rule, hint that the poems were perhaps a mixed lot, but that was the full extent of my interference. I lectured the following week partly upon the poems, but rather more upon the comments, or protocols, as I call them.

Much astonishment both for the protocol-writers and for the Lecturer ensued from this procedure. The opinions expressed were not arrived at lightly or from one reading of the poems only. As a measure of indirect suggestion, I asked each writer to record on his protocol the number of 'readings' made of each poem. A number of perusals made at one session were to be counted together as one 'reading' provided that they aroused and sustained one single growing response to the poem, or alternatively led to no response at all and left the reader with nothing but the bare words before him on the paper. This description of a 'reading' was, I believe, well understood. It follows that readers who recorded as many as ten or a dozen readings had devoted no little time and energy to their critical endeavour. Few writers gave less than four attacks to any of the poems. On the whole it is fairly safe to assert that the poems received much more thorough study than, shall we say, most anthology pieces get in the ordinary course. It is from this thoroughness, prompted by the desire to arrive at some definite expressible opinion, and from the week's leisure allowed that these protocols derive their significance.

The standing of the writers must be made clear. The majority were undergraduates reading English with a view to an Honours Degree. A considerable number were reading other subjects but there is no ground to suppose that these differed for this reason in any essential respect. There was a sprinkling of graduates, and a few members of the audience were non-academic. Men and women were probably

included in about equal numbers, so, in what follows 'he' must constantly be read as equivalent to 'he or she'. There was no compulsion to return protocols. Those who took the trouble to write—about 60 per cent.—may be presumed to have been actuated by a more than ordinarily keen interest in poetry. From such comparisons as I have been able to make with protocols supplied by audiences of other types, I see no reason whatever to think that a higher standard of critical discernment can easily be found under our present cultural conditions. Doubtless, could the Royal Society of Literature or the Academic Committee of the English Association be impounded for purposes of experiment we might expect greater uniformity in the comments or at least in their style, and a more wary approach as regards some of the dangers of the test. But with regard to equally essential matters occasions for surprise might still occur. The precise conditions of this test are not duplicated in our everyday commerce with literature. Even the reviewers of new verse have as a rule a considerable body of the author's work to judge by. And editorial complaints are frequent as to the difficulty of obtaining good reviewing. Editors themselves will not be the slowest to agree with me upon the difficulty of judging verse without a hint as to its provenance.

Enough, for the moment, about the documentation of this book. My second aim is more ambitious and requires more explanation. It forms part of a general attempt to modify our procedure in certain forms of discussion. There are subjects—mathematics, physics and the descriptive sciences supply some of them—which can be discussed in terms of verifiable facts and precise hypotheses. There are other subjects—the concrete affairs of commerce, law, organisation and police work—which can be handled by rules of thumb and generally accepted conven-

tions. But in between is the vast *corpus* of problems, assumptions, adumbrations, fictions, prejudices, tenets; the sphere of random beliefs and hopeful guesses; the whole world, in brief, of abstract opinion and disputation about matters of feeling. To this world belongs everything about which civilised man cares most. I need only instance ethics, metaphysics, morals, religion, æsthetics, and the discussions surrounding liberty, nationality, justice, love, truth, faith and knowledge to make this plain. As a subject-matter for discussion, poetry is a central and typical denizen of this world. It is so both by its own nature and by the type of discussion with which it is traditionally associated. It serves, therefore, as an eminently suitable *bait* for anyone who wishes to trap the current opinions and responses in this middle field for the purpose of examining and comparing them, and with a view to advancing our knowledge of what may be called the natural history of human opinions and feelings.

In part then this book is the record of a piece of field-work in comparative ideology. But I hope, not only to present an instructive collection of contemporary opinions, presuppositions, theories, beliefs, responses and the rest, but also to make some suggestions towards a better control of these tricky components of our lives. The way in which it is hoped to do this can only be briefly indicated at this point.

There are two ways of interpreting all but a very few utterances.

Whenever we hear or read any not too nonsensical opinion, a tendency so strong and so automatic that it must have been formed along with our earliest speech-habits, leads us to consider *what seems to be said* rather than the *mental operations* of the person who said it. If the speaker is a recognised and obvious liar this tendency is, of course, arrested.

We do then neglect what he has said and turn our attention instead to the motives or mechanisms that have caused him to say it. But ordinarily we at once try to consider the objects his words seem to stand for and not the mental goings-on that led him to use the words. We say that we 'follow his thought' and mean, not that we have traced what happened in his mind, but merely that we have gone through a train of thinking that seems to end where he ended. We are in fact so anxious to discover whether we agree or not with what is being said that we overlook the mind that says it, unless some very special circumstance calls us back.

Compare now the attitude to speech of the alienist attempting to 'follow' the ravings of mania or the dream maunderings of a neurotic. I do not suggest that we should treat one another altogether as 'mental cases'¹ but merely that for some subject-matters and some types of discussion the alienist's attitude, his direction of attention, his order or plan of interpretation; is far more fruitful, and would lead to better understanding on both sides of the discussion, than the usual method that our language-habits force upon us. For normal minds are easier to 'follow' than diseased minds, and even more can be learned by adopting the psychologist's attitude to ordinary speech-situations than by studying aberrations.

It is very strange that we have no simple verbal means by which to describe these two different kinds of 'meaning'. Some device as unmistakable as the 'up' or 'down' of a railway signal ought to be

¹ A few touches of the clinical manner will, however, be not out of place in these pages, if only to counteract the indecent tendencies of the scene. For here are our friends and neighbours—nay our very brothers and sisters—caught at a moment of abandon giving themselves and their literary reputations away with an unexampled freedom. It is indeed a sobering spectacle, but like some sights of the hospital-ward very serviceable to restore proportions and recall to us what humanity, behind all its lendings and pretences, is like.