

**I.A. Richards**

**Principles  
of Literary  
Criticism**

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OF  
*Literary Criticism*

I. A. RICHARDS



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## PREFACE

A BOOK is a machine to think with, but it need not, therefore, usurp the functions either of the bellows or the locomotive. This book might better be compared to a loom on which it is supposed to re-weave some ravelled parts of our civilization. What is most important about it, the interconnection of its several points of view, might have been exhibited, though not with equal clarity, in a pamphlet or in a two-volume work. Few of the separate items are original. One does not expect novel cards when playing so traditional a game; it is the hand which matters. I have chosen to present it here on the smallest scale which would allow me to fit together the various positions adopted into a whole of some firmness. The elaborations and expansions which suggest themselves have been constantly cut short at the point at which I thought that the reader would be able to see for himself how they would continue. The danger of this procedure, which otherwise has great advantages both for him and for me, is that the different parts of a connected account such as this mutually illumine one another. The writer, who has, or should have, the whole position in his mind throughout, may overlook sources of obscurity for the reader, due to the serial form of the exposition. This I have endeavoured to prevent by means of numerous cross-references, forwards and backwards.

But some further explanation of the structure of the book is due to the reader. At sundry points – notably in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eleven to Fifteen – its progress appears to be interrupted by lengthy excursions into theory of value, or into general psychology. These I would have omitted if it had seemed in any way possible to develop the argument of the rest strongly and clearly in their absence. Criticism, as I understand it, is the endeavour to discriminate between experiences and to evaluate them. We cannot do this without some understanding of

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the nature of experience, or without theories of valuation and communication. Such principles as apply in criticism must be taken from these more fundamental studies. All other critical principles are arbitrary, and the history of the subject is a record of their obstructive influence. The view of value implied throughout is one which must be held in some form by very many persons. Yet I have been unable to discover anywhere any statement of it to which I might satisfactorily refer the reader. I had to make a fairly full statement with applications and illustrations myself. And I had to put in the forefront of the book where, to the more exclusively literary reader, it will appear a dry and uninviting tract to be crossed for problematical advantages. The same remarks apply to the second theoretical expansion, the psychological chapters; they are to the value chapters, I fear, as a Sahara to a Gobi. No other choice seemed open if I did not wish my later, critical, sections to be misunderstood, than to include as a preliminary what amounts to a concise treatise on psychology. For nearly all the topics of psychology are raised at one point or another by criticism, but raised from an angle which ordinary text-books do not contemplate.

These two deserts passed, the rest of the book accords, I believe, much more closely with what may be expected of an essay in criticism, although the language in which some of the more obvious remarks are couched may seem unnecessarily repellent. The explanation of much of the turgid uncouthness of its terminology is the desire to link even the commonplaces of criticism to a systematic exposition of psychology. The reader who appreciates the advantages so gained will be forgiving.

I have carefully remembered throughout that I am not writing for specialists alone. The omissions, particularly as to qualifications and reservations, which this fact entails, should in fairness to myself be mentioned.

My book, I fear, will seem to many sadly lacking in the conditions which have come to be expected in writings upon literature. Critics and even theorists in criticism currently assume that their first duty is to be moving, to excite in the mind emotions appropriate to their august subject-matter. This endeavour I have declined. I have used, I believe, few words which I could not define in the actual use which I have made of them, and neces-

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sarily such words have little or no emotive power. I have comforted myself with the reflection that there is perhaps something debilitated about a taste for speculation which requires a flavouring of the eternal and the ultimate or even of the literary spices, mystery and profundity. Mixed modes of writing which enlist the reader's feeling as well as his thinking are becoming dangerous to the modern consciousness with its increasing awareness of the distinction. Thought and feeling are able to mislead one another at present in ways which were hardly possible six centuries ago. We need a spell of purer science and purer poetry before the two can again be mixed, if indeed this will ever become once more desirable. In the Second Edition I added a note on Mr. Eliot's poetry which will elucidate what I mean here by purity, and some supplementary remarks upon Value; in the Third, a few minor improvements have been made.

It should be borne in mind that the knowledge which the men of A.D. 3000 will possess, if all goes well, may make all our aesthetics, all our psychology, all our modern theory of value, look pitiful. Poor indeed would be the prospect if this were not so. The thought, 'What shall we do with the powers, which we are so rapidly developing, and what will happen to us if we cannot learn to guide them in time?' already marks for many people the chief interest of existence. The controversies which the world has known in the past are as nothing to those which are ahead. I would wish this book to be regarded as a contribution towards these choices of the future.

Between the possession of ideas and their application there is a gulf. Every teacher winces when he remembers this. As an attempt to attack this difficulty, I am preparing a companion volume, *Practical Criticism*. Extremely good and extremely bad poems were put *unsigned* before a large and able audience. The comments they wrote at leisure give, as it were, a stereoscopic view of the poem and of possible opinion on it. This material when systematically analysed, provides, not only an interesting commentary upon the state of contemporary culture, but a new and powerful educational instrument.

I. A. R.

*Cambridge, May 1928.*

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*For definition of terms in special senses the Index may be consulted.*



## Chapter One

# THE CHAOS OF CRITICAL THEORIES

O monstrous! but one half-pennyworth of bread to this intolerable deal of sack! – *The First Part of King Henry the Fourth*

THE literature of Criticism is not small or negligible, and its chief figures, from Aristotle onwards, have often been among the first intellects of their age. Yet the modern student, surveying the field and noting the simplicity of the task attempted and the fragments of work achieved, may reasonably wonder what has been and is amiss. For the experiences with which criticism is concerned are exceptionally accessible, we have only to open the book, stand before the picture, have the music played, spread out the rug, pour out the wine, and the material upon which the critic works is presently before us. Even too abundantly, in too great fullness perhaps: 'More warmth than Adam needs' the critic may complain, echoing Milton's complaint against the climate of the Garden of Eden; but he is fortunate not to be starved of matter like the investigator of psychoplasm. And the questions which the critic seeks to answer, intricate though they are, do not seem to be extraordinarily difficult. What gives the experience of reading a certain poem its value? How is this experience better than another? Why prefer this picture to that? In which ways should we listen to music so as to receive the most valuable moments? Why is one opinion about works of art not as good as another? These are the fundamental questions which criticism is required to answer, together with such preliminary questions – What is a picture, a poem, a piece of music? How can experiences be compared? What is value? – as may be required in order to approach these questions.

But if we now turn to consider what are the results yielded by the best minds pondering these questions in the light of the

eminently accessible experiences provided by the Arts, we discover an almost empty garner. A few conjectures, a supply of admonitions, many acute isolated observations, some brilliant guesses, much oratory and applied poetry, inexhaustible confusion, a sufficiency of dogma, no small stock of prejudices, whimsies and crotchets, a profusion of mysticism, a little genuine speculation, sundry stray inspirations, pregnant hints and random *aperçus*; of such as these, it may be said without exaggeration, is extant critical theory composed.

A few specimens of the most famous utterances of Aristotle, Longinus, Horace, Boileau, Dryden, Addison, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Carlyle, Matthew Arnold and some more modern authors, will justify this assertion. 'All men naturally receive pleasure from imitation.' 'Poetry is chiefly conversant about general truth.' 'It demands an enthusiasm allied to madness; transported out of ourselves we become what we imagine.' 'Beautiful words are the very and peculiar light of the mind.' 'Let the work be what you like, provided it has simplicity and unity.' 'De Gustibus. . . .' 'Of writing well right thinking is the beginning and the fount.' 'We must never separate ourselves from Nature.' 'Delight is the chief, if not the only end; instruction can be admitted but in the second place.' 'The pleasures of Fancy are more conducive to health than those of the understanding.' 'The spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling.' 'The best words in the best order.' 'The whole soul of man in activity.' 'Unity in variety.' 'The synthetic and magical power of the imagination.' 'The eye on the object.' 'The disimprisonment of the soul of fact.' 'The identification of content and form.' 'A criticism of Life.' 'Empathy favourable to our existence.' 'Significant form.' 'The expression of impressions,' etc. etc.

Such are the pinnacles, the *apices* of critical theory, the heights gained in the past by the best thinkers in their attempt to reach explanations of the value of the arts. Some of them, many of them indeed, are profitable starting-points for reflection, but neither together, nor singly, nor in any combination do they give what is required. Above them and below them, around and about them can be found other things of value, of service for the appreciation of particular poems and works of art; comment, elucidation, appraisal, much that is fit occupation for the contemplative

mind. But apart from hints such as have been cited, no explanations. The central question, What is the value of the arts, why are they worth the devotion of the keenest hours of the best minds, and what is their place in the system of human endeavours? is left almost untouched, although without some clear view it would seem that even the most judicious critic must often lose his sense of position.

But perhaps the literature of Criticism is the wrong place in which to expect such an inquiry. Philosophers, Moralists and Aestheticians are perhaps the competent authorities? There is certainly no lack of treatises upon the Good and the Beautiful, upon Value and upon the Aesthetic State, and the treasures of earnest endeavour lavished upon these topics have not been in vain. Those investigators who have relied upon Reason, upon the Select Intuition and the Ineluctable Argument, who have sat down without the necessary facts to think the matter out, have at least thoroughly discredited a method which apart from their labours would hardly have been suspected of the barrenness it has shown. And those who, following Fechner, have turned instead to the collection and analysis of concrete, particular facts and to empirical research into aesthetics have supplied a host of details to psychology. In recent years especially, much useful information upon the processes which make up the appreciation of works of art has been skilfully elicited. But it is showing no ingratitude to these investigators if we point out certain defects of almost all experimental work on aesthetics, which make their results at best of only indirect service to our wider problems.

The most obvious of these concerns their inevitable choice of experiments. Only the simplest human activities are at present amenable to laboratory methods. Aestheticians have therefore been compelled to begin with as simple form of 'aesthetic choice' as can be devised. In practice, line-lengths and elementary forms, single notes and phrases, single colours and simple collocations, nonsense syllables, metronomic beats, skeleton rhythms and metres and similar simplifications have alone been open to investigation. Such more complex objects as have been examined have yielded very uncertain results, for reasons which anyone who has ever *both* looked at a picture or read a poem *and* been

inside a psychological laboratory or conversed with a representative psychologist will understand.

The generalizations to be drawn from these simple experiments are, if we do not expect too much, encouraging. Some light upon obscure processes, such as empathy, and upon the intervention of muscular imagery and tendencies to action into the apprehension of shapes and of sequences of sounds which had been supposed to be apprehended by visual or auditory apparatus alone, some interesting facts about the plasticity of rhythm, some approach towards a classification of the different ways in which colours may be regarded, increased recognition of the complexity of even the simplest activities, these and similar results have been well worth the trouble expended. But more important has been the revelation of the great variety in the responses which even the simplest stimuli elicit. Even so unambiguous an object as a plain colour, it has been found, can arouse in different persons and in the same person at different times extremely different states of mind. From this result it may seem no illegitimate step to conclude that highly complex objects, such as pictures, will arouse a still greater variety of responses, a conclusion very awkward for any theory of criticism, since it would appear to decide adversely the preliminary question: 'How may experiences be compared?' which any such theory must settle if the more fundamental questions of value are to be satisfactorily approached.

But just here a crucial point arises. There seems to be good reason to suppose that the more simple the object contemplated the more varied the responses will be which can be expected from it. For it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to contemplate a comparatively simple object by itself. Inevitably it is taken by the contemplator into some context, and made part of some larger whole, and under such experimental conditions as have yet been devised it seems not possible to guarantee the kind of context into which it is taken. A comparison with the case of words is instructive. A single word by itself, let us say 'night', will raise almost as many different thoughts and feelings as there are persons who hear it. The range of variety with a single word is very little restricted. But put it into a sentence and the variation is narrowed; put it into the context of a whole passage, and it is still further fixed; and let it occur in such an intricate whole as a

poem and the responses of competent readers may have a similarity which only its occurrence in such a whole can secure. The point will arise for discussion when the problem of corroboration for critical judgements is dealt with later (cf. pp. 166, 178, 192). It had to be mentioned here in order to explain why the theory of criticism shows no great dependence upon experimental aesthetics, useful in many respects as these investigations are.

## Chapter Two

### THE PHANTOM AESTHETIC STATE

None of his follies will he repent, none will he wish to repeat;  
no happier lot can be assigned to man. – *Wilhelm Meister*

A MORE serious defect in aesthetics is the avoidance of considerations as to value. It is true that an ill-judged introduction of value considerations usually leads to disaster, as in Tolstoy's case. But the fact that some of the experiences to which the arts give rise are valuable and take the form they do because of their value is not irrelevant. Whether this fact is of service in analysis will naturally depend upon the theory of value adopted. But to leave it out of account altogether is to run the risk of missing the clue to the whole matter. And the clue has in fact been missed.

All modern aesthetics rests upon an assumption which has been strangely little discussed, the assumption that there is a distinct *kind* of mental activity present in what are called aesthetic experiences. Ever since 'the first rational word concerning beauty'<sup>1</sup> was spoken by Kant, the attempt to define the 'judgement of taste' as concerning pleasure which is disinterested, universal, unintellectual, and not to be confused with the pleasures of sense or of ordinary emotions, in short to make it a thing *sui generis*, has continued. Thus arises the phantom problem of the aesthetic mode or aesthetic state, a legacy from the days of abstract investigation into the Good, the Beautiful and the True.

The temptation to align this tripartite division with a similar division into Will, Feeling and Thought was irresistible. 'All the faculties of the Soul, or capacities, are reducible to three, which do not admit of any further derivation from a common ground: the *faculty of knowledge*, the *feeling of pleasure or displeasure*,

<sup>1</sup> Hegel's dictum, *History of Philosophy*, iii, 543.

and the *faculty of desire*<sup>1</sup> said Kant. Legislative for each of these faculties stood Understanding, Judgement and Reason respectively. 'Between the faculties of knowledge and desire stands the feeling of pleasure, just as judgement is intermediate between understanding and reason.' And he went on to discuss aesthetics as appertaining to the province of judgement, the middle one of these three, the first and last having already occupied him in his two other Critiques of Pure and Practical Reason respectively. The effect was virtually to annex aesthetics to Idealism, in which fabric it has ever since continued to serve important purposes.

This accident of formal correspondence has had an influence upon speculation which would be ridiculous if it had not been so disastrous. It is difficult even now to get out of ruts which have been seen to lead nowhere. With the identification of the provinces of Truth and Thought no quarrel arises, and the Will and the Good are, as we shall see, intimately connected, but the attempts to fit Beauty into a neat pigeon-hole with Feeling have led to calamitous distortions. It is now generally abandoned,<sup>2</sup> although echoes of it can be heard everywhere in critical writings. The peculiar use of 'emotion' by reviewers, and the prevalence of the phrase 'aesthetic emotion' is one of them. In view, then, of the objections to Feeling, something else, some special mode of mental activity, had to be found, to which Beauty could belong. Hence arose the aesthetic mode. Truth was the object of the inquiring activity, of the Intellectual or Theoretical part of the mind, and the Good that of the willing, desiring, practical part; what part could be found for the Beautiful? Some activity that was neither inquisitive nor practical, that did not question and did not seek to use. The result was the aesthetic, the contemplative, activity which is still defined, in most treatments,<sup>3</sup> by these negative conditions alone, as that mode of commerce with things which is neither intellectual inquiry into their nature, nor an attempt to make them satisfy our desire. The experiences which arise in contemplating objects of art were then discovered to be describable in some such terms, and system secured a temporary triumph.

<sup>1</sup> *Critique of Judgment* transl. by Meredith, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Bosanquet was one of the last adherents. See his *Three Lectures on Aesthetics*.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Vernon Lee, *The Beautiful*.

It is true that many of these experiences do present peculiarities, both in the intellectual interest which is present and in the way in which the development of desires within them takes place, and these peculiarities – detachment, impersonality, serenity and so forth – are of great interest. They will have to be carefully examined in the sequel.

We shall find that two entirely different sets of characters are involved. They arise from quite different causes but are hard to distinguish introspectively. Taken as marking off a special province for inquiry they are most unsatisfactory. They would yield for our purposes, even if they were not so ambiguous, a diagonal or slant classification. Some of the experiences which most require to be considered would be left out and many which are without importance brought in. To choose the aesthetic state as the starting-point for an inquiry into the values of the arts is in fact somewhat like choosing ‘rectangular, and red in parts’ as a definition of a picture. We should find ourselves ultimately discussing a different collection of things from those we intended to discuss.

But the problem remains – Is there any such thing as the aesthetic state, or any aesthetic character of experiences which is *sui generis*? Not many explicit arguments have ever been given for one. Vernon Lee, it is true, in *Beauty and Ugliness*, p. 10, argues that ‘a relation entirely *sui generis* between visible and audible forms and ourselves’ can be deduced from the fact ‘that given proportions, shapes, patterns, compositions have a tendency to recur in art’. How this can be done it is hard to divine. Arsenic tends to recur in murder cases, and tennis in the summer, but no characters or relations *sui generis* anywhere are thereby proved. Obviously you can only tell whether anything is like or unlike other things by examining it and them, and to notice that one case of it is like another case of it, is not helpful. It may be suspected that where the argument is so confused, the original question was not very clear.

The question is whether a certain kind of experience is or is not *like* other kinds of experience. Plainly it is a question as to degree of likeness. Be it granted at once, to clear the air, that there are all sorts of experiences involved in the values of the arts, and that attributions of Beauty spring from all sorts of causes. Is there



among these one kind of experience as different from experiences which don't so occur as, say envy is from remembering, or as mathematical calculation is from eating cherries? And what degree of difference would make it specific? Put this way it is plainly not an easy question to answer. These differences, none of them measurable, are of varying degree, and all are hard to estimate. Yet the vast majority of post-Kantian writers, and many before him, have unhesitatingly replied, 'Yes! the aesthetic experience is peculiar and specific.' And their grounds, when not merely verbal, have usually been those of direct inspection.

It requires some audacity to run counter to such a tradition, and I do not do so without reflection. Yet, after all, the matter is one of classification, and when so many other divisions in psychology are being questioned and reorganized, this also may be re-examined.

The case for a distinct aesthetic species of experience can take two forms. It may be held that there is some unique kind of mental element which enters into aesthetic experiences and into no others. Thus Mr. Clive Bell used to maintain the existence of a unique emotion 'aesthetic emotion' as the *differentia*. But psychology has no place for such an entity. What other will be suggested? Empathy, for example, as Vernon Lee herself insists, enters into innumerable other experiences as well as into aesthetic experiences. I do not think any will be proposed.

Alternatively, the aesthetic experience may contain no unique constituent, and be of the usual stuff but with a special form. This is what it is commonly supposed to be. Now the special form as it is usually described – in terms of disinterestedness, detachment, distance, impersonality, subjective universality, and so forth – this form, I shall try to show later, is sometimes no more than a consequence of the incidence of the experience, a condition or an effect of communication. But sometimes a structure which can be described in the same terms is an essential feature of the experience, the feature in fact upon which its value depends. In other words, at least two different sets of characters, due to different causes, are, in current usage, ambiguously covered by the term 'aesthetic.' It is very necessary to distinguish the sense in which merely putting something in a frame or writing it in