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I.A. RICHARDS AND THE AMBIGUOUS MEDIUM

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Therefore, as to the business of being pro-
fessional, that it is with writers as with wells -- if
you dig with good eyes you see to the bottom of the
well, provided any water be there, and, that, often,
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sides dryness and dirt, though it be but a yard and a
half underground, it shall pass, however, for wondrous
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other than

Jonathan Swift
Baldwin's Club

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I conceive therefore, as to the business of being profound, that it is with writers as with wells -- a person with good eyes may see to the bottom of the deepest, provided any water be there, and, that, often, when there is nothing in the world at the bottom, besides dryness and dirt, though it be but a yard and a half under-ground, it shall pass, however, for wondrous deep, upon no wiser a reason, than because it is wondrous dark.

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Jonathan Swift
Tale of a Tub

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INTRODUCTION

The plight of poetry today is something of which too few people are aware at all, and with which too many of those concerned often deal with a paralyzingly heavy hand. Outside the golden circle of professional literary people is a handful of individuals who, for reasons of their own -- or, more realistically, for no "reason" at all -- read poetry. The majority of the population never go near poetry, but hold opinions of the art ranging from vague suspicion to overt distrust (or disgust). Of those people who are exposed to poetry in one form or another as part of their formal education, most learn only to view it much as a prisoner views a new and particularly subtle sort of torture; the rest, who may have "liked" poetry when they were in school, would feel embarrassed if found reading it when the "need" (i.e., term of exposure) no longer exists. Then there is the group of souls who stand staunchly by the Good Old Poetry, the Poetry they could understand (and quote by the yard, usually), but who have given up completely on the modern nonsense of men like Mr. T.S. Eliot. And the opposing camp, though perhaps not so adamant about its position, consists of those who are simply delighted with the poetry of, say, E.E. Cummings, but who can see no virtue in poetry before World War I -- or after World War II.

What does all this mean? Why has poetry been, in effect, exiled from human life; and is it destined to become more and more the pursuit of the specially-trained or the luxury of those whose commitments are elsewhere? The cause of the predicament, it is generally agreed, is twentieth century science with its Platonic presuppositions. We live in a science-oriented culture which is, as one contemporary critic says, "reducing the profoundest utterances of man's spirit to technological disciplines."¹ The same critic states that if we are to have our poetry and our self-respect too, we must meet the challenge of science head-on. A justification of poetry's function in life is imperative, and it must be one unlike any that has been made before. All the old theories are impotent in the face of the scientific threat; if the purpose of poetry is to give us propositional truth, it must bow out before the more efficient methods of the laboratory; if some kind of mystical insight is what we want, then prose will serve as well as or better than poetry; if pleasure is the only reason for the existence of poetry, the market is crowded with more palatable goods; if it is only the "sugar-coated pill" of moral instruction, then it was really deceiving us all along and we should be glad to

1. Murray Krieger, The New Apologists for Poetry (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1956), p. 5.

be rid of it.²

What is needed, then, if poetry is to be "saved," is a vantage-point from which both sides of the situation can be seen, a view which afforded insights such as this in 1926:

Thus a number of men who might in other times have been poets are to-day in bio-chemical laboratories -- a fact of which we might avail ourselves, did we feel the need, in defence of an alleged present poverty in poetry.³

The author of that statement is a man who has not only been in an excellent position for making such observations, but also felt profoundly the need for qualified persons to cope with the modern-day crisis in poetry. A representative of the newest science of his day, a psychologist for whom science alone was not enough, Ivor Armstrong Richards believed strongly in the "high place of poetry in human affairs" but realized at the same time that

both a passionate knowledge of poetry and a capacity for dispassionate psychological analysis are required if [the explanation of that high place] is to be satisfactorily prosecuted.

Neither the professional psychologist, whose interest in poetry is frequently not intense, nor the man of letters, who as a rule has no adequate ideas of the mind, as a whole, has been equipped for the investigation.⁴

When Richards himself proposed to undertake the investigation

2. Ibid., pp. 167-81.

3. I.A. Richards, Science and Poetry, The Great Critics, ed. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks (3rd ed. rev.; New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1951), p. 753.

4. Ibid., pp. 737-38.

in 1926 in his Science and Poetry, however, he was not making exaggerated claims for himself as meeting his own qualifications. Even those who have harsh words for Richards on some counts give him high praise on others:

Perhaps more than any man since Bacon, Richards has taken all knowledge as his province, and his field is the entire mind of man.

No treatment of modern literary criticism is possible without discussing Richards, since in the most literal sense Richards created it. What we have been calling modern criticism began in 1924, with the publication of Principles of Literary Criticism.⁵

Given the problem, then, of what seems to many sensitive minds a clash between science and poetry, with the very real possibility (if not actuality) of the extinction of the latter, and working on the assumption that a critical examination of poetry may well bring to light grounds for restoring it to its former "high place in human affairs," I shall in this paper attempt just such an examination. The theories, beliefs, and attitudes of I.A. Richards as they are found in his major works will serve as both means and ends in my study: means as they shed light on the problem at hand, ends as they prove valuable in their own right.⁶

5. Stanley Edgar Hyman, The Armed Vision (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), pp. 315, 307.

6. The editions referred to in this paper, in order of their original publication, are these: 1923 (with C.K. Ogden), The Meaning of Meaning (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, H.B.); 1925, Principles of Literary Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, H.B.); 1926, Science and Poetry, The Great Critics, ed. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks (3rd ed. rev.; New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1951).

If my use of Mr. Richards as a focus for this inquiry should result at the same time in an increased awareness of a man whose worth is all too often spoken of in the past tense, I shall not be unhappy.

— Plato's Republic. In this utopia there would be no poets, and the reasons for which Plato would banish them form an interesting contrast to the reasons for which other critics would keep them. Although Plato is often referred to as an "idealist," he is in fact a realist — but we must qualify this by saying that Plato's is a realism of ideas. In Book III of the Republic, Plato criticizes poetry for two reasons: first, it is at a third-remove from the truth, or ideal which is, for Plato, the reality; second, poetry "feels and feels the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them run, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue." Poetry, then, with its deleterious effects on the emotions and its perversion of the truth, seems to Plato to work in opposition to his reason, which alone can show him the good life.

If, for Plato, poetry was a seductress leading us away from the truth, for Aristotle she was something quite different. He was doing away with poetry altogether, Aristotle was

The Republic of Plato, trans., E. Vieuille. The Great Books of the Western World, ed. James Harry Muir and 320 Winfield Park (New York: rev. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1951), pp. 100-101.

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The question of the proper place of poetry in man's life is an old one. The earliest solution of the problem, so far as we know, is found in a theory of ideal government -- Plato's Republic. In this utopia there would be no poets, and the reasons for which Plato would banish them form an interesting contrast to the reasons for which other critics would keep them. Although Plato is often referred to as an "idealist," he is in fact a realist -- but we must qualify this by saying that Plato's is a realism of ideas. In Book Ten of the Republic, Plato criticizes poetry for two reasons: first, it is at a third-remove from the true, or ideal (which is, for Plato, the real); second, poetry "feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue."⁷ Poetry, then, with its deleterious effects on the emotions and its perversions of the truth, seems to Plato to work in opposition to man's reason, which alone can show him the good life.

If, for Plato, poetry was a seductress (a lying seductress), for Aristotle she was something quite different. Far from doing away with poetry altogether, Aristotle assigned to it -- or to that best part of it known as tragedy

7. The Republic of Plato, trans., B. Jowett, The Great Criticisms, ed. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks (3rd ed. rev.; New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1951), p. 22.

signed to it -- or to that best part of it known as tragedy -- an important place in human affairs. In his Poetics he explains the function of tragedy in his famous definition:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (*Italics mine*)⁸

This is, of course, Aristotle's well-known notion of catharsis (although the word itself, interestingly enough, does not appear in this translation); and while in this context it refers to tragedy (in dramatic form) as distinguished from the other great "category" of poetry, epic, we shall keep it in mind and find it in somewhat more general use in recent literary theory. Tragedy evokes in us the opposite emotions of pity and fear, holds them in some kind of balance (though just how it does this is the secret of the playwright), and through this process, ultimately, purges or cleanses us of what would otherwise be "unhealthy" (in that they are excessive) emotions. If poetry was for Plato a seductress, then, she seems for Aristotle to have been some kind of a nurse.

All poetry, according to Aristotle, springs from two deep-rooted causes: the imitative instinct and the

8. Aristotle Poetics, trans., S.H. Butcher, The Great Criticisms, ed. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks (3rd ed. rev.; New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1951), p. 34.

instinct for rhythm and "harmony."⁹ While a great deal has been written and said about the first of these (in Plato as well as in Aristotle), it is not necessary for our purposes to set forth any one theory of mimesis, or imitation -- except to say what it is not, which is the naive interpretation of the word as simply copying or mirroring life. On the contrary, imitation is for Aristotle a very creative thing; it is not only natural, but somehow necessary for man to recreate life, i. e., write poetry; it is an activity based, first of all, on instinctual elements of man's personality. The great emphasis which Plato placed on "truth" in poetry is here shifted to an emphasis on credibility: "it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen -- what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity." It is for this reason, that poetry is not bound to the fact, to truth in any scientific sense, that Aristotle considers it a ~~more~~ philosophical and a higher thing than history."¹⁰ Plato, it seems, by admitting to his Republic only "hymns to the gods and praises of famous men," would reduce poetry to something very much like history:

For if you go beyond this and allow the honeyed muse to enter, either in epic or lyric verse, not law and the reason of mankind, which by common consent have ever been deemed best, but pleasure and pain will be the rulers in our state.¹¹

9. Ibid., p. 31.

10. Ibid., p. 37.

11. The Republic of Plato, loc. cit.

Diametrically opposed to Plato's view of poetry, and more emphatic than Aristotle's, is the stand Matthew Arnold took and expressed in "The Study of Poetry" (1888):

"The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry."¹²

Arnold quotes these words of his own at the beginning of his essay, as the attitude toward poetry which, he thinks, should guide any study of it -- whether in English, as is the case in his essay, or in some other language. He feels that we need to hold a higher opinion of poetry and consider it "capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto." For, according to Arnold, as religion fails and philosophy fails (and we "wonder at ourselves for having taken them seriously"), "more and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to

CONSIDER

12. Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," The Great Critics, ed. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks (3rd ed. rev.; New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1951), p. 624.

console us, to sustain us."¹³

What happened in the more than 2,000 years separating Arnold from Plato and Aristotle in time that should bring about such a different attitude toward the importance of poetry? The answer lies in that troublesome era of the Victorians in which Arnold found himself; the Industrial Revolution, higher criticism of the Bible, Darwinian theory, the Reform Bill of 1832 (extending suffrage, and thus political and social power, to the middle class), scientific discoveries of all kinds -- Matthew Arnold felt the impact of these things more keenly, and responded to them more honestly, than did most of his contemporaries. If we can accept Arnold's own poetry as an index of his critical position, Lionel Trilling's observations may be helpful:

Arnold's poetry in its most characteristic mood is elegaic -- it mourns a loss, celebrates the lost thing, and tries to come to terms with the deprivation. What is the thing that is grieved for? The contemporary reader of English literature need not be long over this question. He will quite easily see that Arnold's loss is much the same as that which is at the center of the thought and feeling of such modern writers as T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, and W.B. Yeats. It is the loss of a certain culture -- that is to say, of a certain body of assumptions, a certain way of looking at the world and of responding to it, a certain quality of temperament which seems no longer available.

For Arnold, as for so many intellectuals of his time, the essential element of this sense of loss was the diminution of the intensity of religious faith. Arnold's age was not an irreligious age -- indeed, a case might be made out for its having been one of the notable epochs of religious intensity. And Arnold himself was by ?

13. Ibid., pp. 624-25.

a man without religious faith. But we may say of the religion of Arnold's day that it was of a kind that did not suffuse the consciousness of men of intellect. It was not an element of their imaginations, although it might be an element of their morality or of their disciplined thought.¹⁴

Trilling goes on to explain how, to the Victorian poets, "something had gone out of the universe, some element of wonder, of mystery, of life itself." Arnold he places in the tradition of the Romantic poets Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley -- poets who "were not in themselves essentially religious," though they were seeking (as are Eliot, Lawrence, and Yeats) "to reanimate a world from which the animating imagination of religion had withdrawn." These poets, Trilling points out, were all concerned less with religion per se than with validating "man's power to feel."

The fear of the loss of the power to feel -- this is one of the great themes of the literature of the last century and a half. For Arnold, as for the more recent writers...mentioned, the instinctual life is depressed and attenuated by the pre-eminence of rationality.¹⁵

14. Lionel Trilling, "Matthew Arnold," Major British Writers, gen. ed. G.B. Harrison (enlarged ed.; New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959), II, 585-86.

15. Ibid., p. 586.

II. RICHARDS AND THE PROBLEM

It is just this "pre-eminence of rationality," and its debilitating effect on the instinctual life, that concerned I.A. Richards in 1926, when he said "the whole traditional analysis of the working of the mind has been turned upside down." By this he meant that man has stressed his intellectual capacities entirely too much; although they are indeed important, they are not primary. "Intelligence helps man but does not run him." Man is, in reality, "a system of interests"; his intellect is merely an adjunct to them. Richards goes one step further, however, and says "it is largely as a remedy from the difficulties which this mistake involves that poetry may have so much importance in the future."¹⁶

We can see, then, that in the book which Richards devoted to remedying this difficulty, Science and Poetry, it is not by accident he begins with the quotation from Matthew Arnold which begins "The future of poetry is immense...."¹⁷ This elevation of poetry to a place of first importance, followed logically by the need for a valid criticism to distinguish between the "excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half-true,"¹⁸

and be

16. Richards, Science and Poetry, loc. cit., pp. 742-43.

17. Supra, p. 7.

18. Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," loc. cit., p. 625.

and based on the insistence that the rational and intellectual has been traditionally over-emphasized, is characteristic of both Richards and Arnold. But if Richards has many of the ideas and attitudes of Arnold, he is at the same time something Arnold could not have dreamed of being. Arnold had all the concern for the conflict between science and poetry, religion and poetry, critics and poetry, that is the starting-point for much of Richards' best work; living in an age which saw the beginning of what seemed to be the end of religion and perhaps even of poetry, he was convinced that only poetry could save men-- but he was without the tools to shape a solid vehicle for his conviction. In an age without psychology, without linguistic analysis (without, too, a certain "toughness" of mind which comes, perhaps, from being born in a scientific age rather than having to see it born), Matthew Arnold was crippled by history. I.A. Richards, on the other hand, had the advantages of a psychology which enabled him to do invaluable work in both semantics and literary criticism.

In order to understand his efforts to right the "upside-down" analysis of the mind and thereby restore poetry to its rightful place in human affairs, we must first understand certain of Richards' ideas. Underlying them all is his emphasis on the importance of language, which must be separated and understood in its dual func-

tions (symbolic and emotive) before progress can be made in any direction; and basic to his theory of symbolism -- known as the referential theory of meaning -- is a behavioristic theory of signs (that all knowledge and perception consists of sign-interpretation). Once the essential ambiguity of the language-medium is understood and its two uses are separated, the subsequent distinction between beliefs and attitudes can be made -- with the accompanying notion of "pseudo-statement." The way is then clear for Richards' poetics, including his view of poetic truth and the unique way in which poetry functions as an organizer of neurological impulses. All this is set in the larger framework of Richards' view of the world predicament (brought about by what he calls the Neutralisation of Nature) and his system of values, based in brief on the assumption that experience is -- and must be -- its own justification.

Referential Theory:

Basic to all Richards' other theories is his referential theory of meaning. It is propounded, along with a good many other things, in the monumental (one almost wants to say omniscient) Meaning of Meaning, which Richards wrote with C.K. Ogden in 1923. This pioneer work in semantics is significant today, in spite of all the work that has been done in the field; the distinction made in the book between symbolic and emotive uses of language has had

far-reaching effects -- although many critics who accept the distinction itself are unable to accept as valid the use Richards himself makes of it in his poetic theory.

One of the several linguistic "evils" which Ogden and Richards set out to make semantic war upon is the erroneous but still widely held belief that words have any meaning in or of themselves. Words are instruments, and "it is only when a thinker makes use of them that they stand for anything, or, in one sense, have 'meaning.'" In addition to this referential use, however, for which "all reflective, intellectual use of language should be paramount, words have other functions which may be grouped together as emotive." While Ogden and Richards by no means minimize the importance of the emotive functions, their book deals primarily with an examination of the symbolic (or referential or scientific) function because, they feel, the non-symbolic or emotive functions can "best be examined when the framework of the problem of strict statement and intellectual communication has been set up."¹⁹

Any explanation of the referential theory which would do justice to its authors is out of the question here; not only would the problems in connection with language multiply beyond our ability to solve them, but our

19. C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, The Meaning of Meaning (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923), p. 10

original direction would almost certainly be lost. Yet it is difficult to leave the book without saying more than has been said. To illustrate their causal theory of meaning, Ogden and Richards make use of their famous reference-symbol-referent triangle; its purpose is to show the relationship between thought (reference), words (symbols), and things (referents). They wish to show that the only relation between a word and the "thing" (not necessarily physical, as some misinterpreters have supposed) it represents is for the most part²⁰ arbitrary; they refer over and over to the indirectness of the relation which holds between symbol and referent, and devote their second chapter, "The Power of Words," to an historical examination of the human tendency to believe in some mysterious or magical quality of words.

This belief in a direct (i.e., natural or necessary) relation between a word and its referent can be seen very often in superstitions centering on names; for example, "every ancient Egyptian had two names -- one for the world, and another by which he was known to the supernal powers." And hardly a religion can be found in which there is no mystical significance in names of the deity: "the true and great name of Allah is a secret name," as are the names of the gods of Brahmanism and the "real name" of Confucius;

20. Exceptions; onomatopoeic words, images, gestures, or drawings.

the name Jahweh is apparently avoided by orthodox Jews altogether.²¹ If the instrumentality of words is one of the main "doctrines" of The Meaning of Meaning, the misuses and abuses of linguistic machinery is another. Three pitfalls of language are discussed in the chapter "The Theory of Definition" -- the Phonetic subterfuge, the Hypostatic subterfuge, and the Ultraquistic subterfuge; in addition to these are the Irritants, the Degenerates, the Mendicants, and the Nomads. But perhaps the most common example of this "peopling of the universe with spurious entities, the mistaking of symbolic machinery for referents," occurs in the case of Universals. "Classes are now recognized as symbolic fictions, and logisticians will only be logical when they admit that universals are an analogous convenience."²² Universal "qualities" and universal "relations," according to the authors, arise in the same manner and present the same temptation.

The occurrence of similars does not compel us to recognize 'similarity,' a universal, any more than the occurrence of knowledge forces us to recognize a faculty of knowing. It merely compels us to recognize that similars do occur. That things are similar is natural knowledge. To make it, by exploiting the economy of symbolisms, into a basis of metaphysical knowledge -- into a proof of another world of pure being where entities 'subsist' but do not exist -- is unwarrantable. No argument about the world is valid if based merely upon the way a symbol system behaves.²³

21. The Meaning of Meaning, p. 28.

22. Ibid., pp. 94-95.

23. Ibid., p. 97.

But what does all this mean in more practical terms? It means that people are liable to "a misunderstanding of the function of symbolic accessories such as 'liberty' or 'redness,' so that in making a reference to free actions or red things the user supposes himself to be referring to something not in time and space."²⁴ It is common practice to treat such words as "freedom," "democracy," "love," "truth," "beauty" in just this way.

There is still another factor working for confusion in these terms, however; and it will serve to bring us back to the point at which (and for which) we entered this whole complex area; confusion of the two language-functions. Ogdèn and Richards admit to the difficulty in distinguishing "whether a particular use of symbols is primarily symbolic or emotive," but think

the distinction which is important is that between utterances in which the symbolic function is subordinate to the emotive act and those of which the reverse is true. In the first case, however precise and however elaborate the references communicated may be, they can be seen to be present in an essentially instrumental capacity, as means to emotive effects. In the second case, however strong the emotive effects, these can be seen to be by-products not essentially involved in the speech transaction. The peculiarity of scientific statement, that recent new development, of linguistic activity, is its restriction to the symbolic function.

One of the dangers of language, to the person who is not aware of the ambiguity of the medium, is that of mistaking "words which have been erroneously regarded without question

24. Ibid., p. 95.

as symbolic in function." The word good is taken as an extreme example and shown, upon analysis, to be a "symbolically blank but emotively active" word, with which, Ogden and Richards say, "many of the most popular subjects of discussion are infested."²⁵

Richards discusses the same problem -- as it relates to criticism -- in Principles of Literary Criticism; in a chapter on "The Language of Criticism" he speaks of "that paralysing apparition Beauty, the ineffable, ultimate, unanalysable, simple Idea" which "has at last been dismissed and with her have departed or will soon depart a flock of equally bogus entities." He goes on to name some of these other Mystic Beings -- Construction, Design, Form, Rhythm, Expression -- and says they are "more often than not mere vacua in discourse, for which a theory of criticism should provide explainable substitutes." It is the "insidious power of grammatical forms" that leads to the belief in "some quality or attribute, namely Beauty, which attaches to the things we rightly call beautiful," and Richards says this "is probably inevitable for all reflective persons at a certain stage of their mental development." But the habit is not an easy one to outgrow:

Even among those who have escaped from this delusion and are well aware that we continually talk as though things possess qualities, when what we ought to say is that they cause effects in us of one kind or another, the fallacy of 'projecting' the effect and making it a

25. Ibid., pp. 124-25.

quality of its cause tends to recur. When it does so it gives a peculiar obliquity to thought and although few competent persons are nowadays so deluded as actually to hold the mystical view that there is a quality Beauty which inheres or attaches to external objects, yet throughout all the discussion of works of art the drag exercised by language towards this view can be felt. It perceptibly increases the difficulty of innumerable problems and we shall have constantly to allow for it. Such terms as 'construction', 'form', 'balance', 'composition', 'design', 'unity', 'expression', for all the arts; as 'depth', 'movement', 'texture', 'solidity', in the criticism of painting; as 'rhythm', 'stress', 'plot', 'character', in literary criticism; as 'harmony', 'atmosphere', 'development', in music, are instances. All these terms are currently used as though they stood for qualities inherent in things outside the mind, as a painting, in the sense of an assemblage of pigments, is undoubtedly outside the mind. Even the difficulty of discovering, in the case of poetry, what thing other than print and paper is there for these alleged qualities to belong to, has not checked the tendency.²⁶

If these words do not "mean" in criticism what they are all too often believed to "mean," what is their function? Richards does not seem to be assigning to them a purely or even primarily emotive meaning (as indeed he seems to do with "Good"); it is obvious that they are used, and must therefore have some function in criticism -- what does Richards suggest as the "explainable substitutes" which he says should be provided by a theory of criticism? The answer to this is bound up with a view of Richards' which we shall meet again and again, and which has brought him adverse criticism; for Richards, there is no such thing as an "aesthetic object," and there is no "aesthetic state."

26. I.A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, H.B.), pp. 19-21.

There are simply experiences -- of more or less value, to be sure (we shall discuss criteria later); and poetry is one of them, different only in degree from any other.

Most critical remarks state in an abbreviated form that an object causes certain experiences, and as a rule the form of the statement is such as to suggest that the object has been said to possess certain qualities. But often the critic goes further and affirms that the effect in his mind is due to some special particular features of the object. In this case he is pointing out something about the object in addition to its effect upon him, and this fuller kind of criticism is what we desire. Before his insight can greatly benefit, however, a very clear demarcation between the object, with its features, and his experience, which is the effect of contemplating it, is necessary. The bulk of critical literature is unfortunately made up of their confusion.

Thus the real problem lies in treating "words which are useful, indeed invaluable, as handy stop-gaps and makeshifts in conversation, but which need elaborate expansions before they can be used with precision" as if they were "people's proper names."²⁷

Pseudo-statements:

While we may seem to have wandered far afield, we actually have not; but we have been more concerned with the results of confusing the two functions of language than with their separation and clarification. Ogden and Richards are insistent about the fact that the two functions, if they are kept distinct from each other, need not interfere in any way with the exercise of either.

27. Ibid., pp. 22-23.

The sight of persons irritated with science because they care for poetry ("Whatever the sun may be, it is certainly not a ball of flaming gas," cries D.H. Lawrence), or of scientists totally immune from the influence of civilization [i. e., the arts], becomes still more regrettable when we realize how unnecessary it is.²⁸

To understand Richards' poetics -- our "ultimate goal," to make use of a linguistic fiction -- it is necessary to follow the distinction he makes between "scientific statement, where truth is ultimately a matter of verification as this is understood in the laboratory, and emotive utterance, where 'truth' is primarily acceptability by some attitude, and more remotely is the acceptability of this attitude itself." Thus the question of "truth" arises; and what Richards means by it in connection with emotive statements is found in his concept of "pseudo-statement." He tells us that

it is not the poet's business to make true statements. Yet poetry has constantly the air of making statements, and important ones; which is one reason why some mathematicians cannot read it.

They approach poetry as if it contained truth in the scientific sense, and "find the alleged statements to be false." The difficulty, Richards explains, stems from the fact that while science makes statements, poetry makes pseudo-statements. And he is very explicit about what the limitations of a pseudo-statement are not:

The usual account is in terms of a supposed universe of discourse, a world of make-believe, of imagination, of

28. The Meaning of Meaning, p. 159.

recognised fictions common to the poet and his readers. A pseudo-statement which fits into this system of assumptions would be regarded as "poetically true"; one which does not, as "poetically false." This attempt to treat "poetic truth" on the model of general "coherence theories" is very natural for certain schools of logicians; but is inadequate, on the wrong lines from the outset. To mention two objections out of many; there is no means of discovering what the "universe of discourse" is on any occasion, and the kind of coherence which must hold within it, supposing it to be discoverable, is not an affair of logical relations. Attempt to define the set of propositions into which

"O Rose, thou art sick!"

must fit, and the logical relations which must hold between them if it is to be "poetically true"; the absurdity of the theory becomes evident.

If the proper approach to poetic pseudo-statement is not logical (or only "occasionally and by accident" logical), what is it? According to Richards, "the acceptance which a pseudo-statement receives is entirely governed by its effects upon our feelings and attitudes." And again, "a pseudo-statement is 'true' if it suits and serves some attitude or links together attitudes which on other grounds are desirable." At this point Richards makes a statement which critics of his view would do well to take into consideration; "This kind of truth is so opposed to scientific truth that it is a pity to use so similar a word, but at present it is difficult to avoid the malpractice."

A pseudo-statement is a form of words which is justified entirely by its effect in releasing or organising our impulses and attitudes...; a statement, on the other hand, is justified by its truth, i.e., its correspondence, in a highly technical sense, with the fact to which it points.²⁹

29. Richards, Science and Poetry, pp. 756-57.

Neurological Organization:

If poetry consists of pseudo-statements, then, and these release or organize our impulses and attitudes, we must define three terms before we go on: impulse, attitude, and-- the key to the "meaning" of Richards' whole aesthetic -- organization. In Richards' behavioristic psychology, an impulse is "the process in the course of which a mental event may occur, a process apparently beginning in a stimulus and ending in an act."

Of the possible stimuli which we might at any moment receive, only a few actually take effect. Which are received and which impulses ensue depends upon which of our interests is active, upon the general set, that is, of our activities. This is conditioned in a large degree by the state, of satisfaction or unrest, of the recurrent and persistent needs of the body.

A stimulus then must not be conceived of as an alien intruder which thrusts itself upon us and, after worming a devious way through our organism as through a piece of cheese, emerges at the other end as an act. Stimuli are only received if they serve some need of the organism and the form which the response to them takes depends only in part upon the nature of the stimulus, and much more upon what the organism 'wants', i.e. the state of equilibrium of its multifarious activities.³⁰

If this is an impulse, what does Richards mean by attitude? This is a crucial element in his analysis of the poetic experience, and is perhaps best explained in Science and Poetry, in his step-by-step description of the reading of a poem:

Signs on the retina, taken up by sets of needs (remember how many other impressions all day long remain entirely

30. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism, pp. 86-87.

unnoticed because no interest responds to them); thence an elaborate agitation of impulses, one branch of which is thoughts of what the words mean, the other an emotional response leading to the development of attitudes, preparations, that is, for action which may or may not take place; the two branches being in intimate connection.³¹

Thus an attitude is itself one kind of "impulse"; an impulse towards some kind of behavior which is set off by the poem (itself a stimulus) -- or, rather, by an emotional reaction to the poem, but which cannot be acted out.

In a fully developed man a state of readiness for action will take the place of action when the full appropriate situation for action is not present.³² The essential peculiarity of poetry as of all the arts is that the full appropriate situation is not present. It is an actor we are seeing upon the stage, not Hamlet. So readiness for action takes the place of actual behaviour.³³

Value System:

"Organization" is probably the single most important word in the writings of I.A. Richards. It provides the link between his system of values and his theory of poetry, and at the same time allows us to draw a significant parallel between his ideas and those of his predecessor, Aristotle. For Richards, a poetic experience is to be considered valuable (when it is) for the same reasons as is any other experience, because -- violent though his opposition may be on this point -- for Richards, a poem is simply an experience, different in

31. Richards, Science and Poetry, p. 742.

32. Italicized in the original.

33. Ibid., p. 742.

degree rather than in kind from other experiences. And what are his criteria for judging experiences generally? "If the mind is a system of interests, and if an experience is their play, the worth of any experience is a matter of the degree to which the mind, through this experience, attains a complete equilibrium." The best experience is one that is organized so as to bring as many as possible of one's positive interests into play, at the same time giving "all the impulses of which it is composed the greatest possible degree of freedom" and leading to -- or at least not making impossible -- other experiences of the same kind.³⁴

Richards believes that this highly organized type of experience has been sustained by relatively few people, and they are the poets. He talks of the two ways in which the ever-present conflicts of the interests may be overcome -- conquest and conciliation -- and of the great superiority of the latter (a point which needs no further argument in the light of modern psychiatric attitudes):

Our impulses must have some order, some organisation, or we do not live ten minutes without disaster. In the past, Tradition, a kind of Treaty of Versailles assigning frontiers and spheres of influence to the different interests, and based chiefly on conquest, ordered our lives in a moderately satisfactory manner. But Tradition is weakening. Moral authorities are not as well backed by beliefs as they were; their sanctions are declining in force. We are in need of something to take the place of the old order. Not in need of a new balance of power, a new arrangement of conquests, but of a League of Nations for the moral ordering of the impulses; a new order

34. Ibid., pp. 745-48.

based on conciliation, not on attempted suppression.

Only the rarest individuals hitherto have achieved this new order, and never yet perhaps completely. But many have achieved it for a brief while, for a particular phase of experience, and many have recorded it for these phases.

Of these records poetry consists.³⁵

It may at first seem contradictory -- or perhaps only circular -- to propose replacing the old "moral authorities" with a new "moral ordering of the impulses." If traditional morals (like traditional everything else, it seems) are meaningless, by what standard is this new order "moral"? The only answer apparent in his explanation is simply that it is order; this in itself seems to be, for Richards, self-authenticating. Perhaps, according to this view, the word "moral" is as out-of-date as the word "truth" (in any but the scientific sense); and for both of them should be substituted a new term, which would itself soon become evaluative: Organization. While the old "moral authorities" (which presumably refers to religious authorities) would order life by suppression, the new "moral ordering of the impulses" (i.e., poetry) can achieve a more desirable end by better means: conciliation.

To accept the role Richards would give to poetry, it is necessary first to accept Richards' assumption that "experience is its own justification." Once this fact is faced, Richards tells us, "it is apparent that all the attitudes to other human beings and to the world in all its as-

35. Ibid., p. 748.

pects, which have been serviceable to humanity, remain as they were, as valuable as ever." Yet he admits that "many of these attitudes...are, now that they are being set free, more difficult to maintain, because we still hunger after a basis in belief."³⁶

Neutralization of Nature:

How can Richards hold this view of life which seems to be at once sympathetic and -- to some persons, certainly -- rather merciless? The answer lies in what Richards calls the Neutralization of Nature; the downfall of the "Magical View" of the world and its replacement by the scientific, a phenomenon which, though it began much earlier, first began to cause noticeable trouble in the Victorian Era. It was to this "beginning" that Trilling referred, in connection with Matthew Arnold, as the "loss of a certain culture."³⁷ By the Magical View Richards means "roughly, the belief in a world of Spirits and Powers which control events, and which can be evoked and, to some extent, controlled themselves by human practices"; in other words, religion -- or as some analysts would have it, "animism." While this view actually offered man little command over nature, its appeal lay in the "ease and adequacy with which the universe therein presented could be emotionally handled, the scope offered for man's love and hatred, for his terror as well as for his

36. Ibid., p. 760.

37. Supra, p. 9.

hope and his despair." In its place is now a scientific revolution which "touches the central principle by which the Mind has been deliberately organised in the past" -- a principle which must be replaced by another if equilibrium is to be restored.³⁸

The principle to which Richards refers is the one mentioned earlier in this paper, the "pre-eminence of rationality." Richards says that man has supposed since he first grew reflective that "his feelings, his attitudes, and his conduct spring from his knowledge." Although knowledge has "been until recently too scarce" for man to organize himself with knowledge as the foundation for his whole life, still

he has sought for knowledge, supposing that it would itself directly excite a right orientation to existence, supposing that, if he only knew what the world was like, this knowledge in itself would show him how to feel towards it, what attitudes to adopt, and with what aims to live. He has constantly called what he found in this quest, "knowledge," unaware that it was hardly ever pure, unaware that his feelings, attitudes, and behaviour were already orientated by his physiological and social needs, and were themselves, for the most part, the sources of whatever it was that he supposed himself to be knowing.

Now, Richards says, man has "genuine knowledge on a large scale"; now, too, he must "recognise that pure knowledge is irrelevant to his aims, that it has no direct bearing upon what he should feel, or what he should attempt to do."¹

For science, which is simply our most elaborate way of pointing to things systematically, tells us and can tell us nothing about the nature of things in any ultimate sense. It can never answer any question of the form: What is so and so? It can only tell us how so and so behaves. And it does not attempt to do more than this.

38. Ibid., pp. 752-54.

Nor, indeed, can more than this be done. Those ancient, deeply troubling, formulations that begin with "What" and "Why" prove, when we examine them, to be not questions at all; but requests -- for emotional satisfaction. They indicate our desire not for knowledge but for assurance....Science can tell us about man's place in the universe and his chances; that the place is precarious, and the chances problematical. It can enormously increase our chances if we can make wise use of it. But it cannot tell us what we are or what this world is; not because these are in any sense insoluble questions, but because they are not questions at all.

"And," Richards goes on, "if science cannot answer these pseudo-questions no more can philosophy or religion." The resulting crisis can be resolved, if at all, only by a reorganization of the mind -- an organization, as we already know, approaching that which is found most perfectly in the poetic experience.³⁹

A perfectly legitimate question one may be tempted to ask here is, "why poetry?" What is there about poetry that gives it qualifications the other art forms do not have? And the answer, it would seem, must lie in that which distinguishes poetry from all other arts: its ambiguous medium, language.

39. Ibid., pp. 754-55.

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF WORDS

It is ironical that Murray Krieger, in his book The New Apologists for Poetry (the most recent and valuable analysis of the so-called "New Critics"), accuses I.A. Richards of the very crime which he commits in his analysis of Richards; a neglect of words. Not only does he fail to take into account several of Richards' most significant points on this subject, however; he also fails to see one important fact about Richards' whole approach which is so obvious one wonders at Krieger's own perspective. In his most violent criticisms of Richards, Krieger attacks him for his description of the poetic process "with almost no reference to the medium" -- a neglect "once more surprising, emerging as it does from a theorist whose interest in literary problems seems largely motivated by his semanticist's interest in language."⁴⁰ He is certainly justified in saying that such a neglect on Richards' part, were it indeed a neglect, would be most surprising; he is quite mistaken in assuming that a neglect exists, as even a cursory reading of Science and Poetry will show.

But the more general injustice Krieger does Richards, though not necessarily the more serious, should perhaps be righted first. While Krieger is working on several of the same problems that concerned Richards (the primary one being

40. Krieger, The New Apologists for Poetry, p. 59.

the plight of poetry in a science-oriented culture), he approaches the question in a different manner: as an aesthete concerned with establishing the autonomous existence of a work of art, he compares the theories of (among other critics) Richards and Eliot⁴¹ in order to set forth his own poetics -- forgetting, apparently, that there exists between the two men a fundamental difference. Eliot can describe the creative process as both poet and critic, while Richards never pretends to be acting in any other capacity than that of a critic (one whose main concern is the reader of poetry). The truly surprising thing is not, as Krieger would have us believe, that Richards neglects the importance of the poet's medium as it figures in the creative process; it is rather that Richards, in his comparatively limited view of the creative act, yet shows a great and valuable awareness of the medium.⁴²

This awareness of the importance of words is most evident in the chapter "The Command of Life" of Science and Poetry, a chapter which could be justifiably quoted in full. In the interests of space, however, we shall deal only with those passages which best answer the charge of Krieger.

41. (to the bad half of whose theory -- the objective correlative -- the expression "once again surprising" in the above quotation refers)

42. Anyone who has sampled Richards' poetic attempts (all made in recent years) knows how limited is his view from that "end" of the creative process.

The chief characteristic of poets is their amazing command of words. This is not a mere matter of vocabulary, though it is significant that Shakespeare's vocabulary is the richest and most varied that any Englishman has ever used. It is not the quantity of words a writer has at his disposal, but the way in which he disposes them that gives him his rank as a poet. His sense of how they modify one another, how their separate effects in the mind combine, how they fit into the whole response, is what matters. As a rule the poet is not conscious of the reason why just these words and no others best serve. They fall into their place without his conscious control, and a feeling of rightness, of inevitability is commonly his sole conscious ground for his certainty that he has ordered them aright. It would as a rule be idle to ask him why he used a particular rhythm or a particular epithet. He might give reasons, but they would probably be mere rationalizations having nothing to do with the matter. For the choice of the rhythm or the epithet was not an intellectual matter (though it may be capable of an intellectual justification), but was due to an instinctive impulse seeking to confirm itself, or to order itself with its fellows.⁴³

Is this the same instinctive element of the poetic process that Aristotle spoke of? At any rate, these are hardly the words of one who neglects the importance of the language medium.

Yet Krieger is not merely charging Richards with a lack of emphasis in one area; he is at the same time criticizing him for over-emphasis in another:

The characteristic which sets off the artist for Richards, it must be noted, is not at all the artist's craft in working in a given material; it is his healthy organization of impulses which allows him to undergo such rich experiences.⁴⁴

A careful reading of Richards will prove Krieger wrong on

43. Richards, Science and Poetry, p. 749.

44. Krieger, The New Apologists for Poetry, p. 59.

one, if not on two counts. Regardless of the truth or falsity of Richards' theory of neurological organization, sheer logical analysis of his view shows there is no "either-or" relationship between the poet's use of words and his use of experience; there is an essential tie that makes his "style" of writing the direct result of his "style" of living.

It is very important to realize how deep are the motives which govern the poet's use of words. No study of other poets which is not an impassioned study will help him. He can learn much from other poets, but only by letting them influence him deeply, not by any superficial examination of their style. For the motives which shape a poem spring from the root of the mind. The poet's style is a direct outcome of the way in which his interests are organized. That amazing capacity of his for ordering speech is only a part of a more amazing capacity for ordering his experience.⁴⁵

Thus, for Richards, one can command words only when one can, in a psychological sense, command life. The poet is not someone who simply has achieved what Krieger calls "fine neurological organization" or "extreme mental health" and decided (out of the goodness of his heart, one must suppose) to "communicate to a more poorly organized public [his] highly elaborate experience";⁴⁶ rather he is someone involved in a process so mysterious that the product, if not genuine, is characteristically given away by its rhythm.

For rhythm is no matter of tricks with syllables, but directly reflects personality. It is not separable from the words to which it belongs. Moving rhythm in

45. Richards, Science and Poetry, pp. 749-50.

46. Krieger, The New Apologists for Poetry, p. 58.

poetry arises only from genuinely stirred impulses, and is a more subtle index than any other to the order of the interests.⁴⁷

Krieger's most serious objection to Richards' theory of the creative process (and to Eliot's notion of the objective correlative) is that the artist "apparently does not need the expressive act to create or, indeed, even to organize his experience." Krieger interprets Richards as saying that "the experience exists, in its complete form, prior to the act of communication."⁴⁸ That Richards is not saying that at all is obvious from what he does say:

Misunderstanding and under-estimation of poetry is mainly due to over-estimation of the thought in it. We can see still more clearly that thought is not the prime factor if we consider for a moment not the experience of the reader but that of the poet. Why does the poet use these words and no others? Not because they stand for a series of thoughts which in themselves are what he is concerned to communicate. It is never what a poem says which matters, but what it is. The poet is not writing as a scientist. He uses these words because the interests which the situation calls into play combine to bring them, just in this form, into his consciousness as a means of ordering, controlling and consolidating the whole experience. The experience itself, the tide of impulses sweeping through the mind, is the source and sanction of the words. They represent this experience itself, not any set of perceptions or reflections, though often to a reader who approaches the poem wrongly they will seem to be only a series of remarks about other things. But to a suitable reader the words -- if they actually spring from experience and not are not due to verbal habits, to the desire to be effective, to factitious excogitation, to imitation, to irrelevant contrivances, or to any other of the failings which prevent most people from writing poetry -- the words will reproduce in his mind a similar play of

47. Richards, Science and Poetry, p. 750.

48. Krieger, The New Apologists for Poetry, p. 67.

interests putting him for the while into a similar situation and leading to the same response.

Why this should happen is still somewhat of a mystery. An extraordinarily intricate concourse of impulses brings the words together. Then in another mind the affair in part reverses itself, the words bring into being a similar concourse of impulses. The words which seem to be the effect of the experience in the first instance, seem to become the cause of a similar experience in the second. A very odd thing to happen, not exactly paralleled outside communication. But this description is not quite accurate. The words, as we have seen, are not simply the effect in one case, nor the cause in the other. In both cases they are the part of the experience which binds it together, which gives it a definite structure and keeps it from being a mere welter of disconnected impulses. They are the key...for this particular combination of impulses. So regarded, it is less strange that what the poet wrote should reproduce his experience in the mind of the reader.⁴⁹

Less obvious, perhaps, than Krieger's misunderstanding of Richards on this point is the underlying reason for it: the two critics hold views of the poem as aesthetic object that are basically opposed. For Richards, as we have already seen, poetry is an experience essentially like any other, though of course more valuable; there is no such thing as an "aesthetic experience";⁵⁰ and the values which govern poetry are no different from those which govern all the rest of life. Richards' artist discovers relations between the different elements of life (whether these elements be words or picnics, or a combination of both), thus creating order and meaning in life, which is -- to the imaginative mind of the poet -- itself poetry. Krieger's whole

49. Richards, Science and Poetry, pp. 744-45.

50. See Principles of Literary Criticism, Chapters II and X.

purpose, on the other hand, is to establish the autonomous existence of a work of art. While the so-called "aesthetic object" is nothing to Richards, it is everything to Krieger.

To ask which of them is "right" is to ask a pseudo-question. At least one matter on which they seemed to differ -- the importance of words in the creative process -- turned out to be largely a matter of misinterpretation on Krieger's part; perhaps the other differences, given proper attention, might resolve themselves as easily. In all fairness to Krieger, it must be said that if he is unfair where Richards is concerned, he redeems himself by holding up as valuable T.E. Hulme's view of the creative process:

For Hulme the poet cannot hope to have fresh insights into experience unless he has the ability to bend to the service of these insights the medium by means of which they are to take shape. If most people see the world in a stereotyped manner, it is because they are limited by their stereotyped use of language; fixed patterns of language dictate fixed patterns of thought. Thus for Hulme there can be no pre-existing fresh idea for which the poet then seeks fresh embodiment. The idea becomes fresh as it is worked by him across the grain of language habits. It emerges unique as his individual, and thus unique, purposes triumphantly elude the persuasive grooves of common passage. Thus the idea does not merely take place in language; the language is the idea -- an objectified and communicable phenomenon, not merely a mental and purely private one.⁵¹

While Krieger presents this view as one which is basically different from Richards' own (and better, for that reason), we now know enough about Richards' poetics -- particularly

51. Krieger, The New Apologists for Poetry, p. 67.

that part of it dealing with the importance of words in the creative process -- to see that Richards is himself saying essentially the same thing.

IV. CONCLUSION

We have seen how all Richards' theories about poetry have their origin in his theories about psychology and language: from the basic distinction between the two kinds of language to the corresponding one between the two kinds of statement, and thence to the peculiar kind of neurological organization which is effected in us by what he calls pseudo-statement. And we have seen, too, Richards' world view, in which (as Matthew Arnold predicted) religion and philosophy have failed -- in which only poetry is left, and poetry (like all other experiences in life) is its own justification. What are the implications of this view for poetry itself? Interestingly enough, it leads Richards to the same conclusion that Aristotle reached (and, perhaps, for basically the same reason) -- that tragedy is the highest form of poetry. Of course, Richards would translate that last statement into "perhaps the most general, all-accepting, all-ordering experience known," but it comes to the same thing. It is essential to recognize that "in the full tragic experience there is no suppression"; that the mind is shorn of its defenses and illusions and all the "devices by which we endeavour to avoid the issues which might bewilder us. The essence of Tragedy [and, we might say, the essence of I.A.

Richards] is that it forces us to live for a moment without them."⁵²

This same idea is present in Richards' praise of Hardy as the contemporary "poet who has most steadily refused to be comforted"---by either forgetfulness or beliefs. Richards explains his "singular preoccupation with death" by saying "it is in the contemplation of death that the necessity for human attitudes, in the face of an indifferent universe, to become self-supporting, is felt most poignantly. Only the greatest tragic poets have achieved an equally self-reliant and immitigable acceptance."⁵³ The poetry, then, is there; and as Richards tells us in the last sentences of Science and Poetry,

it is capable of saving us; it is a perfectly possible means of overcoming chaos. But whether man is capable of the reorientation required, whether he can loosen in time the entanglement with belief which now takes from poetry half its power and would then take all, is another question, and too large for the scope of this essay.⁵⁴

The question is too large for the scope of this essay as well -- or of any other; the answer must come, in the last analysis, from the poets themselves; and from their readers.

52. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism, p. 246.

53. Richards, Science and Poetry, p. 761.

54. Ibid., p. 766.

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