

## EVALUATIONS (I)

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CONVERSATIONAL comments on Richards' work, favourable or unfavourable, seldom express opinions about his actual views; they seem more often than not to be reactions to the general tone of his writing. Nor can this aspect of his work be neglected in an attempt to formulate a more precise opinion: some peculiarity of tone, or some prevailing attitude, undoubtedly distinguishes him from most scientific and critical writers. It would be laborious to analyse this attitude in detail. As a handy label for it, the term 'amateur' (with some of its implications) will perhaps do. It is suggested for one thing by the slight acerbity with which so many 'professionals'—literary critics, psychologists, metaphysicians—dismiss him, together with the slight awe that he inspires in the virginally lay. But it has more important justification than this in two essential features of his work, namely in his insistence upon the significance for 'normal practical life' of his special interests, and in the buoyancy with which he rides over difficulties of detail by means of general principles.

Take, for instance, his basic hypotheses for criticism, and consider the difficulty and labour that would be involved in proving them. Only the spirit of the amateur could enable Richards to express them with as little inhibition as he does. 'The first point to be made is that poetic experiences are valuable (when they are) in the same way as any other experiences. They are to be judged by the same standards.' (*Science and Poetry*, p. 28). 'The greatest difference between the artist or poet and the ordinary person is found, as has often been pointed out, in the range, delicacy and freedom of the connections he is able to make between different elements of his experience.' (*Principles of Literary Criticism*,

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<sup>1</sup>This is the first of a series of 'Evaluations' which will be continued in future numbers of *Scrutiny*. There will also be a series of 'Revaluations'.

p. 181). 'The ways then in which the artist will differ from the average will as a rule presuppose an immense degree of similarity. They will be further developments of organizations already well advanced in the majority. His variations will be confined to the newest, the most plastic, the least fixed part of the mind, the parts for which reorganization is most easy.' (*Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 196). 'It is in terms of attitudes, the resolution, inter-  
 inanimation, and balancing of impulses . . . that all the most valuable effects of poetry must be described.' (*Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 113). Nor has his confidence waned with time. He is still ready to assert (see *The Criterion* of October, 1932) that the explanation of the difference between good and less good experiences 'is inevitably in terms of that order or disorder among "impulses" (or however else you care to describe the elementary processes on which consciousness depends) . . .'. Contrast the more 'professional' attitude towards similar problems. 'Personally I do not think the problem of ethical valuation [of different cultures] is hopeless, but it need not necessarily be undertaken in a purely sociological inquiry.' (M. Ginsberg in *Studies in Sociology*.) 'Moreover, in humanity as it exists at present it is not easy to decide that one physical type is better adapted than another, and, when it comes to deciding which emotional and intelligent types are better or worse, the situation becomes far too complicated to handle with any probability of success.' (T. H. Morgan in a paper in *The Foundations of Experimental Psychology*). These quotations, I think, fairly represent the attitude of qualified specialists when they refer to ethical questions: not hopeless but . . . The contrast with Richards need not be stressed.

Three hypotheses, distinct although closely related, are expressed by Richards in the passages quoted. They are, roughly, (a) that art and the rest of human activity are continuous, not contrasting; (b) that art is the most valuable form of activity; and (c) that the value of any activity depends on the degree to which it allows of a balancing or ordering among one's impulses. It is the third which is fundamental and upon which the other two depend, and our attitude to his work in general must depend to a great extent upon the view we take of this account of value. The practical purpose of his account must not be overlooked: he is attempting to discover 'a defensible position for those who believe that the arts are of value,' and it is clear from the context

that he intends primarily a position that can be defended against all those who regard art as something other than one of the practical affairs of life. He attempts in effect to meet the friendly and intelligent Philistine on his own ground. Hence his account of value is best regarded as a systematization based on certain assumptions which are not questioned by the people whom he has in mind. He assumes first that living activity is its own satisfaction and that any questioning of its 'value' is bogus questioning. Next he implies a conception of quantity in living activity and assumes that a further unquestionable satisfaction arises as one becomes *more* alive; he takes as the unit of living activity the satisfied impulse, so that the value of an activity or attitude can be measured, hypothetically, in terms of the number of impulses it satisfies. Further he adopts the view that in all living organisms there is an unquestionable effort after greater and greater differentiation and integration of experience.

The necessary limitations of such an account of value have to be recognized before its usefulness for particular purposes can be judged. It is clear that it cannot, even hypothetically, give us grounds for judgment when a difference of opinion rests on a fundamental constitutional difference between two people. Richards for instance condemns swindling and bullying because they lead to a thwarting of important social impulses: the implicit assumption is that the swindler and bully in question possess the 'normal' social impulses. If they do not, then they cannot be condemned on these lines. You might as well try to convince a tiger of its misfortune in not being a buffalo. The numerical treatment of impulses will not help here; it would be flat dogma to assert that the man without social needs must achieve a lower total output of satisfied 'impulses' than the man with them. And according to Richards it is the total number that matters, for the 'importance' of an impulse is only another term for the number of other impulses that depend upon it. It is difficult to suppose that the tiger, given equal strength and good health, satisfies fewer 'impulses' (fewer of 'the elementary processes on which consciousness depends') than the buffalo. This is only to point out that Richards' systematizing of value judgments cannot, even in theory, lead to agreement in evaluations unless the parties concerned have the same fundamental constitution. In point of fact Richards keeps his numerical conception in the background, and

implies that greater ordering or integration will of itself lead to the satisfying of more impulses. 'At the other extreme are those fortunate people who have achieved an ordered life, whose systems have developed clearing-houses by which the varying claims of different impulses are adjusted. Their free untrammelled activity gains for them a maximum of varied satisfactions and involves a minimum of suppression and sacrifice.' (*Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 53). Similarly in the much finer discussion of development in *Practical Criticism*, where he relates the sayings of Confucius on sincerity to modern biological views, it is the ordering alone that is insisted on. The implication here and throughout his work is that everyone begins with the same fundamental impulses, but that they and the secondary impulses dependent on them get muddled and disorganized, thwarting each other unnecessarily. He is profoundly convinced that the function of the arts is to bring back order. In the discussion of sincerity, moreover, he brings forward, perhaps not explicitly enough, the idea that art is not merely remedial (restoring an original order) but that it aids in positive development; aids, that is, the assumed effort of the living organism to become more finely differentiated in its parts and simultaneously more integrated. 'Being more at one within itself the mind thereby becomes more appropriately responsive to the outer world.' Fundamental difficulties confront anyone who attempts to grasp the full meaning of this integration and this appropriateness. But the essential feature of Richards' attitude to art is clear: he pins his faith to the possibility of its being shown to be a means of further progress along the lines of what we regard as biological advance. This is the essence of his defensible position for the arts. Its significance rests perhaps less on the usefulness of its contentions than on the fact that it was formulated by a writer who is genuinely sensitive to poetry, not by one with convictions of its uplift value, nor by a philosopher who felt that he 'ought' somehow to provide art with a pedestal in his exhibition of the universe.

The practical usefulness of Richards' account of value in convincing the plain man of the value of poetry or in helping us to reach agreement over disputed points is doubtful. After outlining the theory Richards writes (*Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 51) 'We can now take our next step forward and inquire into the relative merits of different systematizations.' This step remains

to be taken, unless it consisted in the brief discussion which follows, on the importance of the social virtues. In practice, of course, Richards is able to give us no more help in making these judgments than, for instance, T. H. Morgan offers, in the passage quoted. One might innocently suppose that we should judge a work of art by assessing the number of impulses it satisfied. It is needless to point out that Richards has nowhere done this, nor even pointed out what main impulses any one work of art has satisfied in him. It is of course quite clear that 'the impulse' will not serve in practice as a unit of measurement. Who can say what this smallest impulse is in terms of which the importance of the others must be expressed? There is obviously a vast gap between Richards' theory of value and any actual judgment one may make. To say that 'It is in terms of attitudes, the resolution, inter-inanimation, and balancing of impulses . . . that all the most valuable effects of poetry must be described' is perhaps as true, and just as helpful, as to say that it is in terms of the combination and disintegration of molecules that all the effects of modern warfare must be described. Even the difference between a pleasing and an irritating variation of rhythm is 'a matter of the combination and resolution of impulses too subtle for our present means of investigation.' (*Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 138). And in making up our minds about a poem 'We have to gather millions of fleeting semi-independent impulses into a momentary structure of fabulous complexity, whose core or germ only is given us in the words.' (*Practical Criticism*, p. 317). And if his account of the basis of valuable experience has little practical significance for literary judgments, as a means of judging other arts it is more remote still. The greater part of his chapters on painting, sculpture, and music, must be regarded as something very close to psychological eyewash; he hardly makes the gesture of applying his main theory to these subjects. We have to conclude that this attempt to provide a conception (of a balance of impulses) which will establish continuity between the everyday standards of a civilization advanced enough to condemn the bully and swindler and the standards of its art critics, fails through the remoteness and elusiveness of the common denominator chosen—the impulse.

This conclusion does not affect the significance of Richards' profound conviction of the value of poetry and his belief that

this value is of the same kind as that implicitly recognized by the civilized Philistine. The significance lies in the fact that such a writer should have felt the need to meet the outside world of common sense and science on its own ground and justify his position by current standards. It is one sign of the uneasiness that those with special qualifications in the arts are experiencing. They cannot now confidently remain specialists, secure in the knowledge of fulfilling a recognized function. They have to become amateurs, looking at the matter from the point of view of the majority and attempting to prove that their function does exist before they can attack their own more specialized problems. This consideration may account for the kind of use to which Richards puts psychology. In the first place it is a means of shaking the complacency of practical people, who are more uneasy at the hints of psycho-analysts than they are at the gibes or fury of artists. 'Human conditions and possibilities have altered more in a hundred years than they had in the previous ten thousand, and the next fifty may overwhelm us, unless we can devise a more adaptable morality. The view that what we need in this tempestuous turmoil of change is a Rock to shelter under or to cling to, rather than an efficient aeroplane in which to ride it, is comprehensible but mistaken.' (*Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 57). Secondly, psychology as Richards uses it seems to help him in repudiating the pseudo-mystical monopolists of æsthetic theory whose ideas do more harm than good to his demand for the recognition of poetry as a practical assistance in living. It seems to confer authority on such a statement as '. . . the experience of "seeing stars" after a bang on the nose is just as "unique" as any act of musical appreciation and shares any exalted quality which such uniqueness may be supposed to confer.' (*Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 171). On the other hand, the work of psychologists on æsthetics has not been of the kind he has any use for; it has usually implied other standards than his in its approach to works of art, and it has done nothing to show the practical value of such art as it has dealt with. Hence his care to dissociate himself from the professional psychologists. '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.' (*Principles of*

*Literary Criticism*, p. 8). And rather than be committed to existing psychological methods he draws still further on the already heavily mortgaged future of neurology. Musical effects, for instance, ' . . . belong to a branch of psychology for which we have as yet no methods of investigation. It seems likely that we shall have to wait a long while, and that very great advances must first be made in neurology before these problems can profitably be attacked.' (*Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 170). But there is a marked change of tone in *Practical Criticism*. After reiterating his dissatisfaction with much of the psychological work on æsthetics he goes on, 'The general reader, whose ideas as to the methods and endeavours of psychologists derive more from the popularisers of Freud or from the Behaviourists than from students of Stout or Ward, needs perhaps some assurance that it is possible to combine an interest and faith in psychological inquiries with a due appreciation of the complexity of poetry. Yet a psychologist who belongs to this main body is perhaps the last person in the world to underrate this complexity.' (*Practical Criticism*, p. 322). Again, speaking of the harm done by the cruder psychologies, 'But the remedy of putting the clock back is impracticable. Inquiry cannot be stopped now. The only possible course is to hasten, so far as we can, the development of a psychology which will ignore none of the facts and yet demolish none of the values that human experience has shown to be necessary. An account of poetry will be a pivotal point in such a psychology.' His attitude here seems to be one of willingness to leave professional psychology to make its contribution to the problem in its own way, whereas the tendency before was to short-circuit psychological methods by dogmatizing about the essentials of the conclusions they must reach. The change may perhaps be related to the fact that in *Practical Criticism* Richards has a much more demonstrable function that he had in the earlier work. For one thing he can offer his work as a contribution to academic psychology: ' . . . to find something to investigate that is accessible and detachable is one of the chief difficulties of psychology. I believe the chief merit of the experiment here made is that it gives us this.' (*Practical Criticism*, p. 10). Further he offers his work as a contribution to education, and is able to show that even by existing educational standards such work as he has done here has an important and undeniable function. 'This, then, may be made



a positive recommendation, that an inquiry into language . . . . be recognized as a vital branch of research, and treated no longer as the peculiar province of the whimsical amateur.' (*Practical Criticism*, p. 337).

It is undoubtedly in dealing with problems of communication that Richards comes most closely to grips with his material and least shows the characteristics of the amateur. But to say this ought not to suggest that his work falls into two isolated compartments, one concerned with evaluation and the other with communication, and that they can be appraised separately. It is in fact through a consideration of his theory of value and its limitations that the importance of his work on communication can best be seen.

The conclusion that his account of value gives a basis for agreement only when 'normality' (or identical abnormality) is assumed, might seem to leave us no defence against an endless variety of critical opinions, each justified by an appeal to a fundamental constitutional peculiarity in the critic. Since innate differences do of course exist, we must perhaps admit that in the end we shall have to recognize distinguishable 'types' of critical opinion founded on psycho-physiological differences in the critics, and irreconcilable. But this is too remote a consideration to give 'type' psychologists any excuse for extending their literary labelling. It is still possible to show that differences of opinion in literary matters frequently arise from errors of approach which even those who make them can be brought to recognize. With people who assert that they know what they like the one hope is to demonstrate to them that in point of fact they *don't*, that according to standards they themselves recognize elsewhere their judgment here is mistaken. As these inconsistencies are faced and abandoned, the possibility of agreement with other people grows greater. We cannot tell how far this principle may be pushed, but undoubtedly we have a very long way to go before innate psycho-physiological differences are the sole cause of disagreement between us. The most important part of Richards' work consists in extending the possibility of agreement. From one point of view it is work on problems of communication; from another it offers us exercise in attaining self-consistency in literary judgments, and remotely approaching the 'self-completion' that Richards sees as the ultimate form of valuable experience.



In this part of his work there are so many distinct contributions—close, fully-illustrated discussions of actual instances—that little general comment is in place. Many of them offer a starting point for further investigation; sometimes there seems a possibility of fresh preliminary discussion, where, as for instance in his treatment of intellectual truth in poetry and of rhythm, Richards does not seem free from ambiguities and shifts of ground; all draw attention to serious possibilities of mis-reading and mis-judging, and all go towards stressing the same main theme, that the adequate reading of poetry is a discipline and not a relaxation.

The relation between the two aspects of his work is well set out by Richards himself. 'The whole apparatus of critical rules and principles is a means to the attainment of finer, more precise, more discriminating communication. There is, it is true, a valuation side to criticism. When we have solved, completely, the communication problem, when we have got, perfectly, the experience, *the mental condition* relevant to the poem, we have still to judge it, still to decide upon its worth. But the later question nearly always settles itself; or rather, our own inmost nature and the nature of the world in which we live decide it for us. Our prime endeavour must be to get the relevant mental condition and then see what happens. If we cannot then decide whether it is good or bad, it is doubtful whether any principles, however refined and subtle, can help us much. Without the capacity to get the experience they cannot help us at all. This is still clearer if we consider the use of critical maxims in teaching. Value cannot be demonstrated except through the communication of what is valuable.' The difficulty of demonstrating the rightness of an opinion even on these lines ought not to be underrated; over the Longfellow poem, for instance, it seems only to have been a drawn battle between Richards and the protocols. But a reliance on improved methods of reading as the most hopeful way of reaching agreement in literary judgments undoubtedly grows out of Richards' practice more naturally than does his explicit theory of value. The suspicion is left, however, that in making practical judgments he is assuming more principles of evaluation than one would expect from the passage just quoted. One weakness of Yeats' transcendental poetry, for instance, is 'a deliberate reversal of the natural relations of thought and feeling. . . .'

(*Science and Poetry*, p. 74). His charge against Lawrence is rather similar. But *natural relations* . . . Lawrence might have detected a principle of criticism here. The fact is that principles of evaluation remain a necessity for the practising critic even when interpretation and understanding have been carried to their hypothetical limit. How large is the highest common factor in human natures, and how far it can be formulated into agreed ethical principles, are questions that will not be answered in the near future. Yet guesses have to be made; 'To set up as a critic is to set up as a judge of values.' This is a fact that receives less prominence in Richards' later work than it did in his earlier, and it is not surprising to find Father D'Arcy reminding him (in *The Criterion*, January, 1933) that we have to set out 'both to understand the meaning of others *and* the truth of what they say.'

The importance of Richards' work on communication is unfortunately obscured for many people by their annoyance at a too frequent outcropping of the amateur spirit. This shows itself particularly as a romantic inflation of the significance of the topic, in the form of dark hints at the extent of our ignorance and the cataclysm that awaits us as The Theory of Interpretation is pushed further. Exploitation of the Tremendous Idea makes a peculiarly strong appeal to one side of the amateur: for one thing, every professional immediately has the ground cut from under his feet. No matter what a man's standing, and no matter how impressive the substance of his views, you can still regard him from an unassailable vantage-ground if only you happen to observe that he isn't capable of understanding what's said to him. This, according to Richards (in *The Criterion*, October, 1932), is the weak place in the armour of Max Eastman, T. S. Eliot, and Irving Babbitt. They are all 'untrained in the technique of interpretation . . . this is not their fault since the proper training has not yet been provided . . . you must *understand* before you argue . . . When the right training has been provided, our three champions here will be seen to be each journeying through and battling with his own set of mirages.' So much for Irving Babbitt, T. S. Eliot, and Max Eastman. The earlier work too occasionally betrays this anxiety to cut the ground from under the feet of those who might otherwise seem qualified to express an opinion: '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 [into the nature of poetry]. Both a passionate knowledge of poetry and a capacity for dispassionate psychological analysis are required if it is to be satisfactorily prosecuted.

It will be best to begin by . . . ' (*Science and Poetry*, p. 9). It is probably, too, as an aspect of the amateur that we must interpret the curiously romantic tone that sometimes appears in Richards' writing. *Science and Poetry*, for example, leaves a strong impression of a thrilled responsiveness to the difficulties and hazards of 'the contemporary situation,' and also of some failure to get at grips with any definite problems that concern people. The latter is a serious failing here, for it prevents him from clinching his argument that poetry is of supreme value as a means of re-orientation. The nearest he comes to specifying more closely 'the contemporary situation' of which one may be 'agonizingly aware' is in his discussion of the neutrality of nature and the impossibility of beliefs. But the former is surely not a concern of fundamental importance to most informed people nowadays, though in some moods they may feel chilled by it. And the impossibility of beliefs—except in some quite limited sense—seems itself to be impossible. Certainly T. S. Eliot has repudiated Richards' suggestion that *The Waste Land* is without beliefs; but apart from this repudiation it is impossible to see how any living activity can go on without beliefs in some sense, and we must suppose that Richards is speaking only of a special sort of belief. Indeed he seems only to mean that most people have ceased to believe in the possibility of supernatural sanctions or aids. If this is all, the excitement apparent in his tone seems naïve. 'It is very probable that the Hindenburg line to which the defence of our traditions retired as a result of the onslaughts of the last century will be blown up in the near future. If this should happen a mental chaos such as man has never experienced may be expected.' (*Science and Poetry*, p. 82). 'Consider the probable effects upon love poetry in the near future of the kind of inquiry into basic human constitution exemplified by psycho-analysis.' These are very bourgeois bogies. Their worst feature is the way they play into the hands of the would-be emancipated, those whom L. H. Myers has described in *Prince Jali*: 'they depended basically

upon a solid, shockable world of decorum and common sense. They had to believe that a great ox-like eye was fixed upon them in horror.'

These defects of tone in Richards' writing cannot be passed over. In the first place they tend to attract the least desirable kind of audience, though the astringency and discipline of Richards' best work should be a sufficient safeguard against this. A more serious consideration is that they offer a needless obstacle to an appreciation by better readers of Richards' real significance. To sum up this significance one may indicate the two points of view from which Richards sees poetry: he sees it both as the practised reader who has acquired his standards of culture imperceptibly, and as the plain man of common sense and faith in science who needs *convincing*, without a gradual process of education, that poetry might be of some importance to him. A large part of Richards' work can be regarded as an attempt to find common ground for these two points of view; to find a set of standards recognized by the second man which will lead logically to the position of the first. He sets to work in two ways; first by an explicit theory of value, second by showing up the kind of mistakes that are likely to lead to an under-estimation of poetry. The second method really consists in making explicit, and at the same time telescoping, the steps which those who adequately value poetry must at some time have taken, normally without having analysed them. This second method is obviously of enormous value to people already prepared to take poetry seriously; it may well divert university students, for instance, from their otherwise almost inevitable progress towards the point from which they regard 'the time when they read poetry' with slightly more wistful feelings than they have for 'the time when they played Red Indians.' But whether Richards' methods would be effective in convincing the intelligent and friendly Philistine is another matter. It may be that his work fulfills its purpose by giving those who already value poetry a new assurance that their concern for it is a development, and not a distortion, of 'ordinary practical living.' If this is one of its functions it bears witness to the growing need of those with minority views to justify themselves at the bar of the main community. The main community may not be convinced; perhaps the fundamental need is that the minority should be.

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## HISTORY AND THE MARXIAN METHOD

THE writings of the modern Marxists contain explanations which should at least open our minds to the consideration of the Marxian view of history. We need not fear the word 'materialist,' for we are now told that 'materialist' only means 'matter-of-fact'; for us at least, as will be seen later, it need signify nothing more than the modern scientific method in historical study. We understand—for it is satisfactorily explained—that the Marxist is no 'crude economic determinist'; the Marxian thesis does not rule out the influence of individuals or the power of ideas. An interpretation of history which purports to belong to the same intellectual world as 'the linguistic criticism of Mr. Ogden, the æsthetic criticism of Mr. Richards and the methods of the new psychology' is a thing which the most jaded historian would desire to consider afresh; and the worst of Philistines must wish to weigh a theory which claims to be appropriate to our capitalistic age. That variations in means of production are the starting-point of historical change; that what Marx calls 'production-relations' are factors in history which are in a special sense inescapable; that historical change is a dialectical process, the contradiction of thesis and antithesis setting up a movement which results in a new synthesis; and that deep at the bottom of our history there is really the immemorial class-struggle—these are propositions less strange but more intriguing, now, than in former days; for they do not drop into our minds without raising an echo, without stirring at least half a sympathy. So we may be more open to the consideration of the Marxian view of history, as it is embodied in the famous Marxian formulation of the historical process—the doctrine that, within an existing order of society, the discrepant interests of two economic classes provide a contradiction and provoke a struggle, which leads to the formation of a new order, where the same thing happens again. It may