



The Literary Apprentice

I. A. Richards on the "Chief Difficulties" of Reading

I. A. Richards was among the first to make a systematic study of how his students actually read poetry under the guidance of their own strategies and resources. He describes his methods in his famous book, *Practical Criticism* (1929), from which the following passages are taken. Richards simply gave his students many poems but with no adjunct materials, not even the titles or authors indicated, and asked them write commentaries about their processes of reading the poems. Though his experiments were focused on reading poetry, we can generalize to reading other sorts of literature as well.

After examining the responses of many of his very well prepared students, I. A. Richards decided there are several typical ways that their readings went astray. While his observations have an air of negative commentary which derives, no doubt, from a philosophy that believes, since art is "communication," one should find the core meaning in it, and that anything other than this meaning is a "misreading," we can still learn much from his list of "chief difficulties" (12) these readers encountered:

A. First must come the difficulty of *making out the plain sense* of poetry.

The most disturbing and impressive fact brought out by this experiment is that a large proportion of a devoted readers of poetry both as a statement and as sense, its plain, overt meanings, taken quite apart from equally, they misapprehend it in a travesty it in a paraphrase. readers; not only those who most abstruse poetry which brutal truth, no immunity is reputable scholar, from this

B. Parallel to, and not uncommon meaning are the difficulties have a form to the mind's eye silently read. They have a movement . . . and another laboriously with finger-cour has most far-reaching effects

C. Next may come those difficulties *imagery*, principally visual in the incurable fact that we to produce imagery of the as a whole, as well as of so lives varies surprisingly. Some images; others seem to be and every state of thought the whole (though by no means exceptional imaging capacity stress the place of imagery

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The Virtual Classroom at Cambridge University, which begins with an excellent explanation of how I. A. Richard's "practical criticism" guides their approach ... [Jump to text »](#)

to judge the value of the poetry by the images it excites in them. But images are erratic things; lively images aroused in one mind need have no similarity to the equally lively images stirred by the same line of poetry in another, and neither set need have anything to do with any images which may have existed in the poet's mind. Here is a troublesome source of critical deviations.

D. Thirdly, and more obviously, we have to note the powerful very persuasive influence of *mnemonic irrelevancies*. These are the misleading effects of the reader's being reminded of some personal scene or adventure, erratic associations, the interference of emotional reverberations from a past which may have nothing to do with the poem. Relevance is not an easy notion to define or to apply, though some instances of irrelevant intrusions are among the simplest of all accidents to diagnose.

E. More puzzling and more interesting are the critical traps that surround what may be called *stock responses*. These have their opportunity whenever a poem seems to, or does, involve views and emotions already fully prepared in the reader's mind, so that what happens appears to be more of the reader's doing than the poet's. The button is pressed, and then the author's work is done, for immediately the record starts playing in quasi- (or total) independence of the poem which is supposed to be its origin or instrument.

Whenever this lamentable redistribution of the poet's and the reader's share in the labour of poetry occurs, or is in danger of occurring, we require to be especially on our guard. Every kind of injustice may be committed as well by those who just escape as by those who are caught.

F. *Sentimentality* is a peril that needs less comment here. It is a question of the due measure of response. This over-facility in certain emotional directions is the Scylla whose Charybdis is—

G. *Inhibition*. This, as much as *Sentimentality*, is a positive phenomenon, though less studied until recent years and somewhat masked under the title of *Hardness of Heart*. But neither can well be considered in isolation.

H. *Doctrinal adhesions* presents another troublesome problem. Very much poetry—religious poetry may be instanced—seems to contain or imply views and beliefs, true or false, about the world. If this be so, what bearing has the truth-value of the views upon the worth of the poetry? Even if it be not so, if the beliefs are not really contained or implied, but only seem so to a non-poetical reading, what should be the bearing of the reader's conviction, if any, upon his estimate of the poetry? Has poetry anything to say; if no, why not, and if so, how? Difficulties at this point are a fertile source of confusion and erratic judgment.

I. Passing now to a different order of difficulties, the effects of *technical presuppositions* have to be noted. When something has once been done in a certain fashion we tend to expect similar things to be done in the future in the same fashion, and are disappointed or do not recognise them if they are done differently. Conversely, a technique which has shown its ineptitude for one purpose tends to become discredited for all. Both are cases of mistaking means for ends. Whenever we attempt to judge poetry from outside by technical details we are putting means before ends, and—such is our ignorance of cause and effect in poetry—we shall be lucky if we do not make even worse blunders. We have to avoid judging pianists by their hair.

J. Finally, *general critical preconceptions* (prior demands made upon poetry as a result of theories—conscious or unconscious—about its nature and value), intervene endlessly, as the history of criticism shows only too well, between the reader and the poem. Like an unlucky dietetic formula they may cut him

off from what he is starving for, even when it is at his very lips. (13-15)

Richards is refreshing when, in the first observations, he says "no immunity" is possessed by the "reputable scholar" for we assume he is including himself in the group and thus is admitting he is also vulnerable to these problems. Much later in the book he makes this clear:

... The wild interpretations of others must not be regarded as the antics of incompetents, but as dangers that we ourselves only narrowly escape, if, indeed, we do. We must see in the misreadings of others the actualisation of possibilities threatened in the early stages of our own readings. The only proper attitude is to look upon a successful interpretation, a correct understanding, as a triumph against odds. We must cease to regard a misunderstanding as a mere unlucky accident. We must treat it as the normal and probable event. (315)

How serious he was about including himself, however, could be debated!

For further explorations of Richards and his approach, visit

- *The Virtual Classroom* at Cambridge University, which begins with an excellent explanation of how I. A. Richards' "practical criticism" guides their approach. Try performing some of the readings they suggest!!
 - Here is their page devoted to an overview of [Richard's Practical Criticism](http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/vclass/pracrit.htm)
<<http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/vclass/pracrit.htm>>
 - Here is the introductory page to the English Department's "[Virtual Classroom](http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/vclass/virtclas.htm)"
<<http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/vclass/virtclas.htm>>
- Visit [THE I. A. RICHARDS WEB RESOURCE](http://www.btinternet.com/~j1837c/jbc/richards/iar.html):
 - <<http://www.btinternet.com/~j1837c/jbc/richards/iar.html>>
 - Under "related links" visit those devoted to *Practical Criticism* where you will find a link to this article:
 - Purves, Alan C. "[The Aesthetic Mind of Louise Rosenblatt](http://www.hu.mtu.edu/reader/online/20/purves20.html)." *Reader 20* (1988): 68-77.
<<http://www.hu.mtu.edu/reader/online/20/purves20.html>> Here Alan Purves not only demonstrates the importance of I. A. Richards to Rosenblatt's seminal work on Reader Response theory but also shows how she "reverses" his assumptions:

More important than her concern with the substance of the text is the way in which she turns Richards' ideas around. What is in the reader's head is not erroneous, but a necessary part of reading. It becomes a given of her definition of the reader.

Rosenblatt's reversal of Richards is, to my mind, one of the main contributions of her early work. The very act of interpretation is the relating of the text to a set of known structures in the reader's head. To be sure, there can be misinterpretations and misapplications of knowledge. But the fact of erroneous interpretations does not negate the basic principle that interpretation is driven both by the reader and by the text. The idea of the active use of prior knowledge in reading literature, a main theme of *Literature as Exploration*, is the point of the reader-response critics whom Rosenblatt anticipated by some thirty years. (Purvis)

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