I. A. RICHARDS,  
**PRACTICAL CRITICISM: A STUDY OF LITERARY JUDGMENT (1929)**


In this seminal work, Richards’ thesis is that literary criticism (what he terms, with a tip of the hat to Alexander Pope, ‘judgment’ in the subtitle) can be objective and thereby yield a true understanding of the one and only meaning of the literary work. It is in this way that what he terms ‘misunderstanding’ can be avoided. This is not, however, an easy, straightforward undertaking given the numerous obstacles of a linguistic nature strewn in the way.

Richards’ approach is scientific and, as such, specifically inductive. In other words, he applies the so-called ‘scientific method.’ He starts practically by collecting and collating as much empirical data as possible, he then analyses the results and, finally, he formulates a posteriori certain theoretical conclusions of a general and unifying nature that are designed to explain as much of the data in question as possible by positing specific causes. To be precise, Richards distributed several poems (stripped of the names of their authors and/or titles to eliminate the possibility of prejudice) amongst his undergraduate students at the University of Cambridge and then gathered the interpretations written, the correctness of which he then attempted to assess. After analysing the data, Richards postulated a theory designed to explain the results and proposed a remedy designed to cure literary criticism of the misunderstandings that plague the reading process. He concluded, as we shall see, that misunderstanding is due to a simple confusion between four different levels, aspects or kinds of meaning and as to which of these levels should predominate in a given genre of discourse.

Of course, notwithstanding the inductive approach which he ostensibly applies, it is arguable that Richards is not without his presuppositions. From this perspective, one might contend that Richards’ approach is in fact deductive in nature. That is, he starts out with certain general a priori presuppositions concerning the nature of literary interpretation from which he infers particular conclusions that merely confirm his pre-given assumptions. To be precise, the main assumption informing his work here and elsewhere is that works have a single, correct meaning which it is possible to objectively grasp via a method of reading that is scientifically determinable. When this process goes awry, misunderstanding is the result. Interpretations are, consequently, either true or false. Richards, in short, assumes that he knows the true meaning of the poems which he distributes. He accordingly deems those of his students’ interpretations with which he agrees correct, and those with which he does not incorrect. He seemingly never considers the possibility that interpretations may be deemed valid on the basis of consensus.

**PART I: INTRODUCTORY (1-16)**

Here, Richards recounts how as a lecturer at the University of Cambridge he became fascinated by the fact that responses to the same literary work could be so widely divergent, even on the part of students who were supposed to be very intelligent and highly educated. Why, he wondered, did even the best students respond in such divergent ways to the very same works? This stimulated him to give out poems to his students without titles or names on it — he did this so that students would not be swayed by any assumptions which they may have already possessed concerning the author or the work in question (see Appendices C and D). He then asked the students to interpret these poems,
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collected their comments (what he called ‘protocols’), and compared them.

PART II: DOCUMENTATION (19-170)

Here, Richard lays out the 13 poems together with the students’ responses to them, all this with a view to documenting the sheer variety and divergence of their interpretations of the very same works.

PART III: ANALYSIS (173-291)

Chapter 1 “The Four Kinds of Meaning”

Richards is left with much to ponder after collecting and collating the students’ responses: “a hundred verdicts from a hundred readers . . . a result at the very opposite pole from my hope and intention” (173). He notes that the original difficulty of all reading, the problem of making out the meaning, is our obvious starting-point. The answers to these apparently simple questions: ‘What is a meaning?’ ‘What are we doing when we endeavour to make it out?’ ‘What is it we are making out?’ are the master-keys to all problems of criticism. If we can make use of them the locked chambers and corridors of theory of poetry open to us, and a new and impressive order is discovered even in the most erratic twists of the protocols. (174)

Richards comes up with the view that “there are several kinds of meaning” (174). As listeners and readers, he writes, the “Total Meaning we are engaged with is, almost always, a blend, a combination of several contributory meanings of different types” (174). This is because “language as it is used in poetry . . . has not one but several tasks to perform simultaneously” (174). For this reason, “we shall misconceive most of the difficulties of criticism unless we understand this point and take note of the difference between these functions” (174).

There are, Richards argues, four “types of function, four kinds of meaning” (175) found in all uses of language:

- **Sense**: we speak “to say something, . . . to direct our hearer’s attention upon some state of affairs, to present to them some items for consideration, and to excite in them some thoughts about these items” (175). To put this another way, words must communicate to some degree a claim of some sort about the world (Richards is alluding here to the ‘correspondence’ theory of language).

- **Feeling**: Richards writes that we also, as a rule, have some feelings about these items, about the state of affairs we are referring to. We have an attitude towards it, some special direction, bias, or accentuation of interest towards it, some personal flavour or colouring of feeling; and we use language to express these feelings, this nuance of interest. Equally when we listen we pick it up, rightly or wrongly; it seems inextricably part of what we receive. (175)

Under the term ‘feeling,’ he clarifies in a footnote, he groups the “whole conative-affective aspect of life – emotions, emotional attitudes, the will, desire, pleasure-unpleasure, and the rest. ‘Feeling’ is shorthand for any or all of this” (175).

- **Tone**: moreover, the speaker ordinarily has an attitude to his listener. He chooses or arranges his words differently as his audience varies. . . .
The tone of his utterance reflects his awareness of this relation, his sense of how he stands towards those he is addressing. (175)

- **Intention**: Richards distinguishes the speaker’s ‘intention’ from “what he says (Sense), his attitudes to what he is talking about (Feeling), and his attitude to his listener (Tone)” (176). Intention is the speaker’s or writer’s aim, conscious or unconscious, the effect he is endeavouring to promote. Ordinarily he speaks for a purpose, and his purpose modifies his speech. The understanding of it is part of the whole business of apprehending his meaning. (176)

Sometimes the speaker’s intention is merely to “state his thoughts” (176) (hence, an emphasis on Sense), or “express his feelings about what he is thinking” (176) (Feeling), or to “express his attitude to his listener” (176) (Tone). Frequently, in other words, his intention “operates through and satisfies itself in a combination of other functions” (176). However, it is “not reducible to their effects” (176). For example, it may “govern the stress laid upon points in an argument...” (176), “call attention to itself in such phrases as...” (176), and so on; it also “controls the plot... and is at work whenever the author is...” (176).

The protocols reveal copious examples of the “failure on the part of one or other of these functions. Sometimes all four fail together... and often a partial collapse of one function entails aberrations in the others” (177). The “possibilities of human misunderstanding make up indeed a formidable subject for study” (177).

Richards proceeds to argue that different uses of language emphasise one or more than one of these components rather than others as a result of which “at times, now one now another of the functions become predominant” (177). Scientific treatises, for example, would emphasise ‘sense’ but downplay ‘feeling,’ while the ‘tone’ would be “settled... by academic convention” (177): the scientist will, Richards asserts, “indicate respect for his readers and a moderate anxiety to be understood accurately” (177). The scientist’s ‘intention’ would normally be “confined to the clearest and most adequate statement of what he has to say” (177) or, in some circumstances, to the desire to “reorient opinion, to direct attention to new aspects, or to encourage or discourage certain methods of work or ways of approach” (177). By contrast, these four constituent elements of meaning would be arranged differently in work designed to popularise scientific research rather than addressed solely to an academic elite. For example, a “precise and adequate statement of the sense may have to be sacrificed, to some degree, in the interests of general intelligibility” (178); a “much more lively exhibition of feelings on the part of the author towards his subject-matter is usually appropriate and desirable” (177); and greater “tact” (178) should inform his tone. Richards then turns his attention to political speeches where, he avers, the “furtherance of intentions... is unmistakably predominant” (178) but relies on the “expression of feelings about causes, policies, leaders and opponents” (178) as well as the “establishment of favourable relations with the audience” (178). In such discourses, sense, the “presentation of facts” (178), is often “subordinated” (178) to the other functions.

The “statements” (180) which “appear” (180) in poetry, Richards’ real concern, are there “for the sake of their effects upon feelings, not for their own sake” (180). Many, he argues, “if not most, of the statements in poetry are there as a means to the manipulation and expression of feelings and attitudes, not as contributions to any body of doctrine of any type whatever” (180). All in all, what occurs is a “subjugation of statement to emotive purposes” (180). (He argues elsewhere, in another famous book of his called *Science and
Poetry [1926], the truth-claims made by poetry are really pseudo-statements.) Therefore, to "challenge their truth or to question whether they deserve serious attention as statements claiming truth, is to mistake their function" (180). Hence, the confusion which surrounds what exactly the Romantic poet Keats meant when he wrote mysteriously at the end of his famous "Ode on a Grecian Urn" that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" or when another poet describes his soul as a 'ship in full sail.' In short, we must not look primarily for truth-claims in poetry but for the poet's feelings which are expressed therein and which in turn have an impact on the reader's own feelings. He deals with the effect of literature on the reader in greater detail in yet another famous book of his: Principles of Literary Criticism (1924).

All in all, Richards is of the view that listeners and readers misunderstand the meaning of a particular statement when they wrongly emphasise that kind of meaning which is not meant to be predominant in that genre of discourse (e.g. 'feeling' in a scientific treatise). From this perspective, although misunderstanding is always a possibility, it can be avoided. Richards' student William Empson continued this line of research in his own equally famous work, Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930), in which he explores the various ambiguities found especially in the language of poetry which contribute to misunderstanding.

Chapter 2 "Figurative Language"
Chapter 3 "Sense and Feeling"
Chapter 4 "Poetic Form"
Chapter 5 "Irrelevant Associations and Stock Responses"
Chapter 6 "Sentimentality and Inhibition"
Chapter 7 "Doctrine in Poetry"
Chapter 8 "Technical Presuppositions and Critical Preconceptions"

PART IV: SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS (292-329)
I "Culture in the Protocols"
II "The Services of Psychology"
III "Suggestions Towards a Remedy"