I. A. Richards and the Rise of Cognitive Stylistics

David West

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My father, Peter West, died in October 2010, and I wish I could have presented him with a copy of my book. As an engineer, he would have been sceptically proud, I hope.

Introduction

Towards a science of criticism

In an interview which I. A. Richards gave in 1971, towards the end of his long and highly productive life (he was born in 1893 and would die in 1979 at the age of 86) – a life in which he had made significant contributions in the diverse fields of linguistics, literary and aesthetic theory, language-teaching theory, and the philosophy of metaphor and rhetoric; in which he had published several volumes of poems and plays; in which he had played a leading role in the movement to found an international second language, Basic English; in which he had taught for extended periods in Britain, China, and the United States; and in which he had succumbed to the lure of many high mountains, both literal and metaphorical – he recalled an incident from his 'early teens,' when, 'laid up' with 'TB,' he came across a passage from 'The Battle Chorus' in Swinburne's tragic drama *Erechtheus* (1881):

> About ten lines later I couldn't see the book. I just blubbered my way through the rest of the excerpt. I had to lie down on my back on the hearthrug with the book propped up on my chest to keep the tears out of the line of vision (Richards 1971, pp. 17–18).

For the young Richards, this passage, beginning 'Ill thoughts breed fear, and fear ill words; but these/The Gods turn from us that have kept their law,' was 'the divine vision', and the *Erechtheus* as a whole would become for him 'a talisman to restore courage' at 'fearsome moments' (Richards 1971, p. 18). The fact that Richards could remember this incident in such fine detail after some sixty-five years, and indeed found it important enough to talk about it in an interview towards the end of his long life, would indicate its immense significance to him, both as a young man at the time suffering from a near-fatal illness (he would suffer from tuberculosis throughout his teenage years) and as an old man reflecting on his long life and career. As J. P. Russo, Richards's

biographer, points out, this moment 'claimed the status of a condensed private allegory' for Richards (Russo 1989, p. 6).

And, indeed, it is perhaps fanciful, but not altogether absurd, to claim that Richards's life subsequent to that moment in his early teens was a long quest to make sense of the intense, and intensely valuable, experience that he had had as an effect of reading the passage from Swinburne, for the central knot of questions that he came back to again and again throughout his life's work were: What is the nature of the relationship between objects in the world – such as poems, paintings, and pieces of music, but also ordinary objects such as houses, trees, and mountains – and the human being who *experiences* those objects? What, indeed, *is* the nature of human experience? And, since Richards was interested primarily in *linguistic* objects, what is the nature of our experience of *language*? More specifically, what is the nature of our experience of *poetic* language, such as a Swinburne poem, and why do we find such poetic objects *beautiful*? Why do they cause us to experience such overwhelmingly powerful *feelings* and *emotions*, and wherein lies their *value* to us? What *effects* do they have on us, and what is their *place* and *function* in human life? It is perhaps significant, too, that it should have been a poem which precipitated Richards's strong outburst of emotion, for it was poetry, as a metonymy of literature, with which Richards was primarily concerned in his work; that it should have been Swinburne who was the sole protagonist in his private allegory, for, in Swinburne's work, sense and meaning are often subordinated to the sheer sensual pleasure of the texture of rhythm and metre and of the feel of phonemes in the ear and in the mouth – precisely the formal elements (or tied images) that Richards stressed as being of such fundamental importance in our experience of literature; and that it should have been this passage from Swinburne, one concerned with the relationship between 'thoughts' and 'words,' that Richards focused on, for it was this relationship between language and thought, and, in particular, the influence of the former on the latter, that was of central concern to Richards.

Some ten years later, in October 1919, when Richards, then aged 26, gave his very first lecture to a university audience, for his Theory of Criticism course for the new English Tripos at Cambridge, he began by telling the handful of students before him:

> You can *either* think of the literature of criticism as an assemblage of disconnected conflicting opinions to which if you write criticism yourself

> you can only add another such opinion. Or, you can think of it as a *science*, a body of coherent knowledge with many provinces (Quoted in Constable 2001a, pp. ix–x).

The science of criticism that Richards would go on to build in the 1920s – principally, in *The Foundations of Aesthetics* (1922), which he wrote with his friends C. K. Ogden and the painter and novelist James Wood; *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), which he wrote with Ogden; *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), which was the product of his Theory of Criticism course; *Science and Poetry* (1926); and *Practical Criticism* (1929) – was a science of criticism which was designed to explain precisely those questions raised by his experience of the Swinburne passage. Instead of producing literary criticism, or additional readings of, or opinions on, the same literary texts, Richards set out to build a *science* of criticism, one which, founded on scientific principles, would explain the nature of literary experience itself, and the value that such experience can have for us. Such a science of criticism would enquire into what we are doing when we read literature (in particular, poems), into the mental events that occur in the literary experience, into the valuable effects of this experience, and into the general place and function of literature in human life. 'Criticism, as I understand it,' Richards wrote in the preface to the second edition of *Principles of Literary Criticism*, which was published in 1926, 'is the endeavour to discriminate between experiences and to evaluate them' (Richards 1926a, p. viii).

Richards's science of criticism could claim the status of a science, too, not only in its quest for knowledge and coherence (Richards understood the category of *science* in very broad terms: alongside Art or Poetry, it is one of the two vast universes of human endeavour), but also in its grounding in the natural and human sciences. Each of Richards's three major books of the decade – *The Meaning of Meaning*, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, and *Practical Criticism* – was published in the International Library of Psychology, Philosophy and Scientific Method series, which had been founded in 1921 by Ogden, Richards's friend and principal collaborator during the decade, to give expression, as its advertising flyer proclaimed, 'to the remarkable developments which have recently occurred in Psychology and its allied sciences.' By 1926, the series had become 'the conduit for European and American psychology – experimental, philosophical, Viennese, behaviourist, *Gestalt* – and boasted

fifty titles' (Russo 1989, p. 95), and it is important to stress that Richards's work was very much part of a wider movement within psychology and its allied sciences, a movement which sought to explain the nature of the human being and her or his place in the natural world.

Richards, then, was – and, indeed, saw himself as – first and foremost a psychologist rather than a literary theorist or a literary critic. In other words, he approached literature as a psychologist, as someone who was steeped in the psychology of his time and who was investigating literary experience in an attempt to discover the nature of experience itself; he was not a literary theorist or critic who was drawing on psychology to understand literature. Without an appreciation of that fact, it is impossible, I would argue, even to come close to an understanding of his work, since his science of criticism is underpinned by psychology, and the principal features of that science – a concern with our experience of the literary object rather than with the object itself; with the mental processes involved in reading literature; with the valuable effects that literature can have on the human being; with the central function of literature in human life – are, therefore, direct products of the psychological and scientific paradigms in which he was immersed. Richards had read very widely in literature when he entered the subject of English in 1919 – in particular, poetry, and especially poetry from the Romantic and post-Romantic period. 'I knew Swinburne by heart – and Shelley much better,' he remembered in 1977 (Quoted in Russo 1989, p. 12). Nonetheless, when he began teaching the subject, he had never studied literature formally. This was a distinct advantage for him, since he was able to approach the subject free of all preconceptions, and was, therefore, willing to see the subject anew, to address the fundamental issues and problems of the subject, and to put forward radical solutions to cure the subject of its ills. Instead, his formal education had been in Moral Sciences, which he had studied at Cambridge between 1912 and 1915 (having switched from History after only one term), and this was, broadly speaking, philosophy (in particular, ethics, logic, aesthetic theory and, most importantly, psychology). In addition, his long and frequent periods of illness (he spent most of the War years in the mountains of North Wales) had given him the opportunity to become something of a polymath, so that, by the time that he began teaching for the English Tripos in October 1919, he had studied not only philosophy, ethics, logic, aesthetic theory, and psychology, but also medicine

(with a view to becoming a psychoanalyst), chemistry, biology, physiology, and linguistics. These disciplines – particularly that of psychology – would form the basis of Richards's science of criticism. And, moreover, they each provided a model for him of what a science could and should be like.

In an important early article, 'First Steps in Psychology,' written with Ogden and published in the latter's *Psyche* journal in July 1921, Richards claimed that 'it is hard to find any branch of human activity upon which psychology cannot throw fresh light' (Richards et al. 1921, p. 51). According to the publisher's description which appeared at the end of the first edition of *Principles of Literary Criticism*, moreover, the book was written 'by a psychologist,' while, in the book itself, Richards provides 'a concise treatise on psychology' in recognition of the fact that 'nearly all the topics of psychology are raised at one point or another by criticism,' and he expresses his 'desire to link even the commonplaces of criticism to a systematic exposition of psychology' (Richards 1924, p. 2). Also, at the end of the decade, in *Practical Criticism*, Richards would describe psychology as 'the indispensable instrument for this inquiry' (Richards 1929, p. 10). Richards also wrote a number of articles and reviews in psychological journals during the decade, including, in 1926, one of the first detailed expositions of the new psychology of behaviourism, and there is even strong evidence to suggest that he cowrote much of *The Meaning of Psychology*, which was published in 1926 under the sole name of Ogden (See Russo 1989, p. 708).

Since Richards was concerned principally in his professional life from 1919 with literature, it was perhaps inevitable that he should have focused in his quest to understand human experience and the human mind on that most human activity of reading literature, but that should not conceal from us the psychological foundations of his work. Had he not been recruited to teach for the English Tripos in 1919 (according to Richards's own account, his recruitment, by Mansfield Forbes, had happened 'accidentally' and was 'a pure fluke' (Richards 1968, p. 257; 1971, p. 24)), it is likely that he would not have written any works in literary criticism at all. Moreover, his private letters from the early 1920s reveal his personal thoughts concerning the subject that he was teaching. In a letter to Dorothy Pilley, his future wife, from November 1923, when he had already completed half of *Principles of Literary Criticism*, for example, Richards wrote that there were 'so many things I want to work at

and can do something with,' but that there was 'nothing literary among them however.' 'I think, I shall tell Magdalene that I won't coach any people any more for the English Tripos,' he wrote in the same letter, since 'it's iniquitous, profanation, to expect people to use literature for such purposes,' and 'it does more harm than good' (In Constable 1990, p. 27). Moreover, when he was invited to deliver a paper at the inaugural meeting of F. R. Leavis's English Research Society at the end of 1931, the title of the paper that he gave was 'A Case Against Research in "English".' Unsurprisingly perhaps, Leavis would turn against Richards shortly after this meeting, and, indeed, spent the rest of his life denouncing him. (For an account of this meeting, see MacKillop 1995, pp. 142–3).

In 1970, Richards told Russo that 'hundreds of models ought to be employed to tell how [the mind] works' (Quoted in Russo 1989, p. 726), and the eclecticism of Richards's psychology is, indeed, striking: psychology is very much an 'instrument' to use, and certainly not something to be enthralled by. This eclecticism was undoubtedly partly due to the 'lack of a serviceable psychology' which Richards identified in *Principles of Literary Criticism* (Richards 1924, p. 32), but it was also due to his intrinsic distrust of grand narratives. The mind, for him, was an 'unimaginable organisation,' an 'energy system of prodigious complexity and extreme delicacy of organisation' with 'an indefinitely large number of stable poises,' and therefore no single paradigm or model could possibly come close to explaining the mind in its entirety (Richards 1924, pp. 50, 104). Moreover, what Richards was attempting to do, for the first time, was to provide a comprehensive scientific explanation of the intense experiences that we can have when we read complex linguistic objects, such as Swinburne's *Erechtheus*, or when we listen to a piece of music, or when we contemplate a picture or a sculpture, and no single psychological or scientific paradigm was available that could provide the materials for such an explanation.

Speaking in 1971, in the same interview in which he had talked about his Swinburne experience in his early teens, Richards identified the paradigms which were of most importance to him in the early 1920s, while he was writing *Principles of Literary Criticism*:

> What mattered was that I was interested in psychology, a rather old-fashioned psychology: pre-behaviouristic, although I did know a good deal about behaviourism and did something towards joining them up. But

> my psychology came out of G. F. Stout [author of influential textbooks of psychology, including *Analytic Psychology* (1896 and 1902)], out of the big James Ward article in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* ['Psychology,' which was first published in the 1886 edition, but substantially revised for the 1911 edition; it was probably the latter which was important to Richards and to which he was referring], and William James's two volumes, *The Principles of Psychology* [(1890)]. Those were the real formative things. Those and Sherrington's *Integrative Action of the Nervous System* [(1906)] to put the physiology in it. I was someone really saturated in psychology and neurology making up a book about the literary approaches. That was a bit of luck really. Two quite different concerns crossing at a crucial point (Richards 1971, p. 28).

These, then, were the three main psychological or scientific paradigms in which Richards was steeped when he was building his science of criticism in the 1920s: the philosophical psychology of James Ward, his teacher on the Moral Sciences Tripos, of Ward's student G. F. Stout, and of William James; the objective stimulus-response psychology of behaviourism; and the neurology of C. S. Sherrington. Each is different from the other, and what Richards attempted to do was to combine, or blend, or weave them together to produce a model of mind which was complex enough to account for what happens when we 'open the book, stand before the picture, have the music played, spread out the rug, pour out the wine' (Richards 1924, p. 5). The influence of the three paradigms can be detected in each of Richards's books from the 1920s, but the relative importance of each varies from book to book. In *The Foundations of Aesthetics*, the dominant paradigm is philosophical psychology; in *The Meaning of Meaning*, it is behaviourism; in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, it is Sherringtonian neurology. In *Practical Criticism*, no single paradigm is dominant, however, since what Richards was attempting to do – to conduct a psychological experiment to discover the nature of literary experience – was unprecedented, not only in literary studies, but also in psychology in general.

There were, though, two other important psychological paradigms available to Richards at the time, and to which he referred in his work during the decade, but which he did not mention in his 1971 interview. The first, psychoanalysis, which had entered Britain in 1913 with the translation into English of Freud's *Die Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*), but whose progress had been hindered by the War, was, with its reduction of human

behaviour to a single motivation, that of sexual instinct, and its proclivity for making unverifiable claims, of little or no significance to Richards, and his comments on the paradigm were, therefore, consistently negative. In *The Foundations of Aesthetics*, for example, he refers to the 'monstrosities' which 'may be found scattered throughout Phallic and Freudian literature' (Richards et al. 1922, p. 49). In *Principles of Literary Criticism*, he writes that, 'to judge by the published work of Freud upon Leonardo da Vinci or of Jung upon Goethe,' psychoanalysts 'tend to be peculiarly inept as critics,' while, in the same book, he calls an unconscious mind 'a fairly evident fiction,' for which 'goings on in the nervous system' are 'a satisfactory substitute' (Richards 1924, pp. 29–30, 82). And, in *Practical Criticism*, psychoanalysis occupies one of the 'two extreme wings of the psychological forces' (Richards 1929, p. 322). (Significantly, it is behaviourism, to which Richards had a highly ambivalent attitude throughout his life, that occupies the other extreme wing).

The second psychological paradigm available to Richards was that of *Gestalt* psychology, whose founding document was an article by Max Wertheimer on the visual perception of movement which was published in 1912 (the year that Richards began his undergraduate studies in Moral Sciences), but whose roots lay, as Wertheimer acknowledged (Wertheimer 1925, p. 4), in a paper by Christian von Ehrenfels on form-quality (*Gestaltqualität*) in visual and aural perception, which had been published in German in 1890. In his paper, 'Über Gestaltqualitäten,' Ehrenfels pointed out that, if a familiar melody of six tones is played and six *new* tones are employed, we will still recognize the melody, despite the change, and he argued that this is due to the presence of 'a something *more* than the sum of six tones, viz. a seventh something, which is the form-quality, the *Gestaltqualität*, of the original six.' It is this '*seventh* factor' which, according to Ehrenfels, enables us 'to recognize the melody despite its transposition' (In Wertheimer 1925, p. 4). In other words, the aural stimuli change, but the experience that we have remains essentially the same, which suggests that present experience is not simply the product of the accumulation of past experiences of stimuli mediated through memory (as the associationist psychologists had been arguing), but the result, rather, of a capacity within us to give form-quality to stimuli. Richards almost certainly knew of Ehrenfels's paper, since both Ward and Stout had discussed it favourably (the latter had written about it in a chapter in the first volume of his *Analytic Psychology*