Practical Criticism

A Study of Literary Judgement

I. A. Richards

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Edited by John Constable

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION[1]

The Beginnings of Practical Criticism

The 'Practical Criticism' experiment began to take shape in late 1923. A. C. Benson, then Master of Magdalene College, records in his diary for the 13th of October that at dinner Richards had

> suggested as a good examination for English students to print five extracts of poetry and prose, with no clue as to author and date, and containing one really *worthless* piece – and ask for comments and opinion.[2]

The opportunity to experiment with this proposal quickly arose, since Richards, who though not yet a Fellow of Magdalene, was responsible for the marking of the College's Davison Prize, which was awarded for an essay on a literary subject. He set short passages of Ella Wheeler Wilcox, W. S. Landor, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Hilaire Belloc, Thomas De Quincey, and Jeremy Taylor, and whilst overseeing the session on the afternoon of the 19th of November Richards wrote a letter to Dorothy Pilley, later to become his wife, describing this, the very first 'Practical Criticism' examination:

> Now invigilating in Magdalene Hall, that gold and brown place with stairs going out of it, with coats of arms in the windows, and banners hanging from the roof. Beneath at the table are the victims. Beginning to show signs of desperation. Some of them horribly haggard. Some writing like nuisances, what a lot of rot. I shall have to read through this. Oh Alack! Woe's me.
>
> *I* now am depressed. Magdalene is nearly too much for me. I look at all these down here (some dozen, a baker's one). Some of 'em respect me, think me happy, freed from the need to satisfy other people's whims in such matters. *I* if any scheme such as

1 Those reading *Practical Criticism* for the first time and wishing to preserve the anonymity of the poems discussed should not read this introduction until after completing Part 2 of the main text.

2 A. C. Benson, Diary, 13 Oct. 1923, Volume 172, Leaf 11, Verso. Magdalene College, Cambridge.

this had been mooted in my time would have refused, I suspect. Some of 'em must by now hate me. Most of them I've never seen before. They have seen me of course. What exactly they think I am and what doing now I don't know. Such sighs resounding in the chamber! (I *couldn't* make up my mind about anything *ever* in this place or such a place. It smells of dead thoughts, a hellish stink.)

What am I doing here? I ask myself. It's an educational institution: one of the best in the land no doubt. But I don't touch it and it doesn't touch me. Perhaps it might be worth while to, but it would mean a dreadful struggle. For nearly all the things I know to be important and would want to say would run counter to all that the other people here stand for. They are better than most, of course, and I must have conversational contacts of my peculiar sort, but I can't make them with these dons, no! and few of *my pupils*, yet at any rate, have been of any use to me, or I to them. I'm half decided to chuck it. Clear out of Magdalene and save my time for real work. I could live without what I get from all this well enough, £350 a year, and there are so many things I want to work at and can do something with. Nothing literary among them however. Here I'm in a horrible difficulty. The whole upshot of my book[1] is to put the arts, as the supreme mode of communication in the forefront of all values. And yet what is it? Why do I despise literary people, men of letters? It is the false, *professional* air which destroys it all, I suspect.

This place is impossible. I cannot think here any more than if I were upside down. The musty food smell, the dark goldy light, the age of the objects, engorge the blood vessels of the head and make me feel like apoplexy. No! It's not the Master's lunch which has done it. I was abstemious.

I think I shall tell Magdalene that I won't coach any people any more for the English Tripos. It's iniquitous, profanation, to expect people to use literature for such purposes. It does more harm than good. If I have to go for that reason I can still lecture and make as much as I like that way.

This is a dull stream of dry reflections, but this place is really filled with a numbing, dumbing devil. Oh poor people before me, you don't know how I pity you! [...]

Still they scribble down below. Mountains and reams of

1 *Principles of Literary Criticism*, which Richards was beginning at this time.

> crabbed writing to read over. How I'm to decide, I don't know. [...][1]

The following day, the 20th of November, Richards wrote again:

> 'Oh Strange, beyond report, thought or belief',[2] all the candidates for my prize with only one exception prefer Mrs Wilcox to Landor, Hopkins, Belloc, De Quincey, and Jeremy Taylor at their very best! I'm nearly ill with laughter at their opinions. Aching. – But what a state of things! – and the pick of the College unquestionably. Where are we and what am I doing? Who lecturing to? Why do I feel, not salved[3] but exhilarated by the discovery. I feel as though I had just read *Candide* again. Alive to the real world and remarkably hungry.[4]

The prize essays had saved Richards, brought him back to his work with a renewed sense of purpose. Here was something he could actually do for his students, here was an explanation of the falsity of the would-be-professionalism of the literary men: the reading public, perhaps many of the men of letters themselves, were barely able to distinguish the worthless from the valuable in their reading. And this was not just the reaction of a young outsider. Benson himself, writing in his diary, remarked that the result was 'most curious and interesting', and wondered that the candidates showed 'no critical faculty, no taste', and were 'taken in by a shoddy sonnet', adding that 'It shows how little our teaching trains discrimination.'[5] For the time being, though, the experiment with unsigned and undated poems had to be put aside, since Richards was entirely occupied with the writing of *Principles of Literary Criticism*, which was

1 IAR to D. E. Pilley, 19 Nov. 1923, Richards Collection, Magdalene College, Cambridge (hereafter RCM).

2 Richards is twisting Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, l. 117: 'O change beyond report, thought, or belief!'

3 In John Constable, ed., *Selected Letters of I. A. Richards* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1990), 28, I opted for the reading 'saddened' but now think this was mistaken.

4 IAR to D. E. Richards, 20 Nov. 1923, RCM.

5 A. C. Benson, 19 Nov. 1923, Volume 172, Leaf 33, Verso. The words quoted here have been added to the entry for the 19th Nov., but are enclosed in square brackets. Benson presumably left a space, and added this remark the following day.

complete by November 1924. In February 1925 he set the Davison Prize again, and the results were no less curious:

> Have been studying Davison Prize records all afternoon and evening. Very curious. Of course Woodbine Willy well ahead. Donne last, Bridges second. Only one man (out of 17) is reasonably right about all of them. One other is not very far off. All the rest are so wildly erratic there's little to be said. One, who hated 'em *all*, thought No. 1 had Henry James' 'frosty solemnity and plaguey jerkiness'!! I ask you, what is one to say? Golly? Think I must next year do a course of lectures like this Prize. *Practical Criticism*, to lead up to a book – to be built on actual instances of what people say.[1]

The title of the course is derived, in all probability, from the opening sentence of Chapter XIV of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*:

> In the application of these principles to purposes of practical criticism as employed in the appraisal of works more or less imperfect [...].[2]

The contrast in Coleridge's sentence, between the principles he has been laying out and the practice of criticism is the same as that between Richards' *Principles* and *Practical Criticism*, and Richards' choice of the term is descriptive of his subject, individuals engaged in criticism, and it does not offer the conditions under which its experiment was conducted as a model, or as practical and desirable.

With the aims of his course clearly defined he began to work on the lectures, taking over some of the texts he had employed for the Davison Prize. A student of this time, John Blackie, reports that Richards showed him Margaret Bulley's *Art and Counterfeit*, which contained pairs of pictures and designs and invited the reader to select that possessing merit. 'It might be

1 IAR to D. E. Pilley, 24 Feb. 1925, RCM. Quoted in *Selected Letters of I. A. Richards*, 36.

2 J. Shawcross, ed., S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1907), Vol. II, p. 13.

interesting to try the same thing with poems', Richards remarked to Blackie.[1] In the Michaelmas term (October–December) of this year he was at last able to transfer his new investigative technique over on to a larger audience. Fortunately, the notes for these first courses survive, in a green cloth-bound Notebook, No. 21 in the Richards Collection, with 'Practical Criticism 1925' heavily inked on the cover. Richards' method was to write out his lecture on the recto of each sheet, reserving the facing verso for later additions, though in fact most of these additions are revisions to the course for delivery in the Michaelmas term of 1927.

The First Practical Criticism Course, October-November 1925

The first series of lectures ran for eight weeks from the 20th of October 1925, and students sitting before Richards on this first occasion would have heard him open the series with these words:

> This course is an experiment. I'm going to spend most of this hour explaining what it is the experiment might do and what the conditions are, and in imploring you to follow the conditions. [It is an] attempt to do something which so far as I know has not been tried before. That being so it's very likely to go wrong. Both you and I shall try to do [something] new. Some of you may remember a passage in a half-forgotten novel which only missed greatness through its sentimentality – the rather spurious sentiment in which it seethed – Wm de Morgan's *Joseph Vance*. Old Mr Vance, a character obviously drawn with great skill from life, is expatiating upon how to be successful. His view is:
>
> > Never do anything that's not been done before and never let anyone do anything he hasn't done before. Cos' if he does he's sure to make a howling mess of it. Any man professing to do something for the first time ought to be had up before the Beak, and an injunction got out to stop him.

1 John Blackie, 'Cambridge in the Twenties', *Bradford College Chronicle* (Autumn 1971). Quoted in John Paul Russo, *I. A. Richards: His Life and Work* (Johns Hopkins U.P.: Baltimore, 1989), 749.

> I am rather inclined to think that he may be proved right on this occasion. If he is, if the experiment doesn't come off, as it is quite likely it won't, I shall just cancel the course, so you must not be surprised if this happens.
>
> What I'm going to do is to hand out a sheet of poems. I'm not going to say anything about these now beyond the hint that they are from some points of view a mixed lot. The authors are not indicated, and you will not know most of them. But it doesn't seriously matter if you do know them. I want you to take the sheets away and spend a certain amount of time – it needn't be very long and in any case it will be, I may perhaps dare to say, remarkably well spent time – reading them and writing short comments upon them.
>
> Then next week will you bring them back and give them to me so that I can (1) analyse the views you express, (2) classify them and then (3) lecture upon [them], lecturing partly on the poems but chiefly on your views. So you see the whole thing does demand a peculiar *collaboration* from you.

Richards then passed a hat round containing numbers and invited each of the 120 students[1] attending to take one. This became their unique identifier, written at the head of their replies, which Richards from the very first called 'protocols',[2] deriving his term, he later said, from psychology,[3] though not explaining that the word is there derived from German *protokoll* (record, transcript, proceedings). The numbering, he explained, was intended to overcome what Richards described as 'the chief practical difficulty, namely the natural shyness we all feel about having our views discussed in public in our presence'. Before distributing the sheets Richards made a few preliminary remarks on the sort of responses he was hoping to elicit. Firstly, he asked his students to try to confine themselves to saying '*definite things*', 'the kernel, the core, the essential motive of your opinion, *if you can get at it*', and added that this

1 The number is Richards' own estimate. See I. A. Richards, 'The Future of Reading', in Sheridan Baker, Jacques Barzun, and I. A. Richards, *The Written Word* (Newbury House: Rowley, Mass. 1971), 31.

2 See page 16 of Lecture One in Notebook 21, RCM.

3 I. A. Richards, 'The Future of Reading', 31.

exercise in self-knowledge, 'finding out what we really think and rely on' was something we had too little exercise in. Literary education, he went on,

> doesn't force us to decide. Mathematics and Chemistry does often forces to consider exactly what we are doing, but literature can be studied, even essays written in a kind of *dream*.

From here it was necessary to turn to one of the major causes of insincerity, the reputations of authors. The passage that follows has no correlate in the published work, and goes far towards assisting us in appreciating more exactly what Richards hoped to achieve by presenting the poems unsigned. As should be immediately obvious it is only superficially similar to the very outspoken pro-anonymity of his later years.[1]

> *Don't bother more than you can help about the authorship.* Most prudent critics never venture a remark about anything without peeping to see who the author is. And it is this very prudence which makes literature [...] such a bad training on the whole for the development of independent judgement. As soon as one knows who the author is the whole situation changes. Up come a swarm of suggestions, a whole hive of bees starts buzzing in the bonnet, and for most people on most occasions all chance of a quite unbiased consideration and of a really clear personal independent judgement vanishes.
>
> Of course there is another side to this. Very often it is impossible to understand a poem or to read it adequately unless one knows the setting and context, the century in which it was written, and sometimes even the kind of man who wrote it. [...] And often one must take account of the other poems of the same author which in a sense complete it. But all this kind of filling in of the setting should come *after* the free independent judgement, and it can't take the place of the capacity to form an independent personal judgement.
>
> As a rule we do not know how powerful the influence of suggestion is in these matters. We may think we have kept an open mind about Pope or Swinburne or Gray, yet anyone who likes to

1 'The Future of Poetry', in *The Screens* (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1960), 105–27, and particularly pages 105–8.

> experiment along the lines of this experiment will find that he hasn't! Quite a few authors seem shockingly unlike what we think they are like when we come at them unawares from a new angle. The name tells us what to expect and so puts a twist on our response from the beginning. This is why the most discerning critics are sometimes those who are least well up in the literary tradition. One of the best judges of poetry that I know came to me not long ago agog with enthusiasm for a new poet he had discovered. 'Who's this Rowley?' he asked me. 'He seems to be some sort of medieval fellow. Why have I never heard of him?' I hardly liked to tell him about Chatterton, but of course it didn't matter, he had already seen what was there. We ought to approach more literature than we do in this free, unprepared kind of way. We are judging all the time far too much with other people's minds, not our own.
>
> I ought to add that the same critic is the most thorough man I know in looking up everything he can lay hands upon about an author once he has caught on to him. Finding, for example, all the portraits there are of a poet to be a way of getting at him that is too much neglected.[1]
>
> For after all the main purpose of any study of literature should be to make us so interested in certain personalities and certain ways of regarding the world that we cannot rest content with anything less than the most perfect and complete realisation of these personalities and outlooks that we can attain.
>
> But this experiment deals only with some of the preliminary stages of the undertaking. At the same time they are the most important stages, since without them, without the capacity to form an immediate personal independent judgement of poetry we should do better to study history.

The anonymity of the pieces as presented in the experiment is seen, clearly now, as a pragmatic strategy designed to improve the chances of finding out what the protocolists actually think and derive from their reading. Without it the results would simply be reports of minds other than those writing protocols, perhaps a small number of influential minds. But even in so far as Richards grants a wider application of this method for gaining a

1 The friend Richards refers to here is probably James Wood.

fresh view it is only an initial stage, dispensable for some people perhaps, which improves your chances of developing a sincere judgement. When this stage has been passed the more you know about the poem, its period and author, the better. This is of course a more antiquated sort of view than that which Richards is assumed to have adopted at this time, in which he is generally thought to have endorsed as a general reading method, and one suitable as a guiding principle in the foundation of academic practice, the neglect of anything but the words on the page.[1]

There is even a doubt as to whether it would have seemed to him a viable examination method. Advising the attendants at the lecture on the 'conditions under which these poems should be read' Richards emphasized the fact that 'if the experiment is to work out' the poems had to be read in an undisturbed condition:

> When I've done it before, the poems have had to be read under lecture room circumstances. Which is of course all wrong. That's why I haven't yet distributed these sheets. It would be bad technique if you were to read them first in this room. I want you, if you will, not to look at them until you are ready to give them the most suitable kind of attention, under the conditions which you think are most propitious.

Since Richards also advises his respondents not to write protocols after drinking, to discuss them with friends, or even to watch the faces of friends reading the poems, one might think here that he was merely concerned with the purity of his experiment and would not have seen this remark as warding off the setting of unsigned poems for critical comment in university examinations. But the alternative is compelling. In the letter written whilst invigilating the Davison Prize Richards sees the

1 Joan Bennett, who attended the courses, makes similar points based on her recollections, and noting that Richards' poems were anonymous and undated 'for experimental purposes', remarks that 'The impact of his work perhaps gave rise to too exclusive emphasis upon the words on the page' ('How it Strikes a Contemporary', in Reuben Brower, et al., eds, *I. A. Richards: Essays in his Honor* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1973), 58).

use of critical comment upon literature as the means of grading as a 'profanation'; whilst here in his lecture notes he more calmly observes that it probably won't work anyway.

However, it seems that discussions about the advisability of introducing 'Practical Criticism' examinations had been under discussion since 1925, perhaps even as early as 1924, and when the new Tripos regulations were finalized in 1926 they included a fresh paper, 'Passages of English Prose and Verse for Critical Comment'.[1] Many of the Faculty at the time, and since, have regarded this paper as the highlight of this phase of examination reform. E. M. W. Tillyard, for example, in his history of English at Cambridge, referred to the introduction of 'practical criticism' as 'the greatest single achievement' of the 1926 regulations:

> Here at last we could confront the men with the actual texts and test their ultimate literary insight, making them use their own resources entirely.[2]

It is commonly assumed that Richards' work was the principal inspiration for this paper, and for the approach it embodied. But in fact the English Tripos at Cambridge had long been setting unattributed pieces for comment, though within the context of a specified time period. In 1921 and 1922 for example students taking the paper *Special Period of Literature, 1789–1870* were confronted with two unsigned pieces of verse and asked to 'Write a detailed criticism on *one* of the following poems, its content and style.' But the relative novelty of Richards' actions is certain. The *History of English Literature since 1603* paper for

1 See E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Muse Unchained: An Intimate Account of the Revolution in English Studies in Cambridge* (Bowes & Bowes: London, 1958), 103–9. Richards' own account of the relationship between his lecture courses, given in a late essay, is misleading and its chronology mistaken. He claimed that the inspiration for his course came from the English Tripos section 'Passages for Critical Comment and Appreciation', which 'put pieces of writing in prose and verse before the examinee – without saying what they were or by whom they were written': 'What [the examinees] said I found so bewildering and, on the whole, so discouraging, that I asked our little band to let me give a course – as Research Experiment to try to find out more about it all. I was a Psychologist, you see [...].' (I. A. Richards, 'The Future of Reading', 31.)

2 *The Muse Unchained*, p. 109.

1922 contained two signed pieces of verse, and the papers for *Special Period of Literature since 1789* in 1923, 1924, and 1925 all offered signed pieces for comment. When the first papers being set under the new regulations began to appear, in 1928, unsigned passages became more frequent. However, it should be borne in mind that even here the candidates were offered such passages for dating only, and when, as in 1928, *Literary Criticism: Passages for Comment*, they were asked for 'critical judgement' the examinees were informed that the pieces were by Milton and Bridges. In 1930 the dating exercise in Part I, *Literary Criticism: Passages for Comment* was accompanied by the instruction that the passages should be assigned to their periods with '*only* so much comment as is needed to justify your opinion', but the paper also included unsigned passages for comment, as did the Part II examination for the same year, though again there were also signed passages.

It seems, therefore, that the importance of Richards' work in 'Practical Criticism', both the lectures and the book, was to give a memorable name to and support by association a trend that had begun even before his earliest Davison Prize essay tests. Moreover, as an examination technique 'Practical Criticism' was both less rapidly and wholeheartedly taken up as a method than has been previously thought, and it does not appear that Richards was wholeheartedly behind its employment. It is impossible, for example, to imagine him writing as Tillyard does above, and instead of seeing his work as an original move in the formulation of educational examination, it seems, rather, that we should lay stress on the thoroughness of the exercise as an experiment and the novelty of the purposes to which Richards put his results.

Towards the end of the first lecture Richards offered a scattering of remarks on what he hoped 'might come out of the experiment'. These observations are somewhat surprising, in the light of the finished book, and suggest that he was still expecting, in spite of the Davison performances, a study of the varieties of reading strategies:

> What I think we ought certainly to get out of this experiment is a classification of the most usual modes of approach to poetry, a classification of people's conscious and unconscious expectations. Their critical presuppositions.

Richards then handed round a sheet with five poems on it:

Poem 1. From *Festus*, by Philip James Bailey.

Poem 2. 'Spring Quiet' by Christina Rossetti.

Poem 3. Holy Sonnets VII, by John Donne.

Poem 4. 'Easter', by the Rev. G. A. Studdert Kennedy

Poem 5. A passage from Byron, *The Island*.

Of these the first four were discussed in *Practical Criticism*, while the fifth, about which we know no more than the brief reference in the lecture notes, was apparently excluded because Richards had been unable to find time to cover it in the course. It seems possible, though far from certain, that it may have been the passage quoted in a group of passages about mountains sent to Dorothy Pilley in early 1925:

> A little stream came tumbling from the height,
> And struggling into ocean as it might,
> Its bounding crystal frolick'd in the ray
> And gush'd from cliff to crag with saltless spray;
> Close on the wild, wide ocean, yet as pure
> And fresh as innocence – and more secure,
> Its silver torrent glitter'd o'er the deep,
> As the sky chamois' eye o'erlooks the steep,
> While far below the vast and sullen swell
> Of oceans alpine azure rose and fell.[1]

The second lecture began with an identification of the poems distributed the previous week, and then passed into a lengthy

1 Byron, 'The Island', Canto the Third, Part III. Enclosed with an undated letter beginning 'Herewith a few quotes', in the Richards papers with undated letters of 1924, but datable from internal evidence to after 15 Jan. 1925, RCM.

and prescriptive account of how a poem should be discussed, relying very heavily on the recently published *Principles of Literary Criticism*. It was no more than, as Richards himself said, an 'interim' lecture, necessitated by the scheme of issuing texts and collecting protocols. With the following week the work began, and Richards opened with an admission:

> I have to begin by confessing that I have found the wealth of material you have provided me quite overwhelming. *I've reaped altogether too rich a harvest.* [...] To discuss all the variants of opinion with regard to one poem alone would take a whole term.

Even taking a relatively superficial approach to his material to 'illustrate the views which appear most frequently', Richards only just managed to complete his discussions of the first two poems, and in the fourth lecture he resumed with a lengthy investigation of the responses to the Donne sonnet, concentrating on issues of belief. Although the lecture notes do not tell us so, it seems from later notes that Richards must have distributed another four poems at the end of this session, these being:

Poem 6. From *The Harp-Weaver* by Edna St. Vincent Millay.

Poem 7. 'Spring and Fall, to a young child' by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Poem 8. 'The Temple' by J. D. C. Pellew.

Poem 9. 'Piano' by D. H. Lawrence.

Lecture Five took up the issue of sentimentality, illustrating its points with a discussion of Studdert Kennedy's poem. Lecture Six began by saying that he would omit discussion of Byron, and pass on to the new poems, the excitement and success of the experiment clearly evident in his introduction:

> Quandary. 3 hours for 4 poems each of which should have an hour.
>
> Nothing that I have ever done has so brought home to me the *variety & richness of the human garden.*

Noting that he found himself in the '*stimulating and exhilarating position* of holding a *minority opinion* on every one of these four poems', two of which he held to be 'demonstrably bad' and two 'demonstrably good', Richards began with the bad, Edna St. Vincent Millay, his account closely resembling that eventually printed. In the second half of the lecture Richards turned to Pellew's poem, observing that whilst Millay's poem 'was a trap for the naïve, the unpractised, the unsophisticated reader', 'The Temple' 'appears to be capable of taking in almost anyone'.

Lecture Seven appears to have been rather odd in form, partly because he was 'at the bad point of a rotten cold', and partly because he had received a letter, which he read out, complaining of his treatment of Edna St. Vincent Millay as a disparaging attack on American poetry in general. Richards replied with a brief address 'To All Americans' in which he set down for the record that he 'should no more dream of taking Miss Millay as a representative of the best American Poetry than I'd take Mr Drinkwater, Mr Noyes, or Mr Shanks as [representatives of the best] English', and that 'I personally find American poetry more interesting than English at the moment', listing Eliot, Alfred Kreymborg, Aiken, Frost, Sandburg and E. A. Robinson as examples. The rest of the lecture survives only in the most abbreviated form, on a sheet preceding the notes for Lecture Six, and appears to have consisted of a discussion of Hopkins.

Lecture Eight dealt with Lawrence, though the notes are almost entirely taken up with a treatment of the best way in which to read poems aloud, Richards identifying three modes, 1. The Expressive, as preferred by Mansfield Forbes[1]; 2. The Chanting, as exemplified by Tennyson; and 3. The unobtrusive style, which Richards favoured. It was presumably on this occasion, that Forbes and Richards demonstrated their respective

1 Forbes was consistently encouraging towards the 'Practical Experiment', and Richards inscribed a copy of the volume 'you are responsible more than anyone for its having been written' (Hugh Carey, *Mansfield Forbes and his Cambridge* (Cambridge U.P.:Cambridge, 1984), 72).

styles, using the Lawrence poem as their subject matter, and left the audience to decide for itself which best served the poem. Joan Bennett has left a recollection of this event:

> To demonstrate his theory about pitch [that words in poetry had not only an exact stress and time, but a precise pitch] Forbes read in a falsetto voice the word 'poised' in the line 'And pressing the small poised feet...'; his idea was, perhaps, that this would illustrate the weightlessness of feet merely touching the pedals. The effect, was irresistibly comic. I.A.R. followed in what he called the 'neutral style' of reading. His reading followed with complete fidelity the poem's rhetorical structure and, in so doing, allowed the poet's thought and feeling to emerge.[1]

Mr Alistair Cooke has reported to me that at the 1927 course Richards repeated this 'injunction not to colour the verse with any hint of the reader's personality', and provided his own reading as an exemplar of the 'neutral channel':

> He [...] read to us the poem by, I think, G. H. Luce and began, in his high querulous whine:
>
> *Climb*, cloud, and *pe*ncil all the blue

---

1 Joan Bennett, 'How it Strikes a Contemporary', 47. Bennett suggests that this reading took place after the 'Practical Criticism' lectures. The lecture notes suggest otherwise, unless it was double-act that Richards and Forbes repeated, by popular demand. Yet another recollection of a joint reading exists:

> Richards believes in studying poetry intensively and will spend a whole term's lectures on two lines. Last year he started a wonderful experiment. He believed the way in which different people read poetry would give it a different interpretation. So he and Forbes, his friend, worked together.
>
> Richards entered the room accompanied by stamps from undergrads, and read loudly and solemnly but quite ordinarily some poem or other. Meanwhile Forbes stayed outside the door so that he shouldn't be influenced by Richards' interpretation. When Richards had done, Forbes marched in accompanied by more stamps from the undergrads. He stood up on the platform and read the same poem in exactly the same ordinary voice. There were more stamps and then Richards got up and said 'Oh Mr Forbes, I never thought of that interpretation before. How wonderful it is', and the experiment ended in perfectly tumultuous stamping.

(Gwendolen Freeman, in a contemporary letter reporting Queenie Roth's account, quoted in Gwendolen Freeman, 'Queenie at Girton', in Thompson, Denys, ed, *The Leavises: Recollections and Impressions* (Cambridge U.P.: Cambridge 1984), 13–14.)

> With your mi*rac*ulous stockade:
> The earth will have her *joy* of you
> And *limn* your beauty till it fade.

> The emphases were about as personal as Richards' own voice, and every cadence ended, not with a bang or a dying fall, but with a rising inflection, as if for a petulant question. It was all very funny, and totally idiosyncratic.

The Second Practical Criticism Course October-November 1927

When he came to deliver this course again in Cambridge in 1927 Richards does not appear to have prepared as carefully, relying heavily on the notes made for the previous course, and making most changes orally as required. The number of poems issued did change, down to eight, and these were new poems. However, only five of these poems were actually used in the book:

> Poem 1. 'For the Eightieth Birthday of George Meredith' by Alfred Noyes.
>
> Poem 2. By G. H. Luce
>
> Poem 3. 'George Meredith (1828–1909)' by Thomas Hardy.
>
> Poem 4. From *Ivory Palaces* (1925) by Wilfred Rowland Childe.
>
> Poem 5. 'In the Churchyard at Cambridge' by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Of the other three there is only very scant evidence in the surviving Richards papers. Much of what can be reconstructed at present comes from the remains of a letter from Eliot to Richards on the 20 November 1927, the relevant portion of which runs:

> I am sorry that you gave me the advantage of identifying the quotations. Still, I am surprised at the students' opinions. Of VI

> I should have said: 'First rate 18th century work, solid, well written.' Of VII: 'Rubbish. *Sweet communion* definitely bad, also *silver rain*. Late 19th century or more likely still worse 20th century piece.' VIII is of course Whitman at his best.
>
> [A section of the letter has here been cut away]
>
> I don't know the tomb he is talking about. Those that I remember in Cambridge Mass. are I am afraid only those in Mt-Auburn cemetery, which are as hideous as any in the world.

The final sentence seems to refer to Longfellow's poem, but the identity of the other poems, 6, 7, and 8 remains uncertain, though 6 may well be the Byron passage from *The Island*. Attempts to trace a work containing both 'silver rain' and 'sweet communion', both of which are common terms in isolation, have failed. Of the Whitman no trace survives beyond this remark, and a very brief annotation, almost certainly dating from 1927, mentioning Whitman in the 'Practical Criticism' lecture notes. It may also be noted that in discussing the 'Practical Criticism' courses in the introduction to his book Richards writes that he has been in the habit of setting unsigned poems 'ranging in character from a poem by Shakespeare to a poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox'.[1] Wilcox had, of course, been used in the Davison examination of 1923,[2] but nothing is known of a Shakespeare passage, and it seems unlikely to be poem 6 mentioned by Eliot. We should remember, perhaps, that Richards may well have delivered versions of the 'Practical Criticism' course while travelling in 1926–1927, when he visited the United States, Japan, and China. He does, of course remark that the protocols had been 'supplied to me as a Lecturer at Cambridge and elsewhere', and in the light of this we should perhaps merely suppose that this is where the Shakespeare was used.

Richards seems to have used the letter from Eliot in a lecture on the 1st of December. Dorothy describes the occasion:

> The much looked forward-to lecture fell just a tiny bit flat. Not

1 *Practical Criticism*, p. 3.

2 Presumably the poem quoted in *Principles*, p. 200–1.

> by reason so much of its lack of good material but like a reheated pancake. Suffering from being kept. The same wild enthusiasm was lacking in the audience – and the piping hot matter of the week before had become slightly lumpy in Ivor's brain. The lecture was arranged in a wonderful jazz tune of admonition & technicalities mingled with protocolic humours. They seemed mystified by T. S. Eliot's support of the Longfellow. [1]

The composition of *Practical Criticism* began during or very soon after this lecture. On the 12th of December Richards wrote to his wife that he had 'been doing pretty well':

> My first chapter, or *Introduction* (a long one) finished, about 5000 words. I'm having 3 copies made in order to leave two with Forbes who might be able to do some propaganda work with it. It looks to me (perhaps because I've just finished it) very impressive indeed. Sounds a most overwhelming programme.
>
> Now I'm getting on to the planning of the main body of the book – not as easy a job because the materials tend to get out of hand, Protocols, Lectures, extracts – rather bewildering.[2]

In an undated letter, presumably written a few days later, he told his wife that

> I've done quite a lot – made a start and hope to get Chapter 1 pretty well finished provisionally tonight. The more I turn it over the bigger it strikes me. Both in length and importance. It will hardly get under 100,000 words I doubt, and I now see a way of using it for all kinds of *Meaning of Meaning* arguments incidentally. It can be made into a very powerful battering ram against some of the assumptions I want to sap or knock over. There will be an immense business of ordering and sorting protocols if we are to wring all the juice there is in them out.[3]

It took Richards a little while to get going but when he did the possibilities seemed still larger:

> Things have gone well, and I seem to be in the vein at last. I

1 D. E. Richards' diary, 1 Dec 1927, RCM.
2 IAR to D. E. Richards, 12 Dec. 1927, RCM.
3 IAR to D. E. Richards, Undated, RCM. Quoted in *Selected Letters of I. A. Richards*, 43.

> must have put together 30 or 40 pages today. It's been largely weaving together of protocol scraps to make some sort of interesting and dramatic argument out of them. I think so far as I have got it is pretty successful. It has, of course, to be rather different from the Lectures as one can't use one's tone of voice, but I believe it is quite as successful, most of it. I've now got the preliminaries and three of the poems dealt with (out of 14). There will then be a longish section corresponding to the theoretical parts of my Lectures (and already in shape very large and easy to do). Then a short section that I can't describe and some Appendices. Altogether a very good chance of getting it out in the Autumn, and a knock out it will be. Nothing even faintly resembling it has ever been done.[1]

Richards had many other plans, including a commissioned book on the novel,[2] and a collection of his American articles, 1926–1927, to be collected under the title *In the Balance*,[3] but these plans came to nothing, and by May Richards seems to have been single-mindedly devoted to *Practical Criticism*. During a climbing break Richards seems to have talked of little else, much to Dorothy's bewilderment:

> Sat about a great deal on the Glyder slopes talking of Ivor's Practical Criticism. Get dreadfully confused with Ivor's view that there cannot possibly be a standard of objective value. Difference of opinion in the undiscriminating – he calls stultification: in the discerning – divergence. I feel the world tottering with so little solid ground.[4]

In June he was promising to send T. S. Eliot a copy of the completed draft,[5] but completion was delayed by Tripos marking, and in any case Richards' thinking began to develop in unexpected ways, and gave him a great deal more to say. In another undated letter written some time after the 5th of July 1928 he

1 IAR to D. E. Richards, Undated (begins 'I missed the post'), probably Jan. 1928, RCM.
2 D. E. Richards' diary, 10 Mar. 1928, RCM.
3 IAR to D. E. Richards, 15 Jan. 1928, RCM.
4 D. E. Richards' diary, 27 May 1928, RCM.
5 IAR to T. S. Eliot, 26 June 1928, in *Selected Letters of I. A. Richards*, 44.

wrote to his wife to explain what was going on with the book:

> I'm on a very interesting line about feeling and sense and if could get it worked out (and I'm fairly sure another spell will do it) I'd be very much advanced in all kinds of ways – it's something *new* and an extension in a rather unexpected degree of some *Meaning of Meaning* work. But *very* much to point for poetry.[1]

Though much of this new thought found its way into Chapter 3, the novelty of the thought, which is not in fact fully explicated anywhere in *Practical Criticism*, is more apparent in Appendix A, section one, which is also related to this new treatment, and was within a few years to produce the revision of *The Meaning of Meaning*'s dual language hypothesis in, first, *Mencius on the Mind*, and then in *Coleridge on Imagination*.[2]

Before this breakthrough could have any consequences the Richardses went on their annual climbing holiday, during which Dorothy fell in a crevasse,[3] Richards had his hair burnt by lightning,[4] and, on the 20th of July and under the leadership of the great Alpine guide Joseph Georges, they made the first, and by all accounts terrifying, ascent of the North Ridge of the Dent Blanche.[5] On their return from this eventful break Richards engaged in a 'long consultation' with James Wood and C. K. Ogden in August, with a very surprising result:

> More or less resolved now to make it into two books. *Practical Criticism* and another on the emotive functions of speech (title to be found later).[6]

But by early September he had dropped this plan:

---

1 IAR to D. E. Richards, Undated (begins 'Good news from Ward'), datable from internal evidence to after 5 July 1928, RCM.

2 See Introductions to Volumes 5 and 6 for further and more detailed considerations of the extension of this section in *Practical Criticism*.

3 D. E. Richards' diary, 17 July 1928, RCM.

4 D. E. Richards' diary, 12 Aug. 1928, RCM.

5 D. E. Richards' diary, 20 July 1928 (on page for 19 July), RCM. See D. E. Pilley, and I. A. Richards, 'The North Ridge of the Dent Blanche', *Alpine Journal*, 43 (1931), 276–83, in Volume 9.

6 IAR to D. E. Richards, Aug. 1928, RCM.

> Here, I'm at last getting into some sort of stride. The two books idea has gone by the board. Everything I have to say is too germane to *Practical Criticism* – I can see a book (to be written with Og) on Paraphrasing, in the future. But I'm keeping *Practical Criticism* as simple as I know how – which doesn't mean it goes much faster, though it will be shorter.[1]

Progress was now rapid, though Richards was taking trouble to consult with many of his friends. Sections were shown to H. S. and Joan Bennett,[2] Richards records that conversations with James Wood, who was staying at Richards' Cambridge house, had been 'useful on the reading of poetry',[3] and trying to arrange discussions with Eliot, since 'an evening over *Practical Criticism* would be of immense benefit to me',[4] and in October sent him a section of the book, on Belief, for comments.[5]

Although the book was very close to completion by the end of September there was no likelihood of publication before the following spring, or February at the earliest. Most of the printers were now fully occupied with books aimed at the Christmas market, and they wouldn't be able to begin setting *Practical Criticism* until the January. Further delays arose from the refusal of Alfred Noyes to allow his poem to be included in the book,[6] and he eventually agreed, to Richards' great relief, only when Ogden, who seems to have known him, perhaps through a London club connection, telephoned him on Richards' behalf. Noyes permitted publication on the condition that *Practical Criticism* included a revised version of the poem,[7] and so a further delay was inevitable since, as Richards drily observed, 'composing the new version is not proving an easy business'.[8] He was

1 IAR to D. E. Richards, 5 Sep. 1928, RCM.
2 IAR to D. E. Richards, 5 Sep. 1928, RCM.
3 IAR to D. E. Richards, Sep.1928 (begins 'So pleasant'), RCM.
4 IAR to D. E. Richards, June/July/Aug 1928, in *Selected Letters of I. A. Richards*, 45.
5 IAR to T. S. Eliot, 1 Oct. 1928, in *Selected Letters of I. A. Richards*, 47.
6 D. E. Richards' diary, 13 Nov. 1928, RCM.
7 IAR to D. E. Richards, undated (begins 'I came through'), RCM.
8 IAR to D. E. Richards, undated (begins 'I came through'), RCM.

still waiting in January,[1] but resolved simply to leave a blank page and send the rest of the MSS in to the printers. No further difficulties presented themselves, and printed copies may have been available in the late spring or early summer, copies apparently being distributed to reviewers in May and June.

Identities of the Protocolists

Whilst the most striking anonymity appearing in *Practical Criticism* is that of the poems as presented to the attendants, the identity of the protocolists continues to interest and puzzle readers, but positive attributions have been hampered by the loss of the original protocols, perhaps due to flooding in Richards' Cambridge house, perhaps because he himself destroyed them to frustrate what he would have, in later years, regarded as a fruitless curiosity. He wrote in 1971 that the contributors included writers and scholars from 'T. S. Eliot down', but added that 'no one will ever know who wrote which'.[2] It has certainly not proved easy to find out. Fortunately, a personal communication from Alistair Cooke,[3] two marked copies of *Practical Criticism*, and a scattering of references in memoirs of those who attended the courses has permitted the identification of at least some of the contributors.

Alistair Cooke, who attended the lectures, identifies his own contribution as 5·8 and also remarks that 5·81 is by William Empson. However, Mrs Duncan-Jones, see below, attributes this protocol to Mansfield Forbes, as do others familiar with the manner of both Empson and Forbes, such as Joan Bennett, Hugh Carey, F. R. Leavis, and John Haffenden.[4] As early as 1930 Empson remarked that he did not attend much of the

1 IAR to D. E. Richards, 6 Jan. 1929, RCM.

2 I. A. Richards, 'The Future of Reading', 31.

3 Letter to John Constable, 15 June 1988.

4 Joan Bennett, 'How it Strikes a Contemporary', 55, Hugh Carey, *Mansfield Forbes and his Cambridge* (Cambridge U.P.:Cambridge, 1984), 72; F. R. Leavis, *English Literature in our Time and the University* (Cambridge U.P.: Cambridge, 1969), 16; John Haffenden, personal communication.

course because he found the exhibition of the weak too embarrassing,[1] and it seems safe to assume that none of his protocols, if indeed he wrote any, found their way into the published work.

Mrs Duncan-Jones (Elsie Elizabeth Phare, one of Richards' most distinguished pupils) has kindly lent me her annotated copy of *Practical Criticism*, where she gives the following attributions (some are marginal annotations, some appear on the front paste-down endpaper):

1·163: Mansfield Forbes

2·6: Mansfield Forbes

5·81: Mansfield Forbes

6·8: Mansfield Forbes

7·43: Mansfield Forbes

9·77: Elsie Elizabeth Phare

13·45: Elsie Elizabeth Phare[2]

13·46: T. S. Eliot[3]

13·5: Mansfield Forbes

13·64: Mansfield Forbes

13·91: Mansfield Forbes

The attribution of 13·46 to T. S. Eliot appears to me uncertain on the grounds of content, though as is evident from Eliot's letter quoted above he did contribute comments. Joan Bennett, whose contributions have not been identified,[4] has reported

1 See 'O Miselle Passer!', *Oxford Outlook*, 10/52 (May 1930), 470–8, reprinted in Volume 10, *I. A. Richards and his Critics*.

2 This protocol was incorrectly numbered 13·46 by IAR, and was referred to as such by Mrs Duncan-Jones. The reference has here been corrected to match the numbering of the current edition.

3 Incorrectly numbered 13·47 by IAR. See note above.

4 She notes their existence in 'How it Strikes a Contemporary', 53.

that Eliot certainly sent a protocol, presumably the letter, and that 'I.A.R. told some of us that he and Eliot differed in their evaluation', but whether the piece was used in *Practical Criticism* is not known.

To the list of Mansfield Forbes pieces may be added, on the authority of Forbes' biographer, Hugh Carey, protocol 6·23.

The Richards Collection copy supplies evidence regarding the contributions of F. R. Leavis. This copy has been annotated with the initials FRL in pale violet crayon next to the following protocols: 3·81, 4·12, 5·8, 6·21, 7·42, 8·5. There is some reason to suppose that these ascriptions are by F. R. Leavis himself,[1] though why he should have annotated Richards' copy is hard to explain, but they appear to have been made at an early date. In a letter to a friend Leavis himself remarked that he detected his manner in 5·8, 6·21, and 8·5,[2] but he does not seem to have recalled them with any certainty. The attribution of 8·5 is confirmed by other contemporaries; Muriel Bradbrook observes that 'Leavis's unmistakable tones can be heard' in it.[3] With regard to 5·8, also claimed by Alistair Cooke, I am inclined, here, to accept the attribution to Cooke, especially so since his memories are detailed, and he writes that he was 'very bucked to hear [Richards] say that only two people who'd turned in their "protocols" had spotted the incurable cocksureness of Edna St Vincent Millay's sentimentality'.[4]

1 A friend of Leavis, Arthur Sale (1912–2000) confirmed for me that the handwriting was indeed that of Leavis, and that protocols were, in his view, characteristic.

2 Letter to Tasker, 21 Oct. 1973, quoted in Ian MacKillop, *F. R. Leavis: A Life in Criticisim* (Allen Lane: Penguin Press, 1995), 76–7, and 422 footnote 39.

3 M. C. Bradbrook, '"Nor Shall My Sword": The Leavises' mythology', in Thompson, Denys, ed., *The Leavises: Recollections and Impressions* (Cambridge U.P.: Cambridge, 1984), [29–43], 31.

4 Letter to John Constable, 15 June 1988.

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NOTE ON THE TEXT

The contract for *Practical Criticism* was made on the 6th of February 1929,[1] and it was first published in June of that year. Richards revised the text for a second printing in 1930, and revised it again for the printing of 1935 (I shall refer to these as the 1st, 2nd and 3rd editions). The 3rd edition includes several corrections and minor changes (eg. 'on' for 'no' on p. 15, line 13), but also a substantial addition to the text on p. 79, and one large footnote on page 291, where a portion of the main text is also cut.

No substantive alterations were made subsequent to the 3rd edition of 1935, but some changes were made to the Appendices with the introduction of the first paperback impression in 1964. All hardback editions up to and including that of 1964 printed Appendix C on a fold-out sheet, the halves of the folded sheet being numbered 367, 368 as individual pages, with the verso of the sheet being numbered 369 and 370. The folded page concealed the attributions, and the warning appeared on 369 preventing accidental reading. With the paperback impression of 1964 Appendix C was printed on normal text pages but in the looking-glass style used in the present edition. Moreover, Appendix D, a large fold-out sheet presenting the poems in more or less the form that the protocolists would have seen them, was removed. Appendix D has also been removed in this edition.

It should be noted that whilst US hardback editions appear to have been set from imported sheets, and are substantially identical, there appears to have been at least one paperback edition, the undated Harvest Books (Harcourt, Brace & World: New York) edition. This has an entirely new pagination, and neither uses the mirror-image Appendix C nor removes Appendix D.

There is a potentially very confusing problem in the Rout-

1 Routledge Archives.

ledge paperback editions of *Practical Criticism*, the first of which appeared in 1964, and reprinted the most recent impression of the 3rd edition. Further paperback printings were issued in 1966, 1970, 1973, 1976, 1978, and 1982. Of these I have seen only the 1973 impression, which is a correct reprint of the 3rd edition, and that of 1982 which mistakenly reprints the 2nd edition of 1930. I have not been able to check copies of all the paperback editions produced, and am unsure whether this error was introduced in 1982, 1976, or 1978; nor have I been able to determine whether it affects all paperback editions subsequently published, though the error appears to have been perpetuated as far as 1991. It should be noted that the mistake in copy choice is quite understandable; the 2nd edition describes itself as having 'a few alterations', while the edition of 1935 is merely a 'Third Impression'.

This edition has been derived from a copy of the 1973 paperback edition of the 3rd edition, and reference has been made to the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd editions, a copy of the impression of 1939, and to a marked copy of the 1st edition in the Richards Collection at Magdalene College, Cambridge.

In Richards' own text spelling has been modernized in accordance with contemporary practice where this involved no significant change in meaning, and punctuation has been emended wherever necessary to clarify the sense. However, the texts quoted from the protocolists themselves have been reproduced exactly as found, with the following exception. Richards claims to have made all the italicizations in the protocols,[1] but there are very plain instances where this cannot be true. For example, Protocol 7·4, where the word 'meet' is clearly singled out for consideration by the protocol writer, not Richards; and Protocol 7·51, where 'can' is equally clearly the protocolist's emphasis. In Protocol 5·55 we find the following, '*is* not *at first* very *clear*', an obvious case in which Richards has rendered the protocol writer's emphasis as roman to distinguish it from his

1 *Practical Criticism*, 22.

own italic. In order to make this issue less confusing I have underlined words which it appears reasonable to assume must have been emphasized by the protocol writer and not Richards.

In some protocols Richards has inserted relevant information relating to cross-referencing. In the original editions this material is enclosed in square brackets, but in this edition it has been enclosed in specially modified brackets ⟦ ⟧, to distinguish it from editorial material.

Some protocols were incorrectly numbered by Richards, and where these have been corrected the earlier numbering has been indicated in the footnotes.

Longer quotations originally presented in-line with the main text have been reset as displayed paragraphs wherever this seemed to assist the reader.

Some abbreviations, for example Chap. for Chapter, have been expanded.

To facilitate the tracing of references the page numbers of the first edition, which are consistent with all subsequent impressions, have been supplied in the margin of the pages. All internal cross-references, including those of the index but excluding those in the contents chapter listings, are to these original page numbers. It should be noted that this occasionally results in two sets of original numbers on the same page of the current edition, since footnotes were occasionally allowed to run over on to a succeeding page.

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PRACTICAL CRITICISM
A STUDY OF LITERARY JUDGEMENT

I. A. RICHARDS

To my collaborators
whether their work appears in these pages or not

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PREFACE

vii A convenient arrangement for the parts of this book has not been easy to find. A friendly reader will, I think, soon see why. Those who are curious to discern what motives prompted me to write it will be satisfied most quickly if they begin by glancing through Part Four, which might indeed have been placed as an Introduction.

The length of Part Two, and a certain unavoidable monotony, may prove a stumbling-block. I have included very little there, however, that I do not discuss again in Part Three, and it need not be read through continuously. A reader who feels some impatience will prudently pass on at once to my attempted elucidations, returning to consult the facts when a renewed contact with actuality is desired.

The later chapters of Part Three will be found to have more general interest than the earlier.

I am deeply indebted to the living authors of some of the poems I have used for their permission to print them; a permission which, in view of the peculiar conditions of this experiment, witnesses to no slight generosity of spirit. Some contemporary poems were necessary for my purpose, to avoid the perplexities which 'dated' styles would introduce here. But in making the selection I had originally no thought of publication. The interest of the material supplied me by my commentators and the desire that as many types of poetry as possible should be represented have been the only reasons for my choice. But in
viii those instances in which I have not been able to form a high opinion of the poems must ask the forgiveness of the authors and plead as excuse a motive which we have in common, the advancement of poetry.

My acknowledgements are due also to the publishers of these poems. Details of these obligations will be found in Appendix C in which I have hidden away, as far as I could, particulars as to the authorship and date of the poems. For obvious reasons the

interest of these pages will be enhanced if the reader remains unaware of the authorship of the poems until his own opinions of them have been formed and tested by comparison with the many other opinions here given. I would, therefore, earnestly counsel an intending reader not to consult Appendix C until a late stage in his reading.

I. A. R.
Cambridge,
April 1929.

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Part 1

Part 2