

# theory aside

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41. Brekhus et al., "The Need for Thin Description," 876.
42. Brekhus et al., "The Need for Thin Description," 876.
43. For one example of this kind of call to shift the object of sexuality studies, see Eng et al., introduction to "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?"
44. Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 293.

## chapter 13

### Our I. A. Richards Moment: The Machine and Its Adjustments

Frances Ferguson

The word *practical* in I. A. Richards's *Practical Criticism* has sometimes seemed misleading. How could any version of literary criticism be practical? Richards himself seems to have worried about this issue, especially in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, the work that immediately preceded *Practical Criticism*. In *Principles*, Richards felt obliged to argue for the practicality of criticism by reviewing the claims of poetry and attempting to answer the "central question, What is the value of the arts, why are they worth the devotion of the keenest hours of the best minds, and what is their place in the system of human endeavours?"<sup>1</sup> Such concerns, clearly, have not gone away. Yet Richards, I'll argue, is of great practical use in ways that extend past our views on poetry—and that justify Richards's sense that his kind of criticism might function to alter our interactions with the world.

Take the following case. Someone you don't know sends an email. It appeals to generosity or greed and offers financial rewards for help. The author usually identifies himself as Nigerian, and his message is laced with misspellings. We know about such emails. We have a name for them, phishing, and marvel that they are so inexpertly composed as to contain misspellings and grammatical lapses. Yet a researcher at Microsoft sees another possibility. He suggests that the apparent haplessness and the self-identification as someone who comes from a country known for mail and email scams is itself strategic—that the phisher is trying to select a manageable audience, to eliminate the "false positives . . . that are attacked but yield nothing."<sup>2</sup> At least one commentator has ventured that there is no way of actually confirming the researcher's hypothesis, and he's probably right about that. But what Richards would find appealing in this interpretive scenario is that one only has to read it to see that the researcher's is a better reading than the one we are initially inclined to. Instead of assuming a clumsy con man who is actually from Nigeria, it projects an author clever

enough to identify himself as someone who might be suspected of phishing in order to weed out uncooperative correspondents. And this better reading does not rest on a principled generosity that enjoins us always to read everything as if it were highly deserving of our attention and credit. Nor does it rest on an appeal to what other people agree on. It gets traction from the mere act of comparison. A comparison of one's dismissive interpretation with the method-in-the-madness or the method-in-the-clumsiness interpretation provides the only evidence there might be for the superiority of one to the other.

It is just such acts of comparison that Richards seeks to inspire in the Cambridge students who are the informants in his experiment in *Practical Criticism*, a book that collected his commentary on the commentaries that a number of Cambridge undergraduates provided on thirteen poems. Enjoining the students to read each poem repeatedly over the course of a week, he notes that some readers "recorded as many as ten or a dozen readings."<sup>3</sup> What he does in encouraging multiple readings is not merely to recommend close attention or interpretative generosity. He also provides students with the experience of making judgments on the basis of the confidence that they can develop about meanings that could not be confirmed by consulting either an author or an interpretative community. His model of reading, one that continually asks us to remember and compare what we just thought about the meaning of a poem or a conversation with what we now think, introduces the notion of style into reading itself. Although we can't say exactly where the idea that the phisher might not be an inept Nigerian but a clever pseudo-Nigerian came from, we immediately recognize its appeal. Even though the article venturing the hypothesis is written by a Microsoft researcher in distinctly nonliterary language, it makes itself felt as a bit of found literature. (The article was immediately taken up and re-reported by various publications.) The pleasure it generates is lodged not merely in a text but in the act of critical reading itself.

Richards's project deserves our continuing attention, I suggest, because of the way it mobilizes our attention to the importance of style in reading. Already in the 1920s Richards advances such a notion of style in reading, in criticism that anticipates much of what Jacques Rancière gets at in his ongoing account of dissensus. In a series of books and essays, Rancière has insisted upon the importance of disagreement or dissensus. He has, on the one hand, seen dissensus as the essence of politics. In this mode he has used the notion as the basis for an abstract modeling of politics and has made politics susceptible to a schematic and spatial representation that involves minimal

attention to specific political content or issues. He has, on the other hand, suggested how the literary practices of high modernism made literary content itself dissident as writers like Baudelaire and Flaubert wrested it from the hierarchies of classical decorum and made it bespeak a project of radical equivalences. In this account Baudelaire might write a poetry that deliberately treats garlic and rubies as on the same plane, and Flaubert might accord as much attention to an Emma Bovary as a hero or a queen would have commanded in an earlier regime of literary hierarchies that aimed to match content with style. Dissidence, in Rancière's description of its literary aspect, may run counter to the stated political views of authors. It appears not in political themes or views but rather in style itself, as hierarchical ways of dividing the world of aesthetic representation are turned on their axes and distinctions are made to be equivalences.

Although Rancière addresses questions of political agency more actively than Richards does, his way of routing political views through authorial style and its perceptibility, his emphasis on style, helps locate the terms and importance of Richards's treatment of communication and of Richards's sense that literary criticism offers a royal road to understanding communication and its perils. Rancière, first, enables us to see the importance of realizing that disagreement is not a problem that needs to be eliminated. Criticism of the past half century has organized itself around agreement. Moreover his treating literature as a model for political issues (rather than a venue for their expression) chimes with Richards's ways of suggesting how literature does not function as a world apart from the social and political world but instead can show us how we go wrong on many occasions, some of which have little or nothing to do with literature as such. And whether this is an aspect of the second point or an additional one, Rancière helps us to see how aspects of communication that seem very far removed from doctrinal statements continually introduce differences and disagreements into our discussions.

I focus on two kinds of assertion that might appear to be in some tension with one another when Richards describes the study of language and literature as part of a project of communication. He repeatedly asserts that one of the most basic facts about human beings is that they communicate with one another. Yet communication does not for him resolve itself into agreement. Richards continually identifies mistakes (and thus might seem to hold up an implicit model of unmistakable communication). But the nature and importance of the mistake only comes into view once we take in Richards's view of the standing that individual judgment has for him. No one, he insists, has to

yield her judgment to majority opinion or authority in talking about the meaning of conversations or examples from literature. He introduces the notion of the pseudo-statement, which he attaches to poetry, by contrast with the statements of science, so as to get at the limits on the universality of understanding in poetry. "Poetry," he thinks, is "our best evidence as to how other men feel about things; and as we read it, we discover not so much how life seems to another, as how it is for ourselves."<sup>4</sup> Poems thus look like more massive instances of the sort of malleability we see in metaphor. While we need to catch an association between lions and courage to catch the meaning of a phrase like "Achilles is lion-hearted," the path we follow in tracking the metaphor is less straightforward than positivist descriptions might have it. While a critic like Paul de Man will sometimes describe this situation by attributing it to literary language in particular, Richards continually insists that literature never achieves such independent standing.<sup>5</sup> The names of poems do not designate definite things for him. Instead they are markers for experiences.

In his work with C. K. Ogden in *The Meaning of Meaning*, Richards comes very early to an understanding of the nonidentity of literary texts (and aesthetic objects more generally) with themselves. Pursuing an insight analogous to (but not to be identified with) Saussure's distinction between a sign's physical properties (its appearance as an acoustic or visual image) and its conceptual aspect, he and Ogden argue that G. E. Moore was wrong to imagine that the goodness we ascribe to aesthetic objects ought to be seen as a nonsensuous and implicit property of objects. A statement like "This ball is red" represents a belief that is attributable to a property of the ball, but the burden of a sentence like "This red ball is beautiful" or "The Waste Land is good" falls on the attitude of the speaker. Ogden and Richards, that is, analyze statements of the kind "x is good" as statements of judgment—that is, as statements of consciousness or subjective statements. They insist, moreover, that such judgments relate to the objects themselves only in an oblique and variable fashion. Linguistic objects and literature may, without any change in our understanding of their physical properties, inspire different judgments in different people and even in the same person at different times.<sup>6</sup>

When Richards begins to elaborate on the implications of the views he and Ogden expound in *The Meaning of Meaning*, he is remarkably consistent in applying the distinction between beliefs (about properties in objects and what he tends to refer to as technique in poems) and attitudes (judgments of poems or other aesthetic objects that are not entirely attributable to the

properties of the objects themselves). In our confusion about the two kinds of apprehension, we frequently think that our opinions matter to statements of the kind scientists make (and in the grip of such a thought we lament the fact that fewer than half of the American people believe in the theory of evolution), and simultaneously we minimize the extent to which opinions matter to the kind of pseudo-statements we make in relation to literature. In conversation and in dealing with literature, Richards thinks, people are apt to do something like picking up words, phrases, and poems by the wrong handle. And their misunderstandings tend to arise from an excessive proficiency in finding meaning: "Whenever we hear or read any not too nonsensical opinion, a tendency so strong and so automatic that it must have been formed along with our earliest speech-habits, leads us to consider what seems to be said."<sup>7</sup> That version of meaning in turn leads to our coding meanings in terms of our agreement or disagreement: "We are in fact so anxious to discover whether we agree or not with what is being said that we overlook the mind that says it."<sup>8</sup> On Richards's view, we objectify speech and writing without attending to the ways our codings corral the meanings or pausing to notice how being in or out of sympathy with our interlocutors affects what we think particular strings of words mean. Richards observes as well how our good mood or sleep deprivation changes what we hear and read. Composition handbooks might impress on us the desirability of clear pronoun reference or good grammar as hedges against such misunderstanding, but Richards insists that the producer of an utterance or a poem can never be careful enough. As long as auditors and readers are humans, they are going to be unreliable instruments—and from an excessive obligingness rather than the reverse. We start, he thinks, from a disposition to agree and the conviction that it is socially necessary: "The Wills of Gods, the Conscience, the Catechism, Taboos, Immediate Intuitions, Penal Laws, Public Opinion, Good Form, are all more or less ingenious and efficient devices with the same aim—to secure the uniformity which social life requires."<sup>9</sup> Whereas someone like Vladimir Propp of the *Morphology of the Folktale* consolidates a variety of different actions into various single functions, Richards emphasizes all the aspects of meaning that are obscured by processes of social synonymization.

In the decades after Richards's work of the 1920s, a series of critics and theorists would seek to minimize the importance of what he takes to be perhaps the most important fact about language and literature—namely, that they are directed toward humans. Yet Richards develops his "psychological theory of value" around the variability and unreliability that humans show.<sup>10</sup>

Everywhere he looks he encounters evidence that perceptions of value differ across cultures, between individuals, and even within persons. Anthropological studies make it possible for him to demonstrate how widely value judgments vary from one culture to another, but he also relies on the kind of knowledge that anyone might have at her disposal: "Any observant child . . . might discover in the home circle how widely people disagree." Moreover he insists on the importance of what we might think of as internal relativism: "Fortunately for psychology we can each find wide enough differences in ourselves from hour to hour. Most people in the same day are Bonaparte and Ob- lomov by turns."<sup>11</sup>

What Richards claims as psychology's fortunate ground in establishing what he sometimes calls a science of criticism is its flexibility in tracking the fluctuating values of human behavior, including linguistic and literary behavior. His version of literary psychology aims to recognize broad consistencies in people's ways of interpreting literature. He is, in particular, alert to the ways we are likely to mislead ourselves. We rely on our past experience and our expectations so thoroughly as to have a hard time reading the text in front of us. Even Hume, despite all his acuity in tracking the modes and fields of application of various emotions, looks, under the kind of gaze Richards might extend, like someone who was attempting to consolidate verbal comprehension and sound literary judgment more extensively than experience warrants. Hume's mild identification of some people as better judges of literature and art than others appears to stop short, focusing on these people by comparison with those rather than attending to the variations in response that even the most reliable judges exhibit. He operates with a whole-person standard, by contrast with Richards.

Richards's aim in locating various different sorts of verbal behavior is to name the behavior and, in naming it, to make it susceptible to change. The usefulness of what he calls "an alienist's attitude" (the approach of a psychoanalyst) is that it does not merely record a series of first-person evaluations and interpretations of poetry.<sup>12</sup> Instead it calls for a further and, implicitly, self-reflexive judgment on the worth of such attitudes. We never really lose sight of "ulterior ends," he observes in arguing against A. C. Bradley's description of the aesthetic as "a world by itself, independent, complete, autonomous."<sup>13</sup> "Fundamentally, though this is an unfair way of putting it, when any person misreads a poem it is because, as he is at that moment, he wants to."<sup>14</sup> The question we have to address here is how the judgment on judgment is to be made. How can we evaluate the various motives that lead us to read less well than we might?

A survey of some key alternative positions—principally those of some of the most prominent New Critics—may help us to focus that question. To W. K. Wimsatt, Monroe Beardsley, and Cleanth Brooks, Richards's project looked like the rankest sort of affectivism. They thought that Richards reduced literary meaning to a matter of response and thus opened the door to the possibility that one could never say anything about literature that amounted to more than simple readerly projection. They therefore thought that literary meaning and literary value appeared in Richards's scheme as a pure subjectivism. It could, they believed, only issue in an absolute relativism in which each person, in claiming to be judging through the lens of emotions that each treated as an absolute warrant for valuing and understanding particular poetic objects, essentially took literature and criticism out of the public sphere.

I shall have more to say later about the positions they developed against this perceived threat and how they related to Richards's own work. For the moment, however, it may suffice to say that Richards had a much more capacious account of psychology—and a less substantial notion of the solidity of words and text—than they. A much more recent example may serve to illustrate the sort of point toward which Ogden and Richards, first, and Richards alone, later, drove. My exhibit is a *New York Times* story about the difficulty that a number of people have in remembering the passwords to their various on-line accounts. Although the article features many celebrities, almost anyone would testify as feelingly as they do to the difficulties of remembering their passwords and the clues that are supposed to enable them to reconnect with their accounts when they have forgotten their passwords. The difficulty is that computer systems, being computer systems and correspondingly rigid, do not recognize and allow for the lack of rigidity that the respondents' memories abundantly display. One respondent tries to remember whether he was thinking, at the time he answered the security question, about the name of his first girlfriend, about the first person he slept with, or the first person with whom he was infatuated even when his affections went unrequited. Another worries that his first teacher might have been either his kindergarten teacher or his teacher in what he calls "real school," and then points out that his first-grade teacher married halfway through the school year and acquired a new name. Which name was he thinking of when he answered the security question? The password is rigid: It requires that a user reproduce letters, numbers, and symbols, capitalized and lowercase letters in exactly the same sequence in which she first entered it, and is recoverable only through a process of producing answers to security questions that is itself

rigid. Computer systems do not hear place-names that mention a city and a state if they are calling for the name of a city alone. And the problem manifests itself in a variety of ways. One respondent tries to capture rigidity in a different form. She recommends using the first letters of song lyrics as a fool-proof way of arriving at passwords, and then confesses that she can't ever remember whether the Beatles sang "Hey Jude, don't make it bad" or "Hey Jude, don't make it sad." One might arrive at a highly individualized psychoanalytic account of why each of the informants chose the passwords and the questions and answers they did, but the basic point that would give support to Richards's views is that we can see a pattern of divergence between a string of letters, numbers, and symbols and the image of it that appears in memory.<sup>15</sup> The problem that Richards and Ogden isolate and that the newspaper story illustrates is that our means of recapturing even factual bits of information shift that information and our access to it.

The variation between the rigid term (the user name, the password, and the answer to a security question) and an informant's memory would have been of interest to Richards simply because it shows how readily one might arrive at the possibility of varying names for what we take to be the same thing. While a computer enforces rigidity (down to, and including, spacing and marks of punctuation), natural language does not. The same object may be termed the morning star and the evening star.<sup>16</sup> And such variation does not rely on the kind of affectivism that Wimsatt and Beardsley assimilated Richards's position to when they depicted affect as any kind of emotion that might not readily be shared by another person in different circumstances. What they called "the objective way" in criticism made poetic objects stand in for the possibility of substantial general agreement. It demanded the creation of especially tightly wound objects—versions of poetic texts that pushed variants to the side, dictionaries that they described as offering possibilities "internal" to the poem because they were public.<sup>17</sup> Representing authorial and readerly psychology only in examples of suspiciously heightened transport (from Longinus to Housman), they offered an account of literary interpretation that created entrance requirements and made a reader abandon her irrelevant attitudes at the door. Reading literature seemed almost to involve signing a contractual agreement about what one would and would not notice.

Richards's practice in both *Principles of Literary Criticism* and *Practical Criticism* entered a wider range of literary response into the record. He licensed some of Wimsatt and Beardsley's suspicion of his psychology when he made room for a wide range of motivations that were centered in persons and said,

for instance, "The personal situation of the reader inevitably (and within limits rightly) affects his reading, and many more are drawn to poetry in quest of some reflection of their latest emotional crisis than would admit it if faced with such a frank declaration as that in 11.2" (one of the protocols in *Practical Criticism*, in which the respondent says that the poem's "reflective, conversational manner awakens a quiet mood, rather than a rapture, and since rapture is what I want of poetry, it is lacking to me").<sup>18</sup> In statements like this, Richards made considerable allowance for the ways people use poetry instrumentally, to further their own emotions rather than to observe the language as if from a distance. He even went so far as to observe that one's ostensible human objects might virtually vanish under the powerfully instrumentalizing force of emotions: "Very few people, for example, fall in love for the first time without becoming enthralled by their emotions merely as a novel experience . . . and [indeed] become absorbed in them often to the exclusion of genuine interest in the loved object."<sup>19</sup>

Writing well before the computer age had set in, Richards had his own description for the problem of rigidity: it was using language as if it consisted of nothing but proper names, by which he meant that the names referred to one and only one person or thing.<sup>20</sup> He thought, moreover, that the problem with such a picture of language was that it imagined that there was a unique linguistic object available for retrieval. The ongoing development of language, its continually adding new words and giving new resonance to others, served as evidence against that picture: "No one who uses a dictionary—for other than orthographic purposes—can have escaped the shock of discovering how very far ahead of us our words often are. How subtly they already record distinctions towards which we are still groping."<sup>21</sup> The kinds of lexical shifts that Raymond Williams would catalogue in *Culture and Society* and particularly in *Keywords* were the sorts of things he aimed to tap in thinking about the relation between our sense of our use of individual words (What did we know and when did we know it?) and our sense of the resonances the language has on offer. It was an account that treated the dictionary as provoking an oscillation between one's consciousness of a moment of consciousness and a larger and entirely impersonal registration of consciousness. In that, it complemented the awareness that Richards provoked of an individual's own shifts of consciousness—her reading that poem when she was Napoleon, her reading it when she was Oblomov. The experience of reading poetry could not be captured by models of an archive or a channel (since one's emotions and experiences were not, Richards thought, merely an orderly continuation of one's past experience).<sup>22</sup>

By providing a notion of communication that did not always define itself in terms of success, Richards produced a practical criticism that was, as Wimsatt and Beardsley recognized, not focused on a textual object. He was perfectly content to count ignoble personal inclinations among the motives that drew people to literary texts, and he was willing to suggest that texts, being made up of words, were never going to be any more stable than the words they were made of. Indeed the project of evaluation which he thought of as central to literary criticism needed to face up to the distinction he and Ogden had earlier drawn between beliefs about the properties of the object and the attitudes one expressed about it in judging it.

Wimsatt, writing with Beardsley and writing alone, treated Richards's emphasis on emotive aspects of poetry as a simple distortion of meaning. He did not explicitly take up Moore's argument that the goodness or beauty of aesthetic objects was an actual—if supersensible—property of the objects, but at every point described the meaning of individual poems and the meaning of the images that they deployed as implicit statements about the properties of the poems and the images. Metaphor and simile thus seemed to him to suggest lines of connection that worked almost like algebraic equations, and he was willing to create narrative descriptions of motivations that would further specify what might cause such connections. Literary works, he and Beardsley thought, drew on a "repertoire of suggestive meanings which here and there in history—with somewhat to start upon—a Caesar or a Macbeth—have created out of a mere case of factual reason for intense emotion a specified, figuratively fortified, and permanent object of less intense but far richer emotion."<sup>23</sup> Poetry could not, he and they said, ever be "a poetry of pure emotion." It was, even when it took up symbols rather than actualities, always a "poetry about things," and they endorsed C. S. Lewis's assertion that it was impossible to override the properties of things: "The *Romance of the Rose* could not, without loss, . . . be rewritten as *The Romance of the Onion*."<sup>24</sup>

It might seem plausible enough to look at symbols and metaphors in terms of properties, but it was harder for Wimsatt and Beardsley to say what the properties of a poem were, particularly when a poem appeared in various forms.<sup>25</sup> How was one to know when one was looking at a poem, and in particular a good poem? They took it as "axiomatic" that "judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work."<sup>26</sup> The pronouncement sounds like a direct riposte to one of Richards's most famous and most often repeated lines: "A book is a machine to think with."<sup>27</sup> Richards had modeled the observation on Le Corbusier's maxim that a house is a

machine for living, which he credited James Wood with having introduced him to.<sup>28</sup> Yet the differences between the two treatments of the machine are very substantial. Wimsatt and Beardsley took a poem to be a product, an object whose various properties enabled it to work. Richards, immediately after adapting Le Corbusier, had gone on to suggest the class of machines and then to rule out certain kinds of machines, saying, "But it need not, therefore, usurp the functions either of the bellows or the locomotive."<sup>29</sup> Wimsatt and Beardsley's machine might be objective, but what this meant for them was that it had properties. That is, they talked about poems as if they were objects with properties about which one might have beliefs that accounted for one's responses to the poem. They rejected any of the side-long movement that Richards saw as interrupting the process of making descriptive statements about properties and treating poetry as a species of statement that could never satisfactorily be explained in terms of such properties. They could thus disqualify the footnotes to *The Waste Land* as not really part of the poem because the footnotes seemed too much a personal record of Eliot's own reading.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time that the New Critics' objective way of criticism seemed to set narrow boundaries to poetic objects, however, their poetic objects began to swell from within. Thus Cleanth Brooks insisted that the language of poetry was, on the one hand, distinct from language in general and was, on the other, the language of paradox and ambiguity. Brooks might restrict the sphere of poetry, just as Wimsatt and Beardsley restricted interpretation to poetic objects that seemed to be narrowly defined, but these straitened objects began filling with more and more possibilities as the range of meanings was unrestricted. While Richards hewed to the observation that the words in literary works could never serve as absolutely rigid designators, the New Critics stabilized the instability of the words in literature by designating the language used in literature as a distinctly literary language. Once words entered the precincts of a poem, they were able to grasp and hold as many competing and irreconcilable meanings as a reader might attach to them.

Although Wimsatt and Beardsley used a utilitarian language of "work" in "The Intentional Fallacy," one of their central aims was to free poems from utility, so that Wimsatt could, early and late, affirm that "a poem is a verbal expression which has no end except to be known."<sup>31</sup> And detaching poems from purposes ended up producing a theoretical position that had to import a notion of drama, with its attendant notions of setting and tone, in order to make it realistic to read a poem as anything other than a variorum in process,

in which every word called up all the possible meanings one might associate with it. The peculiar outcome was that Brooks, alone and with his interpretative collaborator, Robert Penn Warren, needed to provide positive examples of criticism, since they were taking various things like tone to be internal attributes of poems in a way that might have appeared to license some of the less extravagant versions of the emotivism that Wimsatt and Beardsley decried.

It was therefore highly instructive when Wimsatt wrote the essay "I.A.R.: What to Say about a Poem," in which he described an essay he had written. He had, he says, "conceived [it] as a teacher's concern about a poem," and he "foisted [his] title" and some of his line of thought upon Richards in the later essay on the grounds that Richards is "by his own profession and in his conspicuous achievement, a critic of and for teachers of poetry."<sup>32</sup> Wimsatt's essay is learned, witty, and decorously alert to its place in a Festschrift for Richards, but his gesture toward the pedagogical imperatives that he takes Richards to share with him may help us see where Richards parts company with both the New Critics and much of the criticism following them. Wimsatt catalogues "the kind of things that a teacher of poetry has to say—analytic, interpretive, explicatory (celebratory, perhaps, rhapsodic—at the same time, more or less sober), reliable, internally oriented to the poem itself—and in these ways distinguishable from the various kinds of things that other kinds of writers, journal essayists, reviewers, historians, biographers, might legitimately say."<sup>33</sup> In his remarks we can catch an intimation of the progress through which the "poem itself" came to be what Stanley Fish would call "literature in the reader." Literary criticism was a specific way of dealing with literature that aimed to attend more actively than other professions might with that "poem itself," and teaching involved producing communities of agreement and identifying procedures under whose banner they could fly.

The pedagogical motive justified the genially tendentious questions that Brooks and Warren set in their many editions of *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*: you too, as a student, can come to ask the same kinds of questions and to identify the same sets of technical matters (rhyme schemes and their names, similes and metaphors and other rhetorical figures, etc.) that your teacher asks about and identifies. What Wimsatt and Beardsley termed the objective way in criticism, that is, was always an interpretive community waiting to develop. And recent projects like Terry Eagleton's *How to Read a Poem* and Lisa Zunshine's more apparently expansive

cognitivist criticism have continued such a process. Eagleton complains that the young no longer know how to read and rolls up his sleeves to produce readings that confirm a reader in the thought that this business of interpretation is a more straightforward matter than one might have thought. He grants with one hand, "So we can misinterpret, say, the tone of a poem," and surveys things that imagined readers might think, but he ultimately settles on a characterization of the poem that puts considerable stress on its distance from other readings: "But there is also something moving, as often with Yeats, about the bold, apparently artless directness of the lines [of 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul'] and their jubilant, chant-like refrain."<sup>34</sup> We are united in reading—and particularly in reading as he reads. Zunshine, analyzing narrative patterns, notes the connections between a joke she understood as a child and the plays on identity that operate in *Amphytrion* and Dryden's *Amphytrion*, or *The Two Sosias*. In all these "a character is persuaded that if somebody looks exactly like him, or even just wears his clothing, it must be him."<sup>35</sup> While Eagleton conjures up imagined readers with whom he differs, Zunshine finds fundamental cognitive consonance in her own experience and that of other people. She understands the joke that underwrites Dryden's play because she recognizes that she understood the same joke when she was a child. In her view, the child is father of the man, and what it means to understand literature is to model oneself on oneself, to form an interpretive community with oneself and implicitly with other persons who also understand such jokes. The discovery of the basic faculties and predispositions that narratives present helps us to establish our commonalities.

All of the critics I've cited, from Wimsatt and Brooks and Warren through Fish and Eagleton and Zunshine, discover preexisting or implicit agreement or build it where they don't. They help us to establish by contrast a recurrent feature of Richards's thought: that literature is a kind of disagreement from within. Seeing the self-qualification within expression represents Richards' alertness to the metaphorical aspects of language and to literature's capacity for representing it. A poem may be a machine to think with, but Richards cautions against our employing such machines as if we could simply and straightforwardly put them to use: we shouldn't, he says, pedal off as if riding a bicycle or spew hot air as if pumping a bellows or race down straight lines of track as if riding the rails. His way of continually adjusting a thought highlights the importance of an exchange that Wimsatt called attention to: someone whom Richards described as an "influential teacher" had written

to him during World War II and had in the process deplored the way people were talking, saying, "Whenever business is seriously threatened, it appears that truth, justice, freedom, religion, democracy, ethics, and everything else are all crumbling." Wimsatt wryly observed that Richards's correspondent "no doubt . . . had expected a response of warm sympathy," and then went on to quote what Richards had written instead: "These great words, justice, freedom, and the others, it seems, mean primarily . . . that someone is getting at him. Interpretation and understanding mean debunking."<sup>36</sup> Even though Richards's correspondent takes himself to be a discerning observer of the fatuities of public discourse—and even though Richards himself might find that discourse empty—he objects to his correspondent's all too complacent expectation of agreement.

Reading an anecdote like this one, we too might object to the words of Richards's correspondent, but we might equally wonder how anyone carried on a correspondence or a conversation with Richards. We might ask why Richards holds his interlocutor to an improbably high standard and does not allow social niceties to prevail. Why does he not extend the sympathy that would make his correspondent's words understandable, if only as examples of the large, vague social meanings that he grants we rely on most of the time? The answer lies, I think, in his seeing *Practical Criticism* as what he calls an experiment in verbal behavior—and in using poetry as an arena in which one can look at verbal behavior without completely collapsing it into the social situation. He issued "printed sheets of poems—ranging in character from a poem by Shakespeare to a poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox—to audiences who were requested to comment freely in writing upon them. The authorship of the poems was not revealed, and with rare exceptions, it was not recognized."<sup>37</sup> Wimsatt offers that Richards holds up a "high ideal of understanding," and he notes the scarcity of "a certain few [successful] opinions (fewer than twenty, I should say, in the total of about 385 protocols)" written by Cambridge students encountering five clearly bad poems, five clearly good poems, and three problematic poems that were both unsigned and undated. Wimsatt speaks of "the crowded galleries of this modern Dunciad," and in doing so affiliates the protocol-writers with the critical and moral limitations of the personae whose actual names shine through in Pope's satire or any other.<sup>38</sup>

Wimsatt's perfectly plausible characterization sounds slightly inaccurate, however, if we linger over it. For Richards's approach, for all its wit, has very little satire to it. Satire is designed to name and shame, to hold up error and

make it appear as such. And while it is designed to correct, it is also designed to make failings and errors look nameable and blamable in someone else. Richards does not merely lace his text with remarks like "Whether we know and intend it or not, we are all jugglers when we converse, keeping the billiard-balls in the air while we balance the cue on our nose."<sup>39</sup> He continually extends the critical judgments he makes about the student protocols to "us" and refrains from naming any of his informants. In asking his informants to write about poems that lack the usual textbook identifications of author and date, he does not encourage them to arm themselves with the approval they expect to extend to Milton or Shakespeare or the scorn they are poised to heap upon the less canonized. At the same time, he bathes his informants' remarks in the waters of Lethe. His informants are not so much persons as roles. They represent the expensively educated young reader at a certain stage of development. A named reader might be tempted to explain and defend his readings. An unnamed reader is someone without a particular identity; she somewhat resembles Catherine Gallagher's account of novelistic character, the generalizable person who is Nobody and thus everybody.<sup>40</sup> Richards's suggestion is that neither guilt nor shame attaches to persons without names and that the experiment he is conducting runs more smoothly on that account: "We are quicker to detect our own errors when they are duplicated by our fellows, and readier to challenge a pretention when it is worn by another."<sup>41</sup>

Richards does not simply put his informants on the spot and make them yield up commentary on the poems. He assembles groups of responses clustered around the same poem in such a way as to make the respondents themselves seem almost like characters in a novel (considered in a different light than that of Gallagher's Nobody)—that is, with distinct personalities and ways of taking up the poems that are their putative objects of attention. Their responses are not important for being right or wrong or more or less closely aligned with positions that Richards might be expected to have. Indeed, as Wimsatt points out, Richards seems particularly unhappy with the responses that seem to attempt to ape or converse directly with Richards and "to employ the raw idiom of the Richards methodology."<sup>42</sup> Those eager informants, ready with phrases like "Failure of communication, as after the 20th reading the nature of the addressee was still obscure" (5.1), "I find it impossible to recreate the poet's experience" (6.33), and "This one seems to me a successful communication of an experience whose value is dubious, or which at most is valuable only on a small scale" (13.1), do not meet with direct criticism

of their remarks. Richards simply responds to 5.1 with the following: "The interesting assumption that the 'unimpeachable body' must be a woman's, not a man's, may be noted in passing. It frequently reappears." He quotes many protocols in support of the frustration that 6.33 expresses at Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Spring and Fall, to a Young Child," and observes that "the unfortunate readers bray, snort, and bleat, so overmastering is their contempt." He characterizes 13.1 as "a writer who finds only a stock experience in the poem" (Longfellow's "In the Churchyard at Cambridge") and is "only mildly disappointed"—by comparison with others who express increasingly outraged objections to the poem's triteness. He sums up the range of criticism thus: "If the easiest way to popularity is to exploit some stock response, some poem already existent, fully prepared, in the reader's mind, an appearance of appealing to such stock responses, should the reader happen to have discarded them, is a very certain way of courting failure."<sup>43</sup>

As the discussion of the Longfellow poem may serve to demonstrate, Richards's informants treat the poets behind the poems as if they had motives that can only be described as social motives, and they respond as social beings. Moreover they obscure the obligingness of their own responses by their vigilance in discerning in the poet a desire to oblige. Well-guarded social beings, superior to triteness and ingratiation, they demonstrate how little the reading of poetry actually participates in a distinct and autonomous world. Reading the protocols is a bit like reading the excursions into criticism that pepper Austen's *Emma*. Some of the informants sound a bit like Augusta Hawkins Elton, for whom poetry has such a vague meaning that she can quote bawdy lines about a bull from John Gay as if they were an anodyne tribute to love. More sound like the Emma Woodhouse who sets herself up as a textual scholar when she admits that Robert Martin's letter to Harriet Smith is a good one and then proceeds to suggest that his sisters must have helped him write it. The moral of her story and that of many of the protocol-writers is that an attitude of superiority toward what one is reading is virtually always socially appropriate.

Criticism for Richards is, then, a judgment of our judgments. And when he calls "the arts . . . our storehouse of recorded values" he is not particularly interested in identifying a canon of indisputably great works.<sup>44</sup> Rather the arts assist us in comparing our experiences, among ourselves but also at various different moments in our lives as individuals. John Stuart Mill made it seem as if eloquence and poetry were distinctly different uses of language when he pronounced that eloquence is heard while poetry is overheard. For

Richards, however, the public function of poetry and of the arts generally isn't about others; it's about making it possible for us as readers, as critics to hear ourselves. Hence Richards's appeal to the image of the "alienist," the person who embodies the question "Did you hear yourself?" This is why Richards's work has a strongly ethical tone. Novels like Austen's may depict self-satisfaction and complacency that operate in relation to other people and less and more public writing, but Richards's criticism does as well. In the process it makes it possible to see how one might use a lifetime of reading not merely to know more but to know better than one had before.

## Notes

1. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 7.
2. Cormac Herley, "Why Do Nigerian Scammers Say They Are from Nigeria?," Microsoft Research, June 2012, accessed 29 June 2012, [Research.microsoft.com/apps/pubs/default.aspx?id=167712](http://Research.microsoft.com/apps/pubs/default.aspx?id=167712).
3. Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 4.
4. Richards, *Poetries and Sciences*, 50.
5. See, in particular, Paul de Man, "Metaphor (Second Discourse)," in *Allegories of Reading*, 135–59. The important and extraordinary move in de Man's chapter involves focusing his account of Rousseau on the relationship between particular instance and general term as an instance of metaphor. Metaphor thus appears in the form of the movement between the general term and its examples rather than anything like a transfer of properties from one term (a lion) to another (a person with such daring and strength of heart as to resemble a lion in that respect).
6. Charles L. Stevenson is especially effective in laying out this aspect of Richards and Ogden's thinking. See his "Richards on the Theory of Value" and *Ethics and Language*.
7. Ogden and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, 6.
8. Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 6.
9. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 56.
10. See Richards's chapter of the same name in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 44–57.
11. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 44–45, 52.
12. Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 7.
13. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 74.
14. Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 229.
15. Critics like William Empson have sometimes been criticized for producing commentaries on versions of texts that existed only in the imperfect medium of their memories. Empson and many others may have misremembered a version of various texts, but Richards and Ogden, I argue, introduced the problem as one that could not be solved merely by regularly consulting the most authoritative versions of texts available. See "Computer Passwords Grow Ever More Complicated," *New York Times*, 22 June 2012.

16. See Gottlob Frege for the classic discussion of *Sinn* (sense) and *Bedeutung* (reference).
17. W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, especially 10–14.
18. Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 141.
19. Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 248.
20. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 22.
21. Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 208.
22. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 104–5.
23. W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," in Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, 37.
24. Wimsatt and Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon*, 38.
25. The New Criticism needed to treat only one version of a text, lest it introduce the notion that a poem was mutable. Jerome J. McGann has long called attention to the ways in which textual editing and its attention to textual variants were discounted in New Criticism. See "How Poems Come About: Intention and Meaning," in Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 514–550. For Brooks and Warren the practice of an ordinary reader (rather than a textual scholar) necessitates settling on one text and seeing other instances of that text as deficient forms of that text. For an account of the importance of understanding different versions of a text as distinct, see Jerome J. McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992) and "Keats and the Historical Method in Criticism," *MLN* (1979), 988–1032.
26. Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, 4.
27. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 1.
28. Brower, "I. A. Richards Interviewed," 28. I. A. Richards: *Essays in His Honor*, ed. Reuben Brower, Helen Vendler, and John Hollander (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 17–41.
29. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 1.
30. One of Wimsatt and Beardsley's examples deserves particular mention. They devote substantial attention to John Livingstone Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu*, an extensive examination of the reading that, Lowes argues, provided the raw materials for Coleridge's incomplete poem "Kubla Khan." See Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, 11–12. At same time, however, they make no mention at all of an impressively convincing brief discussion in which Richards shows the similarities between "Kubla Khan" and Book IV, 11. 223–83 of *Paradise Lost*. See Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 30–31.
31. Wimsatt, "I.A.R.," 117.
32. Wimsatt, "I.A.R.," 101.
33. Wimsatt, "I.A.R.," 101.
34. Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, 114–15.
35. Zunshine, *Strange Concepts and the Stories They Make Possible*, 1–2.
36. Wimsatt quotes from Richards's College English Association Chap-Book, *A Certain Sort of Interest in Language* of October 1941 ("I.A.R.," 102).
37. Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 3.
38. Wimsatt, "I.A.R.," 105, 106–7, 107.

39. Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 174.
40. Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
41. Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 315.
42. Wimsatt, "I.A.R.," 107.
43. Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 61, 84, 157.
44. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 32.