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Unit I

Introduction to Practical Criticism

I.A.Richards – Practical Criticism:

Ivor Armstrong Richards – poet, dramatist, speculative philosopher, psychologist and semanticist, is among the first of the 20th century critics to bring to English criticism a scientific precision and objectivity. He is often referred to as the ‘critical consciousness’ of the modern age. New Criticism and the whole of modern poetics derive their strength and inspiration from the seminal writings of Richards such as Principles of Literary Criticism, Practical Criticism, Coleridge on Imagination, The Foundation of Aesthetics (with C.K.Ogden and James Wood) and The Meaning of Meaning (with Ogden). Together with T.S.Eliot, Richards was instrumental in steering Anglo-American criticism along a new path of scientific enquiry and observation.

Richard’s influence rests primarily on his Practical Criticism (1929) which is based on his experiments conducted in Cambridge in which he distributed poems, stripped of all evidence of authorship and period, to his pupils and asked them to comment on them. He analyses factors responsible for misreading of poems. Even a “reputable scholar” is vulnerable to these problems. First is the difficulty of making out the plain sense of poetry. A large proportion of average-to-good readers of poetry simply fail to understand it. They fail to make out its prose sense, its plain, overt meaning. They misapprehend its feeling, its tone, and its intention. Parallel to the difficulties of interpreting the meaning are the difficulties of sensuous apprehension. Words have a movement and may have a rhythm even when read silently. Many a reader of poetry cannot naturally perceive this.

Practical criticism is, like the formal study of English literature itself, a relatively young discipline. It began in the 1920s with a series of experiments by the Cambridge critic I.A. Richards. He gave poems to students without any information about who wrote them or when they were written. In Practical Criticism of 1929 he reported on and analysed the results of his experiments. The objective of his work was to encourage students to concentrate on 'the words

on the page', rather than relying on preconceived or received beliefs about a text. For Richards this form of close analysis of anonymous poems was ultimately intended to have psychological benefits for the students: by responding to all the currents of emotion and meaning in the poems and passages of prose which they read the students were to achieve what Richards called an 'organised response'. This meant that they would clarify the various currents of thought in the poem and achieve a corresponding clarification of their own emotions.

In the work of Richards' most influential student, William Empson, practical criticism provided the basis for an entire critical method. In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) Empson developed his undergraduate essays for Richards into a study of the complex and multiple meanings of poems. His work had a profound impact on a critical movement known as the 'New Criticism', the exponents of which tended to see poems as elaborate structures of complex meanings. New Critics would usually pay relatively little attention to the historical setting of the works which they analysed, treating literature as a sphere of activity of its own. In the work of F.R. Leavis the close analysis of texts became a moral activity, in which a critic would bring the whole of his sensibility to bear on a literary text and test its sincerity and moral seriousness.

Practical criticism today is more usually treated as an ancillary skill rather than the foundation of a critical method. It is a part of many examinations in literature at almost all levels, and is used to test students' responsiveness to what they read, as well as their knowledge of verse forms and of the technical language for describing the way poems create their effects.

Practical criticism in this form has no necessary connection with any particular theoretical approach, and has shed the psychological theories which originally underpinned it. The discipline does, however, have some ground rules which affect how people who are trained in it will respond to literature. It might be seen as encouraging readings which concentrate on the form and meaning of particular works, rather than on larger theoretical questions. The process of reading a poem in clinical isolation from historical processes also can mean that literature is treated as a sphere of activity which is separate from economic or social conditions, or from the life of its author.

Ivor Armstrong Richards (26 February 1893 – 7 September 1979), known as I. A. Richards, was an English educator, literary critic, and rhetorician whose work contributed to the foundations of the New Criticism, a formalist movement in literary theory, which emphasized the close reading of a literary text, especially poetry, in an effort to discover how a work of literature functions as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object.

Richards' intellectual contributions to the establishment of the literary methodology of the New Criticism are presented in the books *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (1923), by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1926), *Practical Criticism* (1929), and *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936).

I.A. Richards' paternity of the New Criticism is in two books of critical theory, *The Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1929).

The second book, *Practical Criticism* (1929), is an empirical study of inferior response to a literary text.

As an instructor of English literature at Cambridge University, Richards tested the critical-thinking abilities of his pupils; he removed authorial and contextual information from thirteen poems, one by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807– 82), and assigned the literary

interpretations to undergraduate students in order to ascertain the likely impediments to an adequate response to a literary text. That experiment in pedagogical approach — critical reading without contexts — demonstrated the variety and the depth of the possible textual misreadings that might be committed, by university student and layman reader alike.

The critical method derived from that pedagogical approach did not propose a new hermeneutics, a new methodology of interpretation, but questioned the purposes and efficacy of the critical process of literary interpretation, by analysing the self-reported critical interpretations of university students. To that end, effective critical work required a closer aesthetic interpretation of the literary text as an object.

To substantiate interpretive criticism, Richards provided theories of metaphor, value, and tone, of stock response, incipient action, and pseudo-statement; and of ambiguity. This last subject, the theory of ambiguity, was developed in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), by William Empson, a former student of Richards'; moreover, additional to *The Principles of Literary Criticism* and *Practical Criticism*, Empson's book on ambiguity became the third foundational document for the methodology of the New Criticism.

To Richards, literary criticism was impressionistic, too abstract to be readily grasped and understood, by most readers; and he proposed that literary criticism could be precise in communicating meanings, by way of denotation and connotation. To establish critical precision, Richards examined the psychological processes of writing and of the reading of poetry. That in reading poetry and making sense of it “in the degree in which we can order ourselves, we need nothing more”; the reader need not believe the poetry, because the literary importance of poetry is in provoking emotions in the reader.