

Review of John Paul Russo, *I. A. Richards: His Life and Work*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; London: Routledge, 1989. 864pp. Published in both *Studies in English Literature* (English Literature Society of Japan) (March, 1991), 63–8, and the *journal of literary semantics*, 22/1 (Apr. 1993), 86–9. Text released here may differ from original paper publication.

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John Paul Russo's biographical study of his friend I. A. Richards was long in the making, Richards himself sanctioning the project shortly before his death in 1979. The result is an enormous book comprising, according to a rough calculation, 300,000 words of text and 90,000 of notes. These immense pains should convince most readers that finish the course, if any do, of Richards' importance, but everyone who looks into, or even at, this vast bulk will be prompted to ask, in many different tones of voice, what Richards did to do deserve it. The subject himself would have been as perplexed as any. His opinions are not, perhaps, strictly relevant, but no one who knows of them could avoid recalling remarks such as these:

I'm very doubtful whether we want a great *number* of biographies or studies in detail. You see, what is a man who's done English as an academic subject, what's he to do with the rest of his life, except to write books-about-books-about-books and reviews of them? I'm agin it on the whole; I think we're burying the valuables under loads of derivatives.¹

If any of the critical projects deserve detailed consideration Richards' career surely does so, yet a book only forty thousand words shorter than *The Foundations of Aesthetics*, *The Meaning of Meaning*, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, *Practical Criticism*, *Mencius on the Mind*, and *Coleridge on Imagination* combined runs the risk of completely obscuring its subject.

The length is largely due to Russo's historical method, a method pursued in such detail that it has the unfortunate side-effect of suggesting that Richards' thought is quite static and divorced from the present. But this is not specifically Russo's fault. History must draw arbitrary event boundaries, even as it is insisting on continuity, and in this case it inadvertently labels its subject as "Non-current". Indeed it is hard to imagine anyone not professionally interested in the whole of Richards' long career wishing to go through this book in its entirety, consulting every minutely printed, and often extremely valuable, footnote. The truth is that a scholar's knowledge is essential if the book is to be read in a critical spirit sufficiently confident to meet and resist Russo's evaluation and interpretation of

¹ "An Interview Conducted by B. A. Boucher and J. P. Russo", *The Harvard Advocate*, 103 (1969), repr. in J. P. Russo, ed, I. A. Richards, *Complementarities* (Harvard: Harvard UP, 1976), 266.

Richards' whole life. Anyone without a specialist's familiarity might be recommended to think of it as *The Companion to Richards Studies* (if there is such a discipline), a compilation to be consulted as a reference book of useful information, rather than an intelligible and coherent account of the swings and shifts of Richards' theoretical priorities, which are better appreciated simply by reading his own books.

Nevertheless the book is a daunting achievement. Russo clearly knows more about his 'Johnson' than anyone now living, despite being unable to make full use of the large collection of Richards' papers bequeathed shortly before publication to Magdalene College, Cambridge. If Russo had seen that archive in its entirety, and it is through no fault of his own that he did not, the material only being fully unearthed from cellars and attics during 1987, the book would presumably have been correspondingly larger, and more biographical in its bias, though that could hardly have made it a more paradoxical combination of 'life' and 'work'.

Richards, as the quotation above amply demonstrates, was sceptical about that genre, which he thought a subterfuge to avoid careful reading of an original text, as if a knowledge of the life were a short-cut, a 'key', to the truth cryptically and inadequately referred to in the author's writing. Richards' sanction was given on the understanding that the book would be concerned with his thought, not his private biography, and Russo has remained broadly loyal to his friend's wishes without entirely compromising his own vision. The book is not a day-to-day account of a life, nor is it overloaded with the trivia, collar sizes and culinary aversions, cluttered about any living person and forming the staple of literary gossip. Russo has spared us that, somewhat against his will perhaps, since it is noticeable that the chapters concerning Richards' later life, for which Russo was an eye-witness, have a higher density of incidental facts, those concerning his health being ones which Richards would certainly not have wished to put before the public. Indeed the last chapter is less criticism, or biography, than an oddly down-to-earth elegy. Given the extreme difficulties, Russo has obviously succeeded remarkably well in finding a compromise between the narrative history that he wished to write, and the kind of discussion of ideas that Richards would have preferred. The, frankly, unmanageable bulk of the study is not due to an indiscriminating inclusion of departure times and chance encounters (I was surprised to find no reference to a rumoured meeting with Hemingway), but to an essay by essay, and book by book analysis of almost the entire corpus.

Russo divides Richards into three parts: "The Preparation of a Critic" (five chapters, 87 pages); "The Theory and Method of Criticism" (eleven chapters, 310 pages); "The Later Career: Education and Poetry" (eight chapters, 281 pages). The opening section runs over boyhood life at Clifton, and an early love for the poetry of Swinburne. We learn the names of his schoolmasters, and those qualities of their characters which are likely to have been of

importance for Richards. This is also done, but in more detail, for Cambridge, Russo providing short accounts of the philosophical positions of Moore and McTaggart, amongst others. The purpose is to establish that Richards was a Cambridge humanist by education, a point of some importance since the concept of humanism returns often in the narrative, and takes a prominent position in the closing pages: "Contrary to those who have found his work formalistic, 'scientific', and mechanical, his formalism is a humanism, a celebration of what the mind's reasoning and imaginative power can accomplish" (p. 677).

With the first publications in 1919 the method changes, and from here on the volume becomes a series of linked essays on the major and minor texts, punctuated by short flights of biography. Russo has many just things to say of the books, though the depth of his analysis seems to be in proportion to their accepted importance, or acknowledged influence. *Practical Criticism* is reinstated, disappointingly I think, as the masterpiece, while *Mencius on the Mind* receives cursory treatment.

But if he gives in too easily to the received wisdom concerning the well-known material, Russo makes no concession whatever to complacent ignorance of the unpopular post-war works, particularly those connected with Basic English. He courageously defends Richards' decision to direct so much of his career to this end, and makes considerable efforts to understand why it seemed the necessary thing to do. This is the least promising aspect of a long life, yet Russo's explanations of Richards' commitment are amongst the most memorable parts of his account, particularly so because he succeeds in communicating the sense of urgency and involvement that Richards felt in his long association with the future of China and the Chinese people. Chapter 17, "Basic English: The Years in China" is one of a handful that could properly be longer. Here the mix of biography and intellectual biography seems entirely appropriate. Richards' overwork in the cause of Chinese reconstruction, and courage in the face of what proved to be insuperable, and might have been fatal, odds go a long way to show that there is more to I. A. Richards than a don who happened to ask his students for comments on unsigned and undated poems.

Once the narrative returns to the West, to war-time Harvard in fact, it is not long before the methodical analysis of published works resumes, passing through an inevitable chapter on the influence of Richards on New Criticism, in which Russo points out many frequently ignored divergencies, even hinting that "multiple definition" has more in common with "dissemination" (of which I presume it is a pyrrhonic rather than the familiar dogmatic variety) than "tension". And so on year by year and chapter by chapter to 1979. This blow-by-blow approach makes Richards much more of a plodder than he is in his own writing, where as Empson said "He likes to pose a small definite problem and then bound high into

the air" after which you "only see him leaping round the horizon".² While it is excellent that someone should take these works so seriously, a more convincing case for the continued interest of much of what Richards says could have been made if only Russo had felt able to sacrifice a few of his discussions. Richards was pragmatically hard-hearted about his own productions. On seeing *I. A. Richards: His Life and Work* he would not have asked himself "Is every part of my career represented?", but "Will this do any good in the areas of human endeavour I think matter most?", and he would not have accepted that history of this kind has any justification aside from its practical cash-value, in William James' sense, and the cash-value of the works it discusses. This is an important point of division between Russo and his subject, who, as Russo points out "rejected history in favour of myths of synthesis drawn from romantic organicism". Even granting this quite unqualified, the worst we can say is that Richards preferred one myth of synthesis to another, and given his views on the ubiquity and utility of emotive language it is hardly likely that he would have felt the term myth to be so damaging as Russo would wish. He rejected the totalizing myths of historicism not because they were myths, but because they were simply, as Russo reminds us, not emancipating. Readers of this book may well find themselves in agreement with that view.

As a first year undergraduate at Cambridge in 1911, Richards changed courses because History, which he went up to read, was the record of so many things that "ought not to have happened". Russo's retrospective assessment of that part of record which is one man's life comes to much the same conclusion. Having gathered a larger quantity of information about these false turnings, and wasted years, than has, perhaps, ever been assembled in memory of one thinker, he becomes overwhelmed by both by the size of the task, and the pity of the tale. At the end of nearly seven hundred pages of explication and defence he closes with a modest estimation of his advocacy, which, after so much effort, one would have forgiven him for over-rating:

Richards's place in the history of criticism will depend on how often readers return to his works themselves, long after their immediate impact has been absorbed.

The sentence pulls two ways, exemplifying the flaws and excellences of this book. A "place in the history of criticism", catalogued, under glass, a subject for those who wish to take refuge in safe, nugatory, judicial deliberations upon the static past. That for Richards would have been failure indeed. But the prospect of readers returning to the works, using them, developing selected aspects to solve the urgent problems of the present and the future, would be as much as he ever hoped for.

² William Empson, [Review of *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*], *Criterion*, 17/66 (Oct. 1937), 125-9.