THE MICROSCOPE OF WIT.

I.A. RICHARDS AND ENGLISH LITERARY CRITICISM

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines some aspects of the analytical approach to poetry which is associated with such critics as I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis. It also examines the resemblances between this approach and that which in eighteenth century literary criticism appears as a preoccupation with "propriety" in poetic language.

I.A. Richards is discussed first and at greatest length since he is the most persistently theoretical of the critics with whom this thesis deals, and consequently affords an opportunity for an exposition of the principles which underlie this analytical approach.

This exposition is followed by an account of some fundamental features of the doctrine of "propriety", illustrated chiefly from Dr. Johnson's Shakespeare criticism. It is suggested that key ideas of Richards', such as "complexity" and "realisation" correspond with central ideas in eighteenth century literary criticism. This correspondence reveals itself as an interest in the fact that words in poetry interconnect with each other in complex ways. I.A. Richards' term (developed most thoroughly in Coleridge on Imagination) for such interconnection is "interinanimation". The corresponding eighteenth century term is "propriety".

The thesis then examines the literary criticism of T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis and W. Empson. The ideas they hold in common with I.A. Richards are outlined, and then what may be called the distinctive features of their respective approaches are discussed.

The emphasis, throughout the thesis, is upon some methods of analysing poetic language and upon the principles which underlie such methods. The thesis does not attempt to give a complete account of the critics with whom it deals, nor to examine the question of what influence they may have exerted upon each other.

PREFACE

In the following thesis I am, broadly speaking, interested in some methods of analyzing poetic language and in the principles which lie behind such analysis. I examine the work of I.A. Richards, T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis and W. Empson, whose names are associated with what might be called, for the sake of convenience, the "Cambridge school of criticism".

I begin with an account of I.A. Richards, because he is the most persistently theoretical of the critics I have mentioned, and thus affords the best opportunity for a basic outline. I examine his work at some length, since I disagree with the main conclusions of Dr. J. Schiller's I.A. Richards' Theory of Literature, and, to a lesser extent, with W.H.N. Hotopf's detailed examination of Richards in Language, Thought and Comprehension. A Case Study of the Writings of I.A. Richards. I argue that the notion of "interinanimation", developed chiefly in Coleridge on Imagination, is Richards' most useful contribution to thinking about the analysis of poetic language, and that his work before and after Coleridge on Imagination is less satisfactory.

I then try to show the similarities between Richards' notion of "interinanimation" and the eighteenth century concept of "propriety of diction", and to suggest that these similarities are fundamental. I rely for evidence chiefly on Dr. Johnson's Shakespearean criticism.

A comparison of Richards with Johnson is, I think, useful because it illuminates the "traditionality" of the modern critics and the "modernity" of the eighteenth century critics. I also hope, though I do not deal at great length with Johnson's Shakespearean criticism, to have done enough to show that the dominant modern view, which finds Johnson unperceptive, needs to be revised.

I then use the core of opinion, which I have argued is common to Johnson and Richards, to look at Eliot, Leavis and Empson. In each case I outline first the presence of that common core, and then discuss the distinctive features which accompany it.

I should like here to add a brief preliminary comment on the "common core" and the "distinctive features".

The eighteenth century doctrine of "propriety of diction" and Richards' concept of "interinanimation" both refer to the ideal of interconnectedness in poetic language; in the work of a good poet all the aspects of a given word should interconnect to an unusual degree with all the aspects of the other words in the context. "Aspects" here means the senses, the connotations and the physical qualities of the words. In the language of modern criticism, this is a "complex" use of words, which constitutes a "realization" of whatever the poet is talking about. In the language of eighteenth century criticism, "propriety of diction" ensures that the verbal medium attracts no attention to itself—that it becomes transparent, so that the reader feels he is in the presence not of words, but of things and experiences. That is what I have called the "common core".

The "distinctive features" of modern criticism revolve largely around what one might call the idea of fruitful conflict, whereas the bias of eighteenth century criticism reveals itself in a heavy emphasis upon consonance. One can briefly illustrate this by comparing modern Shakespearean criticism with eighteenth century Shakespearean criticism. For the modern critic, Shakespeare's "bold" use of language is a central point for admiration; words are interconnected in such a way that their "normal" meanings are slightly modified. The old meaning and the new context react upon each other in a way which resembles the process of metaphor, but without any of the formal features of metaphor. This conflict between the old meaning and the new gives Shakespeare's language its vitality, or, to revert to the language I used above, the words are particularly complex (since they involve a subtle interplay between the new context and the old meaning) and thus "realize" their subject.

The eighteenth century critic is less admiring than his modern counterpart; he is anxious (and sometimes over-anxious) to detect the point at which "boldness" becomes "license"—at which the new context so dislocates the old meaning that the word disintegrates. Nevertheless, the eighteenth century and the modern critic have a considerable community of interest in "interinanimation", and in related issues. I have tried to bring out this community of interest not only in my chapters on some aspects of "propriety", but also in occasional references, throughout the thesis, to Dr. Johnson.

Richards is the critic with whom I deal at greatest length and I have attempted to trace the development of his ideas. My accounts of Eliot, Leavis and Johnson are briefer and more general, and I do not attempt to describe any development in their critical thinking. In the case of Empson I restrict my discussion to Seven Types of Ambiguity. In view of the fact that the chronology of the works I discuss has not been at the centre of interest, I have arranged all the entries in my bibliography alphabetically.

Since my approach, though it does not enter into the question of mutual influence, involves comparisons between the critics with whom I deal, I have set out a rather detailed table of contents, describing briefly the sections into which I have divided each chapter. I hope that this will make cross-reference more easy.

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