The search for the meaning of meaning

by K.E. Garay

John Paul Russo. *I.A. Richards: His Life and Work.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989. Pp. 843. US$39.95.

"FUNDAMENTALLY, I'M AN inventor"; such was I.A. Richards' typically terse yet insightful summation of himself. Ivor Armstrong Richards (1893–1979) played a seminal role in the invention of modern literary criticism, helped establish the English School at Cambridge University, contributed significantly, through the co-authorship of *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), to the invention of a new international language: Basic English, pioneered new methods of language teaching first in China and then at

Harvard, and, in old age, turned to inventing poetry. Such a long, crowded and multifaceted life makes heavy demands of a biographer, and Richards made no attempt to lighten the load. It was a primary article of his critical canon that the biographical element served only to deflect attention from a work of art: "and words it is, not poets, make up poems"[1]; he refused to write his own memoirs or even to discuss the lives of the many great writers he had known. Thus John Paul Russo, a former student and friend of Richards, now a professor of English at the University of Miami, has had to range wide and dig deeply in the writing of this book; although he secured Richards' cooperation and has had access to an impressive body of unpublished material, both manuscripts and correspondence, this is no standard "authorized" biography.

I.A. Richards had a particular affection for the word "daunting" which he used in an approving way, close to the opposite of its standard meaning, reflecting the excitement and magnitude of a challenge. This 843-page biography would almost certainly have earned the epithet from him; the footnotes alone extend to 130 pages. There are three main thematic divisions: "The Preparation of a Critic"; "The Theory and Method of Criticism" and "The Later Career: Education and Poetry". The "Preparation" section and the first two chapters of the middle section, which trace Richards' career to the mid-1920s, are of the greatest interest to Russell scholars, for it was at Cambridge, "the garden of great intellects", that Richards first felt his influence. Having lost his father at the age of nine and survived a nearly fatal attack of tuberculosis at fourteen, Richards was eighteen when he won a history scholarship to Magdalene College and went up to Cambridge in October 1911, an auspicious year in which G.E. Moore returned after a seven-year absence, in which Wittgenstein arrived, and one year after Russell had begun a five-year Trinity fellowship.

By 1913 Richards had changed his course of study "by accident to philosophy" (p. 36), from whence he turned briefly to medicine, then to the teaching of literature and then (but still not finally) to careers in literacy and language instruction. Throughout, however, he continued to consider himself a philosopher, and during more than two decades of indecision in the United States before his final return to England in 1974 he frequently admitted that his "main preoccupation is to find the right people to hand it [the promotion of Basic English as a language instruction tool] all over to, so that I can get back to philosophy" (p. 466).

In some of the book's most lucidly written passages, Russo deftly places Richards, during those days when "the world seemed hopeful and solid"[2], within the context of Cambridge Humanism, which was:

> characterized by directness in speech and writing; rationalism; a strain of idealism which envisages the ultimate harmony of the good, the true and the beautiful; agnosticism; personalism; anti-authoritarianism; dedication to work; and a meliorist faith in human endeavour. McTaggart expressed certain of these themes in his metaphysics; Russell and Moore in their ethics; Keynes in his economics; Forster in his novels; Dickinson, Russell and Leonard Woolf in their social criticism and politics; F.M. Cornford in his studies of Socrates and Plato; and Richards in his criticism. (P. 43)

1 John Paul Russo, *I.A. Richards: His Life and Work*, p. 203.

2 Bertrand Russell, "My Mental Development", *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, ed. P.A. Schilpp (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, 1944), p. 9. Cited in Russo, p. 15.

Although Richards later acknowledged that the influence of Moore, his most cherished teacher, upon his life and work, was largely negative: "I feel like an obverse of him. Where there's a hole in him there's a bulge in me" (p. 51), Russell's influence was to have a more positive results. Richards had a meeting of minds with a fellow Magdalene graduate, C.K. Ogden, on Armistice Day, 1918, during which "the whole of our book, *The Meaning of Meaning*, was talked out clearly in two hours" (p. 65). It was a paper of Russell's in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*[3] which had prompted the conversation.

Russo also suggests a connection between Russell and the invention of Basic English—a modified version of English which eliminates verbs and functions with a vocabulary of only 850 words. Intended to serve both as an convenient method of international communication and as a first step in the teaching of "full" English, Basic, which emerged in its final form in 1929, was C.K. Ogden's creation. However, it proceeded directly from the concerns and conclusions of *The Meaning of Meaning*, and Richards was to devote most of his life to its development and dissemination. Russo posits that Russell's "model of an ideal language virtually independent of contexts", presented in 1918, "acted as an immediate stimulus to Richards and Ogden to find their own ideal language, one that would, on the contrary, be strictly dependent on contexts" (p. 76). Although Russo does not, for once, document his assertion, it is certainly plausible: Russell's suggestion during the course of his London lecture on "Particulars, Predicates and Relations" that "in a logically perfect language, there will be one word and no more for every simple object, and everything that is not simple will be expressed by a combination of words, by a combination derived, of course, from the simple things that enter in"[4] might well have served as an inspiration for the Basic vocabulary, although Russell himself had in mind only the logical perfection of the language of *Principia Mathematica*, a language consisting exclusively of syntax and no vocabulary at all.

The sections of this biography which follow Richards' life from Cambridge to China and America and follow his work from linguistic analysis to literary criticism are less successful, primarily because Russo's examination of the work is so minutely detailed as to obscure the threads of his subject's life. Having explored *The Meaning of Meaning* in Chapter 7, the remainder of the central portion of the book becomes an extended analytical essay, delving deeply and, it must be acknowledged, expertly into

3 "On the Relations of Universals and Particulars", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, n.s. 12 (1911–12) 1–24. Cited in Russo, p. 703 n.40. In the same interview about the conversation which lead to *The Meaning of Meaning* (quoted on p. 65) Richards also referred to discussion of "an article in *Mind*" which Russo (p. 704 n.6) identifies as "The Meaning of 'Meaning'", a symposium with papers by F.C.S. Schiller, Bertrand Russell and Harold Joachim, Oxford, 20 September 1920 (*Mind*, n.s. 29 [1920]: 385–414). However, this article obviously could not have contributed to the discussion in 1918.

4 "Particulars, Predicates and Relations", Lecture II of a course of lectures given at Dr. Williams' Library, Gordon Square, January–March 1918. Included in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism and Other Essays*, ed. John G. Slater, Vol. 8 of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1986), p. 176.

models, influences, theories and examples relating to Richards' critical methodology. The life is not picked up again until the third and final section which returns, once again, to the blend of biography and analysis established at the beginning, but here still the balance between the life and the work tilts decidedly in favour of the work.

Russo's book is a substantial, skilful and scholarly example of intellectual biography; by its end the reader has explored the contours of Richards' mind and is able to claim familiarity with his œuvres even the most minor and least successful of them. Unlike his friend and mentor, Russo is convinced of the importance of historical context and expertly places Richards' ideas within their intellectual framework. However, for all its brilliance and richness this work does not fully succeed as a life; Richards the Welsh wizard, at once the skilled practitioner and implacable foe of "word magic"; Richards the intrepid mountaineer, scaler of heights and obstacles, physical and emotional as well as intellectual; Richards the teacher, friend and husband; Richards the man, has escaped the searching gaze of his biographer and one cannot but imagine him smiling.

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