
UNIT 3 F.R. LEAVIS

Structure

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall acquaint ourselves with the literary criticism of F.R. Leavis. Our aim will be to evaluate his achievement as a critic, and consider to what extent he can be said to belong to the school of New Critics.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Frank Raymond Leavis (1895-1978) was born at Cambridge, where he spent most of his life. He was educated at Perse School, and had just won a scholarship to study history at Emmanuel College when the First World War broke out. He worked as a stretcher bearer on the battlefields of France, and resumed his academic career in 1919. In his second year at Cambridge University, he moved from history to the newly introduced subject of English. He submitted his Ph.D. in 1924, and started working as a lecturer at Cambridge. He became Fellow at Downing College, Cambridge, in 1937, and was University Reader in English from 1959 to 1962. He started the literary quarterly *Scrutiny* in 1932, and edited it till it ceased publication in 1953. He wrote widely on literature as well as popular culture: publications include *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1930), *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), *Revaluation* (1936), *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (1948), *D.H. Lawrence: Novelist* (1955), *Dickens the Novelist* (1970, written in collaboration with his wife Q.D. Leavis) and *The Living Principle: "English" as a Discipline of Thought* (1975). *Nor Shall My Sword*, 1970.

He was above all a teacher, and preached and practised an approach to literature which advocated close attention to the text: sharp discrimination in evaluating the text was all important to him. He taught literature with a missionary zeal: he felt that the study of literature was the only thing that could save us from the dehumanisation inherent in the impersonal civilization of the technological age. He always insisted that "Literature matters because life matters." His enthusiasm drew many students to him, and his "disciples" can be found in English faculties throughout the Commonwealth. His widespread influence on English studies in the second and third quarters of the twentieth century is not due to his books alone: his classroom lectures and *Scrutiny* played an equally important role.

Leavis's early books, on the English poetic tradition, clearly show the influence of T.S.Eliot. *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) dismissed the popular acclaim accorded to Victorian and Georgian poets. He follows Eliot in finding in the Metaphysical poets the qualities needed in modern poetry, and values Hopkins, T.S.Eliot and Ezra Pound. Leavis's concern with "concrete realization" and his emphasis on a writer's using the full resources of the English language is obvious even in this early book, in the terms in which he praises Hopkins. In his later work, Leavis repeatedly attacked Eliot's criticism, especially the theory of impersonality proposed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent". Leavis was "a man of strong convictions, and even resentments, of harsh polemical manners, who did not practice diplomacy" (Wellek, p.241). He made many enemies, especially in the literary establishment at Cambridge, and they responded by trying to marginalize him. But we need not concern ourselves with such details of his personal life and career; in this unit we shall examine his writing to try and understand how he became, with Eliot, the most influential critic of the age. His criticism of fiction owes nothing to T.S.Eliot.

His books on English fiction represent the most original part of his contribution. He recognized that the novel deserved the kind of critical attention to detail which had been given only to poetry or drama. *The Great Tradition* demonstrated that novels can, and should be, analysed in terms of the words on the page. He declared:

A novel, like a poem, is made of words; there is nothing else one can point to. We talk of a novelist as "creating characters", but the process of "creation" is one of putting words together. We discuss the quality of his "vision", but the only critical judgements we can attach directly to observable parts of his work concern particular arrangements of words -- the quality of the response they evoke. Criticism, that is, must be in the first place (and never cease being) a matter of sensibility, of responding sensitively and with precise discrimination to the words on the page. But it must, of course, go on to deal with larger effects.

Leavis hardly ever theorized. Stray thoughts on his critical method can be found scattered through his empirical work. The above piece, though it was written in the context of the study of novels, describes the method he uses in the study of a lyric, a long poem, or a play by Shakespeare. He never talks of "vision" without particular reference to the "particular arrangements of words." For him, literary criticism is primarily a question of "responding sensitively and with precise discrimination to the words on the page."

The introduction he wrote to *Revaluation* is one of the few occasions when he has discussed his methodology. The correspondence with R,n, Wellek (published in *Scrutiny* and reprinted in *The Common Pursuit*) is another rare instance. Let us examine these two pieces of writing. Then we shall read a chapter from *Revaluation*, to get a taste of Leavis's typical aggressive mode of criticism, designed to provoke controversy and debate.

3.2 "INTRODUCTION" FROM REVALUATION

In his introduction, Leavis tells us that the book was written as a companion piece to *New Bearings in English Poetry*, published four years earlier. That book described contemporary poetry. *Revaluation* is its complement, an account of the past of English poetry, for a "full perspective" can be provided only if the present is correlated with the past. Leavis says that it is "the business of the critic" to see the poetry of the present as the continuation and development of the past. The poetry of the past is alive

only in terms of its relevance to us, the present day readers. He plans to present the main lines of development of English poetry, from Shakespeare to Keats. Any worthwhile criticism has to be from a clearly defined point of view. Leavis's perspective, naturally, will be of a person living in the present, though he will try to make it "as little merely individual" as possible. Needless to say, in the last report, he becomes very personal in his judgements and valorizes these judgements as beyond dispute.

He next takes up the question of method. "No treatment of poetry is worth much that does not keep very close to the concrete." The critic should work in terms of "particular analysis--analysis of poems or passages, and to say nothing that cannot be related immediately to judgements about predicable texts." This is the method he has used in all his criticism. Even studies of long novels like *Middlemarch* are distinguished by the way he never strays from the text. Every critical study by Leavis is full of quotations: he never makes a general statement unsupported by lines from the text. Ian MacKillop compares his technique to that of a lecturer who illustrates his talk with visuals: projected slides, and now transparencies or graphics. In *Revaluation*, for instance, he can make evaluative comparisons by juxtaposing one extract with another. For instance, the drawbacks of Shelley's play *The Cenci* are fully demonstrated when he places extracts from Shelley side by side with the Shakespearean passages which inspired them. The method makes for a very lively presentation, full of wit and humour.

He proposes to discuss tradition not as an abstract concept but in terms of the concrete. Just as he evaluates an individual poet in terms of representative pieces of his work, "one deals with tradition in terms of representative poets". He then briefly justifies his choice of poets, and the pages he devotes to them. He has devoted a chapter to "The Line of Wit" rather than to Donne because he has received a lot of attention as the most important of the Metaphysical poets (Leavis must have been thinking of critical studies by T.S.Eliot, H.J.C.Grierson and Helen Gardner). Dryden, a relatively simple poet, has received more attention than he deserves, but the range of Pope's poetry has not received its due, so he has a chapter on Pope. There is no chapter on Shakespeare, because Leavis feels that "Shakespeare is too large a fact to be dealt with in that way." But the book is full of recurrent references to him. There is no chapter on Spenser because his place in the tradition is clear; his influence is brought out through incidental references to him in the chapters on Milton and Keats. There are individual chapters on Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, but none on the Victorians, because "they do not lend themselves readily to the critical method of this book." Leavis feels that the defect is not in the method but in their poetry, "their verse doesn't offer, characteristically, any very interesting local life for inspection."

Every chapter in *Revaluation* has many "Notes"; these appendices help to clarify points raised in the main essay. Thus many poets not treated in detail in the chapter (Blake, Byron and his satire, Coleridge etc.) are the objects of very interesting comments in the notes, which are sometimes small chapters in themselves.

Leavis ends the "Introduction" with his concept of how a critic should function. His duty is "to perceive for himself, to make the finest and sharpest relevant discriminations, and to state his feelings as responsibly, clearly and forcibly as possible." Leavis's own work is marked by force and clarity. He believes that even if the critic is wrong in his valuation, he has served the business of criticism, because he is open to correction, he has profitably participated in the debate. Criticism is "the profitable discussion of literature." He stresses the importance of collaboration.

3.3 LITERARY CRITICISM AND PHILOSOPHY

The essay "Literary Criticism and Philosophy", first published in *Scrutiny* in 1937, was a response to R. n. Wellek's suggestion that Leavis should spell out the theoretical basis of his criticism. After reviewing *Revaluation*, the eminent critic and literary historian Wellek wrote:

Allow me to sketch your ideal of poetry, your "norm" with which you measure every poet: your poetry must be in serious relation to actuality, it must have a firm grasp on the actual, of the object, it must be in relation to life, it must not be cut off from direct vulgar living, it should be normally human, testify to spiritual health and sanity, it should not be personal in the sense of indulging in personal dreams and fantasies, there should be no emotion for its own sake in it. . . but a sharp, concrete realization, a sensuous particularity. The language of your poetry must not be cut off from speech, should not flatter the singing voice, should not be merely mellifluous. . . . I would ask you to defend this position more abstractly.

(*Scrutiny* 5, March 1937)

Wellek has provided a good summary of Leavis's assumption derived from his critical practice. In his reply, Leavis expresses his views on the discipline of literary criticism, and pleads that by making precise discriminations, he has advanced theory, "even if I haven't done the theorizing." Leavis says that literary criticism is a "distinct and separate discipline", quite different from philosophy and its abstract speculations. The reading demanded by poetry is of a different kind from that demanded by philosophy. The critic is the ideal reader of poetry. The critic is (of course) concerned with evaluation, but judgement is not a question of applying an external "norm". The critic's aim should be to realize as completely and sensitively as possible the experience that is given in the words. "The business of the literary critic is to attain a peculiar completeness of response". A critic should observe a strict relevance in developing this response into commentary, and guard against premature generalizing.

Leavis defends his practice by pointing out that his critical assumptions are implicit in his work. "If I avoided such generalities, it was because they seemed too clumsy to be of any use. I thought I had provided something better." He feels that the best way of presenting theoretical principles is to show them at work in practical criticism. He believes in working in terms of "concrete judgements and particular analyses". Leavis thinks of criticism as a cooperative effort, in terms of discussing the text with fellow critics. His method, to quote him, is "'This--doesn't it?--bears such a relation to that; this kind of thing--don't you find it so--wears better than that' etc."

To reduce his principles to abstract statements would be to take away their precision, and make them "clumsy and inadequate". Leavis wrote that he believes in demonstrating his critical principles, not in stating them: "I do not argue in general terms that there should be 'no emotion for its own sake, no afflatus, no mere generous emotionality, no luxury in pain and joy'; but by choice, arrangement and analysis of concrete examples I give those phrases a precision of meaning they couldn't have got in any other way. There is, I hope, a chance that I may in this way have advanced theory, even if I haven't done the theorizing."

Yet in his own way, Leavis does offer a 'theory' even though it is not conceptualized. The assumptions which guide his judgement of poets and novelists are the nearest to a framework even if they cannot be abstracted into a philosophical theory.

3.4 A REPRESENTATIVE ESSAY: "MILTON"

Leavis looked upon criticism as "the common pursuit of true judgement" . . . a place for quiet cooperative labour" (in the words of T.S.Eliot). Many of his essays begin with a discussion of other critics' views: he either corroborates or violently disagrees. The second chapter of *Revaluation*, "Milton's Verse", begins with quoting Eliot, Middleton Murry and Alan Tate. Leavis supports Eliot's denunciation of Milton, and takes issue with Tate who believes that if we do not like Milton, it is because we are prejudiced against his mythology. Leavis maintains that his dislike of Milton is based purely on his antipathy to his verse, Milton's beliefs have nothing to do with it. He criticizes the monotony of Milton's verse: "reading *Paradise Lost* is a matter of resisting, of standing up against, the verse movement, of subduing it into something tolerably like sensitiveness, and in the end our resistance is worn down; we surrender at last to the inescapable monotony of the ritual." And Leavis immediately quotes a passage from the text. He analyses some lines from the end of Book I, and demonstrates how "the usual pattern of Milton's verse has here an unusual expressive function", quite different from the usual movement, which is just a ritual. The verse movement in the rest of the poem does not contribute to the meaning, it is a fixed, repetitive movement.

Eliot had used the word "magniloquence" for Milton's verse, and Leavis develops this charge by means of suitable illustrations. When we call verse magniloquent we mean that it indulges in outward show, it is not doing what it purports to do, it is hollow. It suffers from "a certain sensuous poverty". He takes a passage by Milton himself, from his masque *Comus*, marked by sensuous richness. Leavis picks out lines and phrases to demonstrate the "Shakespearean life" of the passage, created by telescoping diverse associations. "The texture of actual sounds, the run of vowels and consonants" plays an essential part in the effect of the passage, but this verbal music should "not be analysed in abstraction from the meaning." The total effect is that the reader is aware of a tissue of feelings and perceptions, the words withdraw themselves from our attention. Milton's use of words is quite different in *Paradise Lost*, where Milton's seems to be "focusing rather upon words than upon perceptions." The medium itself calls for attention. Milton "exhibits a feeling *for* words rather than a capacity for feeling *through* words."

Leavis ascribes the failure of Milton's verse to its remoteness "from any English that was ever spoken." According to Leavis, subtlety of movement in English verse depends upon the play of natural idiomatic speech against the verse structure. No such play is possible in *Paradise Lost*, because, unlike Shakespeare, idiomatic speech is completely absent. Milton does not bother about "the intrinsic nature of English", he had renounced the English language, and wrote it as if it were Latin. Leavis consistently lays stress on using the full resources of the English language; he places a high value on the poetry of Hopkins (in *New Bearings* and other articles) because he exploits the native resources of the language.

Milton belongs to the tradition of Spenser. They use a diction remote from speech, dominated by a concern for mellifluousness. There is no pressure behind the words. Leavis repeatedly contrasts this usage with the Shakespearean use of English, "in the essential spirit of the language", making full use of its "characteristic resources." Donne and the Metaphysical poets, and later Keats, belong to this tradition. And Leavis clarifies his assertion by quoting passages from Donne and Milton.

He ends the essay by asserting Shakespeare's incomparable superiority. He quotes G. Wilson Knight, the eminent Shakespearean critic, who looked upon a play as an extended metaphor. He praises the structural unity of Shakespeare's plays, and

condemns critics who praise the "architectonic" power of *Paradise Lost*. With a touch of wit, Leavis says that the only architectural analogy he can find for Milton is with bricklaying. Laying bricks is a purely repetitive activity, where the semi-skilled labourer mechanically puts down line after line of bricks. Leavis suggests that Milton's verse is equally monotonous and mechanical.

3.5 THE ACHIEVEMENT OF F.R. LEAVIS

Leavis is in the "great tradition" of English literary criticism, which can be traced from Dryden, Pope, Dr Johnson, Coleridge, and Matthew Arnold. He is especially close to Dr Johnson in laying stress on the moral value of a work of literature. He lives up to Arnold's ideal of objectivity, comprehending the work "as in itself it really is." *New Bearings* and *Revaluation* have rewritten the history of English poetry from a quasi-new critical perspective. His criticism of fiction was a pioneering attempt to win for fiction the kind of verbal analysis which earlier critics had reserved for poetry, he never talked vaguely about characters or structures. No matter what the genre, Leavis always supports his arguments with quotations from the text. This facilitates critical debate: even where we disagree with his valuations (as in his glorification of all aspects of the writings of D.H. Lawrence), his approach serves to draw attention to the text, and enhance our response to it.

Leavis was always wary of theorizing. He constantly emphasized his lack of interest in abstract principles, and recommended a purely empirical textual approach to literary criticism. Ideological critics like Eagleton have pointed out that disowning ideology is itself a kind of ideology. As Catherine Belsey says "There is no practice without theory, however much that theory is suppressed, unformulated or perceived as "obvious" (p.4). According to her, Leavis believed in expressive realism, the practice of reading that the New Critics attacked. Expressive realism is the theory that literature reflects the *reality* of experience as it is perceived by one (especially gifted) individual, who *expresses* it in a discourse which enables other individuals to recognize it as true. In the article "Henry James and the Function of Criticism" (reprinted in *The Common Pursuit*), for instance, Leavis grounds his discussion of what he finds most valuable in James's work on unquestioned expressive-realist presuppositions. The novels he most admires are praised for "the vivid concreteness of the rendering of this world of individual centres of consciousness we live in" (p.231). There is a marked tendency to blame the personal failings of Henry James for the inadequacies in his work.

Catherine Belsey has pointed out a major failing: "In Leavis's criticism in general there is a recurring slide from text to author which manifests itself in a characteristic way of formulating his observations" (p.12). A weakness of the chapter on Shelley in *Revaluation* is the way he slips into condemning the personality of Shelley, from analysing the poetry. Leavis did not believe in the rigid separation of artist and work advocated by Eliot; he believed that masterpieces drew their moral intensity from the artist's openness to life. He says of the great novelists in the opening chapter of *The Great Tradition*: "They are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity" (p.17).

Raman Selden prefers to categorize Leavis as a "moral critic", rather than among the New Critics. He has pointed out that Leavis's form of close reading differs from the American New Criticism's methods in its stress on "sensibility". The New Critics were committed to an "objective" form of textual analysis. Moral criticism is the most natural of critical practices, and the least explicit theoretically. Its concepts and values are implicitly connected with human experience. Leavis assumes that their validity is

self evident, and does not care to examine concepts like "maturity", "seriousness", "wholeness", "authenticity", "sincerity" or "life". His criticism rests on intuitive values grounded in social commitment to concrete actualities of living. Values are intuitive and felt, never discussed in the abstract. Concreteness is a major value in criticism and in literature. He believes that literary texts are not reducible to abstract summary or to generalized statement. (The American New Critics also laid stress on this view.) The tragic quality of a Shakespeare play is something inseparable from the poetic language of the play: it is "enacted".

C.D.Narasimhaiah, a self-confessed admirer of Leavis, has pointed out a major drawback in his work, his insularity:

While his main approach to literature is that of a collaborator, of the Indian *sahrdaya*, there are some significant gaps in Leavis's critical positions, that is, for an Indian who believes in the validity of his own tradition--the gap is not one of sensibility or self-contradictions or modes of approach to a work of art. No critic of standing in our times or before has made fewer mistakes than Leavis in these respects and when it came to *demonstrating* the value of a work of art by his incisive analysis, Leavis is still unsurpassed. Where correctives are needed, for the Indian reader at least, is in the Englishness of his outlook, an Englishness which took the form of: "Such prepotency as this country may hope for in the English-speaking world of the future must lie in the cultural field and that it should exert such a prepotency — as focus of the inner life of cultural tradition is very much to be desired" (*Education and the University*, 1943). Now the dangers of such self-glorification in matters of culture should be obvious to Leavis himself, in retrospect. It is amazing that Leavis who did so much to teach the sharpest and subtlest kinds of discrimination in reading should not have contributed vigorously to breaking the insularity of the Englishman, and that he who did so much to advance the Arnoldian function of criticism should have in practice minimized the importance of the international perspective in the study of literature. (pp.76-77)

And yet one is not surprised in the kind of interest--it is a major interest--he took in Conrad and Henry James. Conrad is a Pole but to Dr Leavis the secret of the strength of Conrad is in the British Merchant Navy which made him the great novelist that he is. Similarly James: his interest in James is an interest in the English scene--that James was after all a naturalized Englishman and as a novelist he is in the line of Jane Austen and George Eliot who constitute for Leavis a major part of the Great tradition. And yet the "Great Tradition" took singularly little notice of the greatness of Melville or Faulkner, the incomparably greater Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. His admirers would like to think his recent essay on *Anna Karenina* is an effort at making some amends in that direction." (p.78).

The narrow range of Leavis's sympathies are obvious even without any reference to the Indian viewpoint. He values only realist art, of the kind we find in Shakespeare or the nineteenth century novel. One may liken him to Lukacs who also had a puritanical disregard for everything non-realistic. He is hostile to modernism or verbal experimentation: he has a low opinion of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, but exalts D.H.Lawrence as the greatest novelist and literary critic of the century. He also ignores literatures of other countries, the only exception being the essay on *Anna Karenina* and a late interest in Eugene Montale. He may have had genuine scruples about analysing texts in translation, but he is silent about literature written in English in Australia, Canada, Africa, the Caribbean or India. His stray comments on American literature fail to do justice to great novelists like Melville or Mark Twain. He ignored the discipline of comparative literary studies. This is a charge that can be

brought against the New Critics in general: poetry was their first concern, which might be the cause of their preoccupation with texts in English.

In spite of his insularity, Leavis has had a lasting effect on English literary criticism. His recourse to practical criticism rather than theory has had wide-ranging pedagogical significance. His demonstration of the actual organization of the poem and the way language created what it conveyed in the poem shows the new critics' theory at work. He insistently pointed to the poem as an object in front of us, rather than other things which had figured prominently in literary criticism, such as the biography of the poet, the background material, the ethos, the message, or the philosophy related to the work. Leavis established the importance of the intrinsic, rather than the extrinsic study of literature.

3.6 GLOSSARY

architectonic:	relating to architecture, construction.
insularity:	literally, quality of belonging to an island; the attitude of a person who is narrow minded, cut off from others, not caring about the culture of other countries.
magniloquent:	speaking in a grand and pompous style, meant to produce an effect; bombastic, inflated speech.
prepotency:	abstract noun from prepotent , greater than others in power and influence.

3.7 QUESTIONS

1. Attempt an appraisal of F.R. Leavis's achievement as a literary critic.
2. How far do you agree with the opinion that Leavis's values are moral rather than aesthetic?
3. Write a note on Leavis's critical method.
4. Do you think Leavis's critical practice was influenced by T.S.Eliot?
5. René Wellek says, "*Revaluation* can be described as an application of Eliot's methods and insights to the history of English poetry." How far do you agree with this view?
6. "Leavis was primarily an iconoclast." Discuss.
7. Is Leavis a puritanical moral critic? Give reasons for your answer.

3.8 READING LIST

Part I

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Part II

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UNIT 4 JOHN CROWE RANSOM AND CLEANTH BROOKS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 John Crowe Ransom: Introduction
- 4.2 "Criticism Inc."
- 4.3 Other Essays by J.C.Ransom
- 4.4 The Achievement of J.C.Ransom
- 4.5 Cleanth Brooks: Introduction
- 4.6 "Irony as a Principle of Structure"
- 4.7 Other Essays by Cleanth Brooks
- 4.8 The Achievement of Cleanth Brooks
- 4.9 Glossary
- 4.10 Questions
- 4.11 Reading List

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall examine the contribution of John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks to literary criticism. We shall make a detailed study of one important essay by each of them. Though they had a lot in common, there is some difference in their critical approaches, as we shall see.

4.1 JOHN CROWE RANSOM: INTRODUCTION

John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974) was born in Pulaski, and received his bachelor's degree from Vanderbilt University in 1909. He was a Rhodes Scholar at Christ Church College, Oxford, and took a degree there in 1913. After service in the First World War he returned to Vanderbilt University, where he taught till 1937. He was a leading member of the group of writers known as the Southern Agrarians or Fugitives (after a poetry magazine *The Fugitive* co-founded by Ransom and Allen Tate). This group, which included Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, is identified with the rise of New Criticism in America. They shared religious, political and cultural convictions of a conservative character, with a special allegiance to the American South. Many leading poets of the period, such as Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren and Randall Jarrell considered him their mentor. He made his mark as a poet, though he was not very prolific. He shared T.S.Eliot's anti-romantic, neo-classical stance. Ransom's organic theory of poetry is well illustrated by his own practice as a poet.

As critic, poet, teacher and editor, Ransom was widely respected and influential. In 1937 he moved to Kenyon College, Ohio. He was the founder-editor of the *Kenyon Review*, one of the most successful literary quarterlies of the time, which played an important role in disseminating the ideas of the New Critics. His first important book, *The World's Body* (1938) saw poetry as taking on some of the tasks performed by religion in the previous ages. He believed that poetry embodied the world by summoning creation in all its variegated detail and natural organic form. *The New*