

***F.R.***

***LEAVIS***

***Michael***

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**F. R. LEAVIS**

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## Editor's Foreword

F. R. Leavis was undoubtedly the single most influential figure in twentieth-century English literary criticism. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that 'English' as a modern university subject was shaped very largely by Leavis's example, his writings and their influence on successive generations of teachers and students. As a young lecturer at Cambridge, Leavis set out to transform English Studies from a gentleman-amateur pursuit into a discipline of trained critical awareness and high moral vocation. From T. S. Eliot he took the idea of 'tradition' as a highly selective canon of texts whose qualities could only be perceived and preserved through the utmost efforts of applied critical intelligence. From I. A. Richards he derived certain crucial ideas about the nature and specific complexity of poetic language, though rejecting what he saw as the narrowly scientific basis of Richards's work. And one could instance William Empson's pioneering *Seven types of ambiguity* (1930) — published during Leavis's formative years — as having clearly left its mark on his close-reading approach to poetry and his sense of the new insights offered by meticulous verbal analysis. In short, one could claim that there was, after all, nothing very 'original' about Leavis, save only his extreme and single-minded belief in the absolute centrality of 'English' as a discipline of thought. But it can equally be argued that this was indeed the nature of Leavis's original contribution. Somehow his conviction moved out beyond its base in the Cambridge English Faculty to define what amounted to a whole new discourse on and around the henceforth controversial subject of English Studies.

Some measure of this singular pervasive presence may be taken from the efforts of recent commentators to diagnose the sources of Leavis's potent appeal by placing it in relation to a certain *ideology* of English cultural values.<sup>1</sup> Thus his work can be seen as a substitute for other kinds of thinking, themselves largely absent or underdeveloped in the mainstream of British intellectual life. In place of any Marxist or other form of socio-political critique, Leavis held out the idea of *English* — of a training for maturity in literary studies — as the one hope of renewal and growth in an otherwise irredeemable 'mass-civilisation'. This idea he inherited from thinkers like Coleridge and Matthew Arnold, proponents of a



cultural criticism that would save humankind from the disintegrating forces of modern secular society by conserving those imaginative values and energies that transcended mere instrumental reason. Hence Leavis's well-known aversion to 'theory', his quarrel with those (like René Wellek) who wanted him to be more explicit about the precepts and principles underlying his work.<sup>2</sup> 'Theory' for Leavis was the active antithesis of everything that good, responsible criticism ought to be. Theory was a matter of abstract ideas, of lifeless generalities which nowhere engaged with the vital, responsive, intuitive nature of authentic critical insight. Toward the end of his life Leavis found something of interest and value in the work of two philosophers (Michael Polanyi and Marjorie Grene) who had themselves raised questions about the limits of analysis or conceptual knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Particularly useful, Leavis thought, was Polanyi's notion of 'tacit understanding' as the largely inexplicit (and hence untheorisable) basis of all human knowledge. But his attitude remained pretty much unaltered, as witness the title of a posthumous volume of Leavis's essays: *The critic as anti-philosopher*.

Recent commentators have had a good deal to say about Leavis's antipathy to theory. Some — notably Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson<sup>4</sup> — have seen it as an ideological reflex, a rear-guard defence of humanistic values that claim to transcend all class affiliations but in fact belong firmly to a late, beleaguered phase of petty-bourgeois cultural politics. Leavis's refusal to theorise his position would then represent a retreat in the face of mounting historical pressures, a desire at all costs to save criticism from acknowledging its own political interests. This resistance to theory among British intellectuals goes back to the period of intense ideological debate sparked off by the French Revolution. From Burke and the later Coleridge to Arnold, Eliot and Leavis, it is a form of conservative reaction which attempts to drive a wedge between 'culture' and 'society' by treating the one as a separate sphere of absolute, timeless values and the other as witness of a secular decline which criticism can only deplore from its standpoint of elite minority culture. Of course not all these thinkers were 'against' theory in an absolute or general sense. Coleridge indeed did more than anyone to acquaint British readers with Kantian critical philosophy and its bearings on literary criticism. But in his later writings — disenchanted with events in the wake of the French Revolution — Coleridge falls back on a distinctly Burkean way of thinking about history, politics and culture. It is the good fortune

of the British not to be obsessed, like the French, with theoretical notions of justice, equality and truth. Theirs is the opposite way, a decent regard for inherited values and a sense of the social good as consisting in a long-term 'organic' community of spirit beyond mere conflicts of material class-interest. Hence the transition in Coleridge's thought from an organicist aesthetics, based on ideas of unity-in-multiplicity, to the view of social order as a mystical estate likewise transcending sectarian divisions. It is a stance taken up by Matthew Arnold in his plea that the 'philistine' Victorian middle classes should set themselves to read, think and feel more deeply and thus acquire the kind of *cultural* leadership — the hegemonic power — to overcome threatening social disorders by embodying a spirit of new-found national identity. By Eliot's time, in his *Notes towards the definition of culture*, this idea has reached the end of its historical tether and become a last-ditch obscurantist appeal to some divinely-sanctioned order of social inequality.<sup>5</sup>

Such — in grossly reductive form — is the genealogy often proposed for Leavis's quarrel with literary theory. As Nairn writes, in perhaps the most hostile assessment to date: 'lunatic empiricism is the perfect psychological and pedagogic match for romantic conservatism. It destroys the intellect, to render the thaumaturgic power of Literature even greater. By extirpating the slightest temptation to abstract thought, it guarantees the onward flow of Organic Community for another few years.'<sup>6</sup> Leavis's work can then be seen as one more example of that will to mystify the politics of criticism by fixing its sights on a long-lost age of 'organic' cultural values. Certainly this nostalgic desire is strong in Leavis's criticism, deriving as it does from Eliot's idea of a 'dissociation of sensibility' that overtook the English mind at around the time of the Civil War, and which henceforth left its debilitating mark on poetry and politics alike.<sup>7</sup> This potent mythology clearly determined the shape of Leavis's canonical 'tradition', as well as the distinctive emphases of his practical criticism. Thus the touchstone of sensuous 'enactment' in poetry — that language should communicate not only ideas but the experience of thinking concretely in visual, tactile, even 'muscular' images — goes along with Leavis's express conviction that the early seventeenth century (the age of Shakespeare and Donne) was the high point of English poetic tradition. As with Eliot, the effect is to focus attention on precisely the kind of poetry that best responds to such preconceived notions of aesthetic value.

So it is that Milton has to be 'dislodged' from his place in the

great tradition, apparently because (as Keats had once found) his latinate diction and high epic style were too remote from the native resources of English in its true 'exploratory-creative' character.<sup>8</sup> In fact Leavis's attitude to Milton (like Eliot's before him) was consistent with that same historical *parti pris* that locates the origin of all our modern woes in the Civil War period and the first articulations of opposed class-interest in the politics of popular revolt. When Leavis writes about Shelley there is a similar move to preclude any questions of political alignment by focusing on the poet's stylistic shortcomings, his failure to achieve the kind of sensuous enactment — the vividly realised images and metaphors — that characterise the poetry of Donne and his peers.<sup>9</sup> Thus Shelley's 'immaturity' can be seen on the one hand as a case of individual arrested development, and on the other as somehow symptomatic of poetry's plight in an era of advanced 'dissociation' between thought and sensibility. Here, as with Milton, there is not the least hint that this antipathy might have something to do with these poets' political interests, their belonging to a radical-republican line of descent utterly remote from Eliot's conservative or classicist tradition.

It is one great virtue of recent critical theory to have brought these ideological dimensions more clearly into view. Paul de Man has shrewdly analysed the ways in which a certain phenomenalist aesthetics — an habitual confusion of linguistic with natural or sensory experience — goes along with that deep-laid 'resistance to theory' which typifies conservative thinking about art and cultural politics.<sup>10</sup> De Man nowhere mentions Leavis but his arguments are fully borne out by the constant link between 'sensuous enactment' and that backward-looking vision of a lost 'organic' community which Leavis calls up to support his diagnosis of present-day cultural ills. His version of literary history — the 'line of wit' that runs from Donne to Marvell, then (with various qualifications) from Pope to Keats, Hopkins and Eliot — is so constructed as precisely to exclude those poets, like Milton and Shelley, who resist the values and presuppositions of this powerful aesthetic creed. Thus Keats (for instance) figures in the Leavisian canon as a signal exception to the general rule, a poet whose language transcends the conditions of 'dissociated sensibility' through his cleaving to the vivid particularities of sensuous experience. Hence the famous passage from *Revaluation*, analysing Keats's lines from the 'Ode To Autumn' ('And sometimes, like a gleaner, thou dost keep/Steady thy laden head across a brook') in terms of their

physically enacting the effort of muscular balance through the skilful use of enjambement.<sup>11</sup> Unlike Shelley, Keats holds out against the pressures of ideological seduction and the consequent drift toward an abstract imagery remote from living perception.

Leavis's persistent refusal to theorise can therefore be linked to the systematic pattern of inclusions and exclusions which make up his idea of English poetic tradition. It is a pattern that follows from two main imperatives: that history should be seen under the mythical aspect of long-term secular decline, and that poetry should answer to the aims and techniques of a criticism which passes directly from detailed verbal analysis to questions of moral valuation. Such was the purpose of some early essays in *Scrutiny*, setting out the terms for a practical criticism that would go beyond mere close reading to the stage of comparing texts (for instance, poems by Tennyson, Hardy and Lawrence) in point of their 'sincerity', 'maturity' and power to resist an otherwise facile sentimental appeal.<sup>12</sup> Here we can observe with some precision the movement of thought identified by de Man as the source of that 'aesthetic ideology' which conflates linguistic meaning with natural perception and so short-circuits the process of critical thought. 'The link between literature (as art), epistemology, and ethics is the burden of aesthetic theory at least since Kant. It is because we teach literature as an aesthetic function that we can move so easily from literature to its apparent prolongations in the spheres of self-knowledge, of religion, and of politics.'<sup>13</sup> The discourse of aesthetic value carries along with it a tendency to blur distinctions, to accept — as a matter of principled belief — that language can indeed hand across sensations bodily, or 'enact' those meanings that would otherwise belong to the realm of mere abstract representation. It involves, that is to say, a deep-seated resistance to any theory that threatens to block or to complicate the passage from phenomenal experience to linguistic sense.

De Man sees this doctrine as having taken hold through a failure to reckon with the problems encountered in the course of Kant's attempt to make good such claims. His own deconstructive reading of the *Critique of judgement* argues that language simply *won't do* what Kant (or, more properly, the subsequent misreaders of Kant) require of it; namely, achieve a kind of hypostatic union where concepts merge with sensuous intuitions and all ontological distinctions at last fall away. It is a main function of literary theory to 'raise the unavoidable question whether aesthetic values can be compatible with the linguistic structures that make up the entities

from which these values are derived'.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, 'the professing of literature ought to take place under the aegis of this question', since it has been widely and effectively concealed by doctrines that equate the very nature, specificity or value of 'literary' language with its power to communicate sensory perceptions as if by a species of phenomenal enactment. De Man finds this doctrine most typically embodied in the Formalist idea of aesthetic 'defamiliarisation'; the claim that poetry works to revitalise our jaded, routine, everyday habits of perception by forcing us — through metaphor and other such devices — to break with those habits and see things radically anew. This idea he regards as in many ways admirable, but as none the less premised on a simplified and overly dogmatic view of the relation between linguistic structures and aesthetic values. What literary theory brings out, according to de Man, is 'that their compatibility, or lack of it, has to remain an open question and that the manner in which the teaching of literature, since its beginning in the later nineteenth century, has foreclosed the question is unsound, even if motivated by the best intentions'.<sup>15</sup>

Leavis's doctrine of sensuous 'enactment' has much in common with the Formalist emphasis on language in its defamiliarising aspect. In both cases there is the firmly-held conviction that poetry gives access (a special kind of access) to realities otherwise obscured or unperceived through the veil of customary language-habit. In both, there is the further *ethical* claim that such stripping-away of routine perceptions is also, intrinsically, a measure of aesthetic worth and a source of those values attributed to literature by critics convinced of its high moral purpose. So the Formalist position joins up readily enough with Leavis's stress on 'maturity', 'life' and those other evaluative key-terms which enable criticism assuredly to distinguish the good from the bad, or poetry that truly manifests the 'exploratory-creative' use of language from that which merely evokes a false or sentimental response. For Leavis, the common pursuit of such judgements is the only proper business of criticism, and any theory that gets in the way of this pursuit is an idle distraction. Thus one finds him, in an otherwise admiring review of *Seven types of ambiguity*, wondering whether Empson's extraordinary powers of verbal analysis — his sheer ingenuity as a close reader — might not have adversely affected his critical judgement.<sup>16</sup> What Leavis uneasily responds to in Empson's writing is a variant of that same 'dissociation of sensibility' which he, like Eliot, finds everywhere at work in the history

of modern (post-enlightenment) thought. It is the way that Empson's readings — especially his pages on Shakespeare, Donne and other canonical poets — press far beyond any possible *correspondence* between linguistic structures, on the one hand, and sensuous intuitions on the other. For Leavis, such semantic agility always carries the threat that language may be seen to generate a signifying surplus irreducible to any kind of straightforward phenomenalist reckoning.

It is therefore no coincidence that his review of *Seven types* appeared shortly after a stocktaking article on Joyce's work-in-progress toward *Finnegans Wake*.<sup>17</sup> Here also, Leavis diagnosed the signs of a growing rift between mere semantic ingenuity and the proper, 'mature' or responsible use of the novelist's linguistic resources. The point could best be made, he argued, by contrasting Joyce's extravagant form of punning virtuosity — 'fit material for the knowing exegete' — with that other, creative-exploratory style of which Shakespeare was the obvious paradigm. By lending itself so readily to 'knowing' exegesis, to criticism of the kind exemplified by Empson's *Seven types*, this new text of Joyce served only to confirm what Leavis perceived as a deepening crisis in the relations of 'thought' and 'sensibility'. At this point, again, we might turn to de Man for a better understanding of Leavis's negative and markedly defensive response. What distinguishes *true* close reading, de Man argues, is its power to unsettle those deep-laid aesthetic and ethical assumptions which have so far governed just about every modern school of critical thought. 'Mere reading, it turns out, prior to any theory, is able to transform critical discourse in a manner that would appear deeply subversive to those who think of the teaching of literature as a substitute for the teaching of theology, ethics, psychology, or intellectual history.' And again: 'close reading accomplishes this in spite of itself because it cannot fail to respond to structures of language which it is the more or less secret aim of literary teaching to keep hidden'.<sup>18</sup> For it is the presence of these aberrant signifying structures — brought to light with such disturbing frequency in the work of a critic like Empson — which threatens to undo the assured correspondence between language and sensuous intuition.

Of course it may be answered that Leavis never thought of criticism or the teaching of literature as a 'substitute' for anything else; that indeed he went further than Arnold, Eliot or any previous critic in his sense of its absolute value and centrality as a humanising discipline of thought. But this would be to miss the

point of de Man's argument. What is at stake in Leavis's pedagogic enterprise is precisely that potent 'aesthetic ideology', that desire to elide differences and pass directly from sensuous cognitions to judgements of value, which marks the widespread resistance to theory in modern literary studies. It goes along with a mythic organicist view of cultural history and a programme of 'practical criticism' which in fact, by its strongly empiricist or phenomenalist cast, works to exclude those kinds of rigorous close-reading that would call its most basic values into question. Hence de Man's claim, in one of his posthumously published essays, that 'those who reproach literary theory for being oblivious to social and historical (that is to say, ideological) reality are merely stating their fear at having their own ideological mystifications exposed by the tool they are trying to discredit. They are, in short, very poor readers of Marx's *German Ideology*'.<sup>19</sup>

One effect of such demystifying arguments is to show up the partisan or value-laden character of Leavis's 'tradition', the ways in which it operates to marginalise those poets (like Milton and Shelley) who don't fit in with the dominant (post-Eliot) consensus view. Thus one finds a strong counter-tradition already taking shape, a line that runs roughly from Spenser, through Milton to the Romantics (especially Shelley), and thence to Wallace Stevens and the American heirs of a modernism distinctly unindebted to Eliot's example.<sup>20</sup> Its co-ordinates are fixed at a maximum remove from that version of literary history whose outline was sketched programmatically by Eliot and developed in detail by Leavis. And this follows very largely from the new understanding of Romanticism to be found in critics like de Man, Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom; an understanding whose source is the increased attentiveness to issues of language and representation brought about by recent post-structuralist theory. Its effects are most evident in Shelley's case, where the old standard charges — of poetic immaturity, blurred or unfocused imagery, metaphorical self-indulgence and so forth — have now given way to detailed explorations of the way his poetry persistently confronts the aporias of language, memory and representation.<sup>21</sup> And this in turn forms part of a wider revaluative project, one that implicitly questions every aspect of the Eliot-Leavis canonical view.

Michael Bell's study is far from underwriting this general diagnosis of the Leavis 'case'. It is argued from a standpoint of broad agreement and sympathy with Leavis's aims, though not without certain clearly-stated reservations, some of them bearing on points

raised here. Most importantly, Bell is willing to press questions — 'theoretical', even 'philosophical' questions — that Leavis would have thought quite irrelevant to the purposes of authentic literary criticism. Particularly striking is Bell's extended comparison with Heidegger's late texts on language, poetry and the limits of analytic reason, a comparison which goes some way toward explaining Leavis's own, more dogmatic resistance to theory. Again, Bell strongly contests the idea that Leavis should be seen as a last-ditch bourgeois ideologue, using his mystified conceptions of language, creativity and 'organic' values merely to fend off the perceived threat of an opposing (historical-materialist) analysis. Such arguments, according to Bell, merely confirm what Leavis had to say about the worsening state of present-day intellectual culture. 'One may, of course, dissent from Leavis's view of language, or even find it beneath discussion, but it is the ground of his practice and Anderson's ignoring of it is symptomatic and characteristic.' The same would no doubt apply to much of what I have written in this Foreword. Yet when he touches (for instance) on Leavis's attitude to Milton — on its background of cultural presuppositions and the various counter-arguments advanced by dissenting commentators — Bell goes far toward providing an alternative, more subtly nuanced critique.

So far there has been an almost complete lack of dialogue between those who have lined up squarely behind Leavis, endorsing his attitudes as a matter of faith, and those (like Anderson and Nairn) who have taken a sharply diagnostic view. And this antagonism has found an institutional echo in those numerous university Departments of English where 'theory' is grudgingly admitted to the syllabus as a thing quite apart from 'practical criticism' or the interests of better, more intelligent reading. Bell's study leaves no doubt of Leavis's role in maintaining and promoting this widespread attitude. But it should also do much to persuade the unprejudiced reader that the only way beyond this divisive situation is a genuine effort to comprehend the sources of Leavis's potent and continuing influence.

*Christopher Norris*



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