RE-READING LEAVIS

Also by Gary Day

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Re-Reading Leavis

Culture and Literary Criticism

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List of Abbreviations

<i>AB</i>	– Adam Bede
<i>AK</i>	– Anna Karenina: Thought and Significance in a Great Creative Work
<i>BTME</i>	– Bunyan Through Modern Eyes
<i>C & P</i>	– Literary Criticism and Philosophy
<i>CE</i>	– Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness
<i>E U & C</i>	– English, 'Unrest' and Continuity
<i>EWL & L</i>	– Mr. Eliot, Mr. Wyndham Lewis and Lawrence
<i>HJ & TFOC</i>	– Henry James and the Function of Criticism
<i>HTTR</i>	– How To Teach Reading: A Primer For Ezra Pound
<i>J & A</i>	– Judgement and Analysis
<i>J & TRW</i>	– Joyce and the 'Revolution of the Word'
<i>JA</i>	– Johnson and Augustanism
<i>JAP</i>	– Johnson as Poet
<i>JOVB</i>	– Justifying One's Valuation of Blake
<i>KS & CV</i>	– Keynes, Spender and Currency Values
<i>L & S</i>	– Literature and Society
<i>LD</i>	– The literary discipline and liberal education.
<i>LS</i>	– Literary Studies: a reply
<i>MB & C</i>	– Mill on Bentham and Coleridge
<i>MCC</i>	– Marxism and Cultural Continuity
<i>MC & MC</i>	– Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture.
<i>MN</i>	– Mutually Necessary
<i>MOW</i>	– Memories of Wittgenstein
<i>NB</i>	– New Bearings in English Poetry
<i>PC & SH</i>	– Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope
<i>PP</i>	– The Pilgrim's Progress
<i>R</i>	– Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry
<i>RFC</i>	– Restatement for Critics
<i>RC</i>	– The Responsible Critic: or the function of criticism at any time
<i>ROP</i>	– Reading Out Poetry
<i>S & L</i>	– Sociology and Literature
<i>SC</i>	– Standards of Criticism

- TL & O* – Thought, Language and Objectivity
- TC* – Two Cultures? The Significance of Lord Snow
- TIOC* – Luddites? or There is Only One Culture
- TL & O* – The Living Principle: English as a Discipline of Thought
- T & M* – Tragedy and the Medium
- TMA* – The Marxian Analysis: A Review of The Mind in Chains
- TM & S* – Thought, Meaning and Sensibility: the problem of value judgement
- TP & TP* – The Present and the Past: Eliot's Demonstration
- T.S.E. & EL* – T.S. Eliot and English Literature
- TSOC* – Towards Standards of Criticism
- TW & C* – Thought, Words and Creativity: Art and Thought in Lawrence
- UWKB* – Under Which King Bezonian
- VC* – Valuation in Criticism
- WWWC* – What's Wrong With Criticism

Introduction

In 1992 F.R. Leavis was the second most popular critic on English literature courses in polytechnics and colleges. The first was Roland Barthes and the third was Terry Eagleton.¹ In 1995, Ian MacKillop's biography of Leavis² appeared attracting widespread if not exactly sympathetic reviews. Taken together these two incidents suggest that Leavis continues to exert an appeal or to arouse hostility.

But who is this Leavis who can have such an effect? Although there are many critics who have argued against his particular judgements and although some have challenged one or other of his general assumptions or procedures there is no one, according to Francis Mulhern, who has 'produced anything even resembling an integrated account and assessment of his aesthetic and critical position'.³ This is a more sober version of Garry Watson's view that Leavis's work has been systematically distorted and ridiculed with critics ignoring what he does say in favour of what they believe he says – or even want him to say.⁴ It is this absence of a comprehensive account of his criticism that has given rise to a myth of Leavis⁵ which is the source of the strong reactions that his name can still provoke, nearly 20 years after his death.⁶

And yet there is no shortage of criticism of Leavis's work, even though there may not exist that overarching study that Mulhern believes is necessary. There are books which combine biography with exposition such as Ronald Hayman's *Leavis*⁷ and William Walsh's *F.R. Leavis*.⁸ Then there are books which focus on the criticism alone such as R.P. Bilan's *The Literary Criticism of F.R. Leavis*⁹ and Robert Boyer's *F.R. Leavis: Judgement and the Discipline of Thought*.¹⁰ Philosophical approaches include John Casey's *The Language of Criticism*¹¹ and Michael Tanner's essays on the relationship between literature and philosophy.¹² There are books such as Fred Inglis's *Radical Earnestness: English Social Theory 1880–1980*¹³ and Lesley Johnson's *The Cultural Critics: From Matthew Arnold to Raymond Williams*¹⁴ which place Leavis in the tradition of English social commentary. Elizabeth and Tom Burns assay a sociological analysis in *The Sociology of Literature and Drama*¹⁵ while accounts of Leavis's role in the development of English can be found in Chris Baldick's *The Social Mission of English Criticism*

1848–1932¹⁶ and Bernard Bergonzi's *Exploding English: Criticism, Theory, Culture*.¹⁷

In fact there is a wealth of books, chapters in books and articles in journals covering this or that aspect of Leavis's criticism.¹⁸ The amount of material, however, is not matched by its diversity. There is a broad acceptance that Leavis viewed literature in moral rather than formal terms and critics either applaud or deplore this approach depending on their point of view. Rightly or wrongly, Leavis seems to be the sort of writer who either inspires discipleship or excites enmity, neither of which is particularly conducive to insightful comment.

Two studies which I have found particularly impressive are Francis Mulhern's *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'* and Michael Bell's *F.R. Leavis*.¹⁹ The former offers a detailed account of the development of Leavis's thought as it appeared in *Scrutiny*, the magazine he edited with his wife, Q.D. Leavis, for nearly 20 years, and anyone who writes on Leavis is greatly indebted to this fine work. The same is true of Bell's book. This has a narrower focus, comparing Leavis's understanding of language's relation to 'life' with Heidegger's understanding of language's relation to 'Being', but it is a salutary reminder that Leavis is a more complex thinker than is sometimes supposed.

Perhaps the most salient fact about criticism of Leavis is that there has been no sustained post-structuralist account of his work. I am using the term post-structuralism to refer first to Saussure's claim that, in the words of Catherine Belsey, 'language is not ... a way of naming things which already exist, but a system of differences with no positive terms'.²⁰ Language, the argument goes, 'precedes the existence of independent entities, making the world intelligible by differentiating between concepts'.²¹ In short, language creates the meanings which order our perceptions and organise our ideas about the world. The second sense in which I use the term post-structuralism is to refer to the writings of Derrida, Foucault and Lacan. These thinkers have radically changed the study of literature in this country and it is surprising that post-structuralism, which established itself in opposition to Leavisian criticism,²² should have done so without a thorough deconstruction of his work. True, there have been local engagements such as Catherine Belsey's critique of Leavis's reading of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*²³ and Christopher Norris's engagement with Leavis's essay on *Othello*²⁴ but, to my knowledge, there has been no comprehensive post-structuralist engagement with Leavis.

There are two possible reasons for this. The first is that one of the effects of post-structuralism has been to dislodge literature from its special place in the academy. Literary language is no longer regarded as a unique or privileged form of writing but as something which has been invested with those qualities so as to better reproduce the existing power relations of society. Once literature is seen in terms of its ideological effects it loses its aura and can be analysed in the same way as other discourses. In Antony Easthope's view, there is nothing to distinguish 'literary' texts from those of popular culture. They are both forms of textuality which must be discussed in terms of '[i]nstitution, sign system, gender, identification, ... subject position [and] the other'.²⁵ The dissolution of the category of literature eliminated the problem of valuation which was Leavis's special concern and so there was no need to engage with him. Arguably, however, it was this very indifference to valuation that has led to its re-emergence as an issue today.

The second reason why there has been no post-structuralist reading of Leavis is a subliminal awareness that there are similarities as well as differences between the two positions, and to confront these would undermine post-structuralism's claim to be a radical departure from the kind of thought associated with Leavisian literary criticism. To put it simply, Leavis shares with post-structuralism the ideas that works are not explicable in terms of their author's intentions; that the meaning of works is not fixed but changes over time and, perhaps most importantly, that reality is an effect of language.²⁶

Catherine Belsey in characterising Leavis as an 'expressive realist', that is, someone who believes art is a reflection of life and an expression of the author's experience, glosses over the complexity of Leavis's position and how it mirrors, in part at least, her own.²⁷ It is necessary to be careful here. The claim is not that Leavis is a post-structuralist or that post-structuralists are Leavisites in disguise. The similarities I have mentioned conceal significant differences of understanding and emphasis. For example, although Leavis believes that reality is an effect of language his conception of both these terms is not at all the same as what a post-structuralist's might be.²⁸

Nevertheless there are affinities between Leavisian and post-structuralist criticism and this makes it inappropriate to see them purely in terms of opposition. Post-structuralism's failure to acknowledge these similarities has not only driven the ideas of value and evaluation 'into the critical unconscious where they continue to exercise force but without being available for analytic scrutiny'²⁹, it

also represents a lost opportunity to build on what might be useful in Leavis for its own project.

Accordingly, one of my aims is to draw attention to the parallels between aspects of Leavis's work and of post-structuralism as represented in the writings of Derrida and Lacan but particularly the latter. In doing so I hope to show that Leavis's texts are more plural than has hitherto been recognised and that they are therefore available for more progressive readings than they have been given in the past. At the same time, I try to use Leavis as a corrective to what I consider to be the limitations of post-structuralism, for example its anti-humanism, and, to this end, I draw on Adorno, whose ideas about the relation of art and society can be shown to resemble Leavis's own. Further, just as there are post-structuralist elements in Leavis's thought, so there are in Adorno's³⁰, and both writers are also moved by a concern for human significance. Adorno, however, is by far the more subtle thinker and this, together with his greater sociological awareness, means that he can be used to focus and develop some of the insights that Leavis struggles to express.

In addition to reading Leavis through post-structuralism and post-structuralism through Leavis and Adorno, I also aim to outline some of the connections between Leavisian criticism, scientific management and mass consumerism, all of which began to take shape in 1930s Britain.³¹ These connections occur at the levels of structure, logic, rhetoric and vocabulary. The image of the body is also common to all three and it is suffused with an anxiety for what can only loosely be described as 'something more', a phrase whose multiple meanings will become clearer as the argument develops. At its simplest it refers, in scientific management, to increased productivity; in consumerism it denotes the 'something more' of advertising – 'bread is not just bread'³² and, in Leavisian criticism, it refers to a whole cluster of problems ranging from the need to supplement definitions to the nature of literary value. These different aspects of 'something more' are negotiated in each discourse through an image of the body. An image, moreover, which was by no means stable for the body was being reimagined in 1930s Britain as society moved from one which understood itself as based on production to one which understood itself as based on consumption.

In Leavis, the problem of 'something more' is initially understood in terms of an increased amount of reading material and its 'heterogeneity'.³³ This perception of 'more', of a sense of accumulation and profusion cannot be divorced from mass consumerism's

celebration of the fact 'that there is too much'.³⁴ For both Leavisian criticism and consumer society the problem is how to organise this abundance. Leavis develops a 'technique' (*HTTR*, p. 40) of reading that limits it whereas consumer society emphasises it through the 'stack' and the 'display'.³⁵

The kind of language that Leavis uses to describe his technique of reading is consistent with that of scientific management. He speaks of the need to 'improve[] one's apparatus, one's equipment, one's efficiency as a reader'.³⁶ Similarly his belief in the efficacy of a *method* of reading set out, for example, in *How To Teach Reading: A Primer for Ezra Pound* reflects the importance attached to 'method' and technique by scientific management as opposed to 'rule of thumb'.³⁷

The aim of scientific management was to increase profits and productivity by eliminating waste and inefficiency.³⁸ Similarly Leavis aimed to develop a technique that would cut down on the amount the student had to read – so much '*profitless* memorizing' (*HTTR*, p. 26, italics added) – in order that he or she would be better 'equipped to *profit*' (p. 42, italics added) from literature. Leavis proposed a 'scheme of work' (p. 38), essentially a concentrated reading of representative works from 'the tradition', that would develop and refine students' critical faculties (pp. 25–49).

It is worth noting, in passing, that Leavis's phrase, 'scheme of work' is now part of the language of the National Curriculum which, with its 'aims and objectives', 'attainment targets' and 'criteria of assessment' represents an approach to literature that he would have found deplorable. And yet he can be regarded as in some sense responsible for initiating a train of thought that has culminated in the bureaucratisation and codification of learning. Leavis may have associated literature with 'life', with what cannot be measured or precisely defined but his logic belongs to that of scientific management which disregards human significance in the interests of what can be quantified.

The aim of reading, then, is to 'save the student from ... laborious dissipation' and to enable him or her 'to organise, extend and consolidate [their reading]' (*HTTR*, pp. 7–8). But, according to Leavis, reading should also aim at 'something more' (p. 4). The technique of reading should thus aim to generate a double surplus, one of which, expressed through the metaphor of 'profit', throws his whole concept of valuation into crisis while the other, 'something more' is vague because of its multiple meanings. And this semantic plurality is itself

an instance of that 'tropical profusion of topics and vocabularies' (WWWC, p. 88), that 'concourse of signals so bewildering in their variety and number'³⁹ which called Leavisian criticism into being in the first place. Conceived as an exercise in limitation, Leavisian criticism enacts the overproduction it seeks to restrict, and this constitutes one of its main tensions.

Leavis also develops his technique of reading in response to 'the thought-frustrating spell of "Form", "pure sound value"'⁴⁰ which is most evident in poetry that is incantatory. This poetry of 'enchantment'⁴¹ of 'insidious ... spell[s]' (NB, p. 45) so lulls the reader through its soft sounds and soothing rhythms that his or her 'resistance' is 'weaken[ed]'⁴² to the point that he or she 'surrender[s] at last' (R, p. 43). The language of seduction is unmistakable here. A certain type of poetry works on the body rather than the mind, thereby coinciding with the discourses of consumer culture which proclaim the body as 'a vehicle of pleasure'⁴³ and which are 'centred around the hedonistic lifestyle'.⁴⁴ This orientation of consumer culture is at the expense of consciousness understood as a self-reflective process, as something which transcends the body. In consumer society the body not the mind, the outer not the inner, is seen as the true location of identity.⁴⁵

The poetry of 'enchantment' and the character of consumer culture bring about a separation between consciousness and the body. In Leavis, this is felt as a loss of control; the senses are delighted by a poetry which bewitches the mind, thus overturning the traditional hierarchy in which the body is secondary. This experience mirrors the loss of 'distinction and dividing lines' (MC & MC, p. 31) which Leavis views as the essential factor of modernity.

But, in trying to restore the supremacy of consciousness by forging a technique of reading that ensures 'the closest and fullest working attention, the most acutely perceptive, the most delicately discriminating responsiveness'⁴⁶ Leavis is in danger of exiling the notion of pleasure from his literary criticism. And this point is given greater emphasis when it is realised that the sort of heightened consciousness which is required for reading – close and full attention and acute perceptiveness – approximates to that state of watchfulness which is characteristic of the super ego from whom 'nothing can be hidden'.⁴⁷

Although Leavis endeavours to promote consciousness over the body and to develop a technique of reading that will guard it against the siren calls of the poetry of 'enchantment' he does not quite succeed

in his task. Time and again in his criticism the body returns to disrupt the operations of consciousness and, in fact, it is the relation between consciousness and the body which forms the second main tension of his criticism, the first being that between limitation and 'something more'.

These form the main focus of my argument and they are examined in detail in the following chapters. What I hope to achieve is a change in the way Leavis is perceived. To this end I have concentrated on texts which have either not been discussed for some time or else which have appeared in the two posthumous collections edited by G. Singh, *The Critic As Anti-Philosopher* and *Valuation in Criticism and Other Essays*.⁴⁸ Second, I have approached Leavis from a broadly post-structuralist perspective which is, in any case, inevitable since, in one form or another, this constitutes the dominant paradigm of literary studies at present. And third, I have tried to situate Leavis more firmly in his social and historical context than I believe has hitherto been attempted.

The first section offers a detailed reading of 'Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture' focusing particularly on the logic and metaphors of the text. The second section concentrates on *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness*.⁴⁹ This offers a reappraisal of the organic community and analyses what Leavis means by reading. The third section examines Leavis's relation to Marxism and considers his understanding of the relationship between literature and society as represented, for example, in his dispute with F.W. Bateson.⁵⁰ The final section investigates Leavis's concept of the 'third realm' from a number of points of view and also draws together some of the ways that Leavisian criticism is implicated in production and consumption.

Approaching my chosen texts in the way I have indicated will, I hope, not only challenge traditional accounts of them but will also show that Leavis still has a contribution to make to literary and cultural studies.

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