

Critic as the *Messiah*: A Survey of F.R. Leavis's Work

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Abstract

In the arena of the distinctive brand of cultural studies of the traditional 'culture and civilization tradition' as seen as the direct legacy of S.T. Coleridge and Matthew Arnold, F.R. Leavis occupies a very significant and dominant place. He is recognized by many as the direct link between Arnold and the champions of cultural criticism as advocated by Frank Kermode, Terry Eagleton and Harold Bloom and the fore runners of what is generally called as the American ethical turn of cultural criticism represented by Wayne Booth, Samuel Goldberg, Martha Nussbaum and many others. F.R. Leavis's contribution to literary criticism is multifold. From the idea of a minority elite to the theory of an organic community to his ideas about creative uses of language down to his moral formalism, he refuses any clear cut definition and compartmentalization. The present paper therefore has taken up one dimension of Leavis's literary personality, that is, how Leavis goes about defining the literary critic of his time and how he presents him as the ultimate savior or leader of his people steeped otherwise in cultural disintegration and disharmony.

Keywords: F.R. Leavis, Culture, Criticism, Critic, modern era, moral crises, minority elite.

Frank Raymond Leavis clearly belongs to the tradition and legacy of cultural critics who aim ultimately at reforming and refining the moral, ethical and intellectual thread composing of a society. He could be clearly traced to his predecessors like Dr. Johnson, S.T. Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and of course the colossal figure of T.S. Eliot and down to the heirs of the legacy he left behind in the literary figures like Harold Bloom, Frank Kermode, Lionel Trilling, Wayne Booth, Martha Nussbaum and the likes. However, what distinguishes Leavis from his predecessors is the purely secular interest he exhibited in literary texts and literary criticism. For instance, Corder opines: "Leavis seemed to think that literature embodies a kind of moral thinking which could never have been embodied in any religious framework, and which is crucially important just because it escapes both codification and institutionalization." (80)

Moreover, he never sought an exclusively didactic function for literature, instead he recommended a creative use of language in the creation of value. Nevertheless, he was able to make lasting contributions to the study of English literary criticism and thought and is adjudged by many as the most influential British critic of the twentieth century.

Leavis has been uncontestedly applauded as a critic foregrounding the significance of moral literary criticism. His works enjoy the distinction of literary and moral touchstones for students and scholars of literary criticism and theory to look upon. In many respects, Leavis comes across as a dogmatist who subscribes to the old school of morals and ethics prevalent in closed societies and his work derives sustenance from the same moral commitment. Therefore, his work exhibits deep concern in social, cultural, moral matters.

He was strongly committed to the conviction that literature is an important moral and social force and eloquently argued that study of literature must necessarily be viewed as an indispensable pursuit. In accordance with this belief, Leavis remained preoccupied in most of his work with the discipline and method involved in the study of literature. He stressed on ‘the words on the page’, that is, a close critical analysis of the text in order to reach the critical intelligence embedded in the text. Leavis’s advocacy of analytical and close reading of the text combined with a solid commitment to the value and importance of what the text has to say about life established him as the dominant voice of the British criticism in particular and gave a proper direction to the general approach to English literature in many universities until the 1970’s.

In his insistence on close reading of the text, I.A. Richards’s influence could be clearly traced. For instance, from him, Leavis derived the idea of literature as a repository of morals and values of the English culture but rejected the Benthamite utilitarian view of literature which constitutes the core of Richard’s theories. For Leavis instead, Bentham represented the scientific drift of culture and social fabric which he considered absolutely harmful to a holistic humane spirit, his most central and life-long concern. His was a moral formalism that constituted a close reading of the text to reach the moral force embedded in it and to grasp its ‘life’ experience. Leavis practiced what he taught. Therefore, looking at Leavis’s analysis of literature, one comes across numerous instances where his analysis of a particular work or writer is interrupted by a commentary on the cultural force behind the work. The inference that one draws is that for him, literature is a part of culture and culture an organic component of literature. Reading literature is, therefore, a means to understand the society as a whole.

Additionally, the literary critic and the literary artist remained his life-long fascination and matter of interest. In fact, his literary output in the form of his essays, lectures, editorials, letters and books could be easily distinguished on the basis of the primary target of focus which could either be a critic or an artist. For example, works like *New Bearings in English Poetry*, *The Great*

Tradition and D.H. Lawrence: Novelist talk about the responsibilities and characteristics of the 'desirable' literary artists as perceived by Leavis and other books like *Valuation in Criticism*, *The Common Pursuit*, essays published in the *Scrutiny* and many others discuss the responsibilities and commitments of the literary critic. Leavis championed for the writer having "an intense moral interest of her own in life that is in the first place preoccupation with certain problems that life compels on her as personal ones." (Leavis, *The Great Tradition* 16) What is however most interesting about Leavis is the fact that in his personal and professional life as a teacher mentoring many generations of students also, he taught the principles of literary criticism with the same devotion and conviction with which he wrote. He enabled his disciples to identify and formulate their own critical thinking. Some of his students were able to produce volumes of valuable critical work and cultural commentary of enormous significance. For instance, *Pelican Guide to English Literature* in eight volumes was edited by Boris Ford, a well-known Leavisite.

Leavis held a very high moral and intellectual ground for literature and literary criticism. He denied an exclusive emotional standing to literature and believed that literature operates in a definitive social space with social footprints and cultural consequences responsible for maintaining certain cultural standards. In one of his books published posthumously, *The Living Principle*, he argued that the study of English literature is a discipline of rigorous intellectual thought and not merely an exercise of emotions, feelings and melodrama. Leavis here suggests echoes from Samuel Johnson who wrote in "The Rambler, No. 4" that "books are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduce, and introductions into life" (Johnson 16) clearly implying the significance of the artists having an elevated moral stature for the general good of the society that is otherwise highly impressionable.

Leavis is credited with infusing more social relevance and meaning into English syllabus by turning it away from mere aestheticism and belletrism. He approaches literature taking into consideration how it shapes up within the prevalent cultural and educational conditions. He classified literature as a powerful social and moral force and study of literature as the most vital pursuit. Literature, he believed, represents life as mirrored through the moral position of the artist to be finally assessed by the high moral standards of the critic. Therefore, while granting English literary studies the status of a distinct discipline, he placed it at the center of the intellectual and cultural life of a civilized society. He also envisioned evaluation of the text as its primary and principal function.

In the over-all business of literary studies, Leavis ascribed to the literary critic the status not less than of a *messiah*, one who is continuously preoccupied with the civilizing mission of humanizing the people of the modern times and act as the fountainhead of values he derives from the literary texts alone. For this, the critic undertakes the business of close analytical scrutiny of

the literary text having an intrinsic literary merit, disregarding its context. Leavis goes as far as actually counting on finger tips the works and artists that he thinks qualify as great.

Leavis's writing comes across as a reaction as well as a remedy to the social situation he was faced with. While positioning English civilization on a cultural trough, he draws from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* a faithful representation and evidence of the cultural disintegration. Concerns such as these are clearly reflected in the general sense of crises that pervades Leavis's work—crises resulting from the turn of British society from a hierarchical to the one based on the standards promoted by mass-culture. By cultural disintegration, Leavis also meant an inability to reach at a common understanding of literature. Citing the example of press, films and the subsequent machine-driven mass production, he opines that there is a grave need of 'levelling down.'

Leavis's primary motive was to set right the standards gone otherwise astray in the English culture of which he comes across as a prophet like Carlyle and Arnold. For this, Leavis put forth his idea of minority elite or minority culture closely connected with the idea of a literary critic as seen by him.

In his formulation and conceptualization of a literary critic or the cultural minority, Leavis was strongly influenced by T.S. Eliot. For example, he derives the title of his most important work, *The Common Pursuit*, dealing with the ideas of minority culture and tradition from T.S. Eliot's *The Function of Criticism*. The title itself is evocative of Leavis's attempt at generating a common and unidirectional interest and mode of scrutiny of literary texts so as to achieve the goal of founding a constructive and healthy tradition and culture. Putting the idea of collaboration at the centre of critical process, common pursuit is a critic's pursuit of true judgement, that is unambiguous and clear pronouncements about what is good and morally enriching and meritorious, and equally transparent disapproval of what is frivolous.

The special office of the literary critic, he saw, in educating the society about its living tradition so as to reclaim the organic community and its standards that existed before. In this frame of reference, Leavis's approval of writers representing the morality peculiarly prevalent in rural pre-industrial England appears natural. A critic should then take up the role of the representative of an enlightened minority in order to become the "steward of the living tradition of English literature, and by extension, English culture." (Chambers 40).

The idea of a minority culture or a minority elite is seminal to F. R. Leavis, the most powerful account of which we receive in "Mass Civilization and Minority Culture" and also in *Culture and Environment*, that he co-authored with Denys Thompson in 1933. In order to safeguard the cultural progression of both English literature and society as a whole, he calls for a

highly trained intellectual elite. He goes on to explain the tragedy of the modern man or the modern reader who is “exposed to a concourse of signals so bewildering in their variety and number that, unless he is especially gifted ... he can hardly begin to discriminate.” (Leavis, *For Continuity* 31) In the same work, Leavis blames new media like film and advertising and also industrialization and the resulting mass culture for sabotaging the minority values represented and promoted by the custodians of culture. In fact, he wrote his doctoral thesis on *The Relationship of Journalism to Literature*, an analysis of how the spirit of a periodical can mirror and at the same time shape culture.

An ordinary reader in such a situation finds himself bewildered in the confusing flow of knowledge and information. He is not able to make sense of even poetry based on simple sensibility. In the absence of tradition and a feasible social environment, a reader faces what Leavis calls a “perpetual avalanche of print.” (*New Bearings* 157)

Leavis, in the same vein goes on to classify the critic as the elite amongst the reading public who “would be the representative of the highest level of such a public” (for continuity 191), and also “a very small minority, capable of fending for themselves amid the smother of new books.” (32) This minority for him, is a specially gifted section of the society. “By the critic of poetry,” Leavis states, “I understand the complete reader: the ideal critic is the ideal reader” (*The Common Pursuit* 212)

Readers of this quality determine the worth of a text since they are the only ones who possess the knowledge of values and standards that direct the “finer living of an age” (Leavis, *For Continuity* 15) They identify the centre, set the limits and guard the boundaries. They sift great works from the dross in the face of an overwhelming mass production to make prevail the tradition or ‘canon’ that both Eliot and Arnold championed. So a critic discovers the significance of a particular work and then assists in shaping the most relevant and appropriate response. “In dealing with individual poets the critic, whether explicitly or not, is dealing with tradition, for they live in it. And it is in them that tradition lives.” (Leavis, *Revaluation* 10)

Moreover, they constitute the consciousness of the race and preserve standards and tradition in their most perceptive form so that when faced with the crises in tradition, the critic made available “an eligible past that could guide poetic practice in a de-traditionalized society”. (Mulhern 117) Leavis is so sure of this minority that he devotes pages upon pages to define them and their contribution to literary criticism. In “Mass Civilization and Minority Culture” he states: “In any period, it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends: it is (apart from cases of the simple and familiar) only a few who are capable of unprompted, first-hand judgment. They are still a small minority, though a larger one, who are capable of endorsing such first-hand judgment by genuine personal response.” (*For Continuity* 13-14)

Further, this elite minority which constitutes the consciousness of a race at a given time, is also capable of identifying its successors, those who would carry forward the standards imbibed in the great tradition by becoming simultaneously a part of it. In addition to defining the contemporary sensibility, they contribute to formulate it by identifying the significance and relevance of select texts for readers to identify themselves with. Leavis attempts to bring the reader close to the text through the critic by consensus building, sometimes seemingly coercive, that is, “you see what I see, as you understand what I understand” (Chambers 35). This whole process of consensus building is directed to the end of ensuring a unitary and wholesome culture.

Considering himself one among the minority, he advanced the critical tradition that he vehemently articulated in his books, teaching, lectures, usually controversial in nature and most importantly in the Cambridge-based journal, *Scrutiny*, that he co-founded with L.C. Knights in 1932 and to which he remained the major contributor and editor to the last issue. The other major contributors included, Q.D. Leavis, Marius Bewey, William Empson, L.C. Knights, Michael Oakeshott, Herbert Read, I.A. Richards, George Santayana, Derek Traversi and Martin Turnell in addition to the competent editorial staff.

He started *Scrutiny*, fundamentally, as the title literally tells to scrutinize the works of writers in order to tell the difference between the ones who form the tradition and imbibe the standard values thereof and those who are barely readable for the perusal of the reading public. A critic then would educate the people while shaping the general intellectual and cultural temperament of an age by engaging in decisive and insightful literary evaluation. In other words, like a proper *messiah*, a critic would lead its people by acting as their saviour.

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