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PART ONE: SOCIETY, CULTURE AND CRITICISM

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INTRODUCTION

> Literary criticism, then, is concerned with more than literature...A serious interest in literature cannot be merely literary; indeed, not only must the seriousness involve, it is likely to derive from, a perception of – which must be a preoccupation with – the problems of social equity and order and of cultural health.[1]

The nature of the literary criticism of F. R. Leavis cannot be properly understood apart from his social and cultural concerns; as he indicates above, behind all his work lies the preoccupation with the cultural health of society. His basic assumption is that modern civilization is diseased, and his primary concern is to foster the growth of the activities that will alleviate and remedy this condition.

Perhaps more cogently than any other critic in the twentieth century, Leavis has continually argued the case for the importance of literature and of literary criticism in modern society, but the importance he attributes to them must be seen in the context of his other concerns. The various answers that Leavis gives to the contemporary plight are clearly indicated by the titles of some of his early works: *Mass Civilization And Minority Culture* (1930), *Culture And Environment* (1933), *For Continuity* (1933), *How to Teach Reading* (1932), *Towards Standards of Criticism* (1933), and *Education And The University* (1943). In the face of the modern disintegration Leavis argues for the necessity of maintaining the continuity of the English cultural tradition, now largely represented by English literature, and the finer values that it embodies. But this continuity can only be maintained by the existence of a strong minority or educated

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public, which in turn makes possible the function of criticism and the maintenance of standards. Leavis looks to education, in particular to the university, to help create the necessary educated public and to sustain the effective life of the cultural tradition. Only by these means, he thinks, can we begin to strive towards cultural health.

The cultural diagnosis and the cure Leavis offers remained consistent over a period of more than forty years. There is not only consistency but also a certain symmetry in his writing career: he began by presenting his cultural diagnosis in *Mass Civilization And Minority Culture* in 1930 and in two of his last books, *English Literature In Our Time And The University* (1969), and particularly in *Nor Shall My Sword* (1972), he explicitly returned to the concerns of the earlier work. These later books show no great divergences from his earliest position; while there are changes, modifications, a sense that things have become worse, the continuity of Leavis's concerns is more striking. In *Anna Karenina And Other Essays* (1969), for instance, he reprinted, as apparently still representing his views, one of the earliest statements of his general position, 'Towards Standards of Criticism' (1933). Also, Leavis occasionally quotes from his earlier works. For example, in *Nor Shall My Sword*, in order to present his analysis of the effects of technological change, he refers to a crucial passage from *Education And The University*. Since the early and later works are this closely connected, rather than discuss the separate books, I intend to examine Leavis's key social/cultural ideas: his ideas on past and present society, on cultural tradition, and on the educated public.

There is, however, a problem here that needs to be cleared up at the outset. Although I am beginning with a discussion of Leavis's views on society – his analysis of modern society and his various remedies or therapies – he is, of course, primarily a literary, rather than a social critic. The insight and authority he repeatedly demonstrated in speaking on literary texts does not necessarily carry over into his general comments on society. And, in a sense, Leavis himself recognizes this clearly enough. In his essay, 'The Function of Criticism at Any Time; or the Responsible Critic', he makes a very definite distinction between literary and social criticism:

> The business of the literary critic as such is with literary criticism. It is pleasant to hope that, when he writes or

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> talks about political or 'social' matters, insight and understanding acquired in literary studies will be engaged – even if not demonstrably (and even if we think it a misleading stress to speak of his special understanding of 'contemporary social processes'). But his special responsibility as a critic (and, say, as the editor of a critical review) is to serve the function of criticism to the best of his powers. He will serve it ill unless he has a clear conception of what a proper working of the function in contemporary England would be like, and unless he can tell himself why the function matters. If he tells himself (and others) that it matters 'because a skilled reader of literature will tend, by the nature of his skill, to understand and appreciate contemporary social processes better than his neighbours', he misrepresents it and promotes confusion and bad performance.[2]

Leavis does, nonetheless, offer a critique of industrial society. But in his comments on, say, working conditions in industrial society he is not saying anything new, and certainly a far more precise analysis of this aspect of society, and this aspect of technological change, is offered by Weber, Durkheim and Marx, with their respective diagnoses of progressive rationalization, anomie and alienation. When Leavis approaches this kind of topic – and in *Nor Shall My Sword*, for instance, he often does – his analysis is frequently vague.

But, in commenting on society, Leavis does have his own distinctive area of concern, and within this area his analysis is often trenchant. He is, in his concern with continuity, the educated public and standards, the main twentieth-century representative of a central line of English social thought that reaches back through Arnold to Coleridge. Much of his importance lies in keeping this tradition – a tradition of social-cultural thought – alive. Much of his commentary on society is focused on the *cultural* effects of technology; in particular, the ways in which technological change influences language and literature. And as he points out in 'The Responsible Critic': 'There *is*, however, a special understanding of 'contemporary social processes' and a special preoccupation with them, that a critic as such, and above all, the editor of a critical review, ought to show. I am thinking of... the social processes that have virtually brought the function of criticism in this country into

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abeyance.'[3] Hence his concern with the literary world. Further, much of his 'social' analysis focuses on education – particularly on the role of the university. In his diagnosis of the state of the university and of the state of culture, Leavis is often illuminating; he is, in fact, one of our leading cultural critics.

There is, moreover, a way in which Leavis *is* qualified to speak more generally about industrial society. Much of his life's work is devoted to trying to get recognized how important the study of literature is to any proper understanding of society. In *English Literature In Our Time And The University* he argues for the importance of criticism in, indirectly, providing a distinctive approach to the study of civilization and society. And he further insists on 'the immense importance of the novel in a literary education that should vindicate the idea of the university... In English the novelists from Dickens to Lawrence form an organic continuity, and the intelligent study of them entails a study of the changing civilization (ours) of which their work is the criticism, the interpretation and the history; nothing rivals it as such.'[4] More than anyone else in our time Leavis shows how literature is relevant to the study of history and society.

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1

Leavis's View Of Society: The Past And The Present

i. Literature and Seventeenth-Century English Society

Like many other modern critics and writers – I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and W. B. Yeats, to name a few – Leavis believes that we live in a time of marked cultural decline, and, like most of these writers, he looks back to a period in the past which he sets against the present. Much of Leavis's work, in fact, involves an argument about the nature of the past: this was a central issue in his quarrel with C. P. Snow, and he found T. S. Eliot's literary criticism so stimulating in part because he agrees with Eliot's theory of 'the dissociation in sensibility', that a great change in civilization in the seventeenth century is manifested in the language of poetry. The period before this change became decisive, the era of the seventeenth century that includes both Shakespeare and Bunyan, is, for Leavis, the time of the fullest cultural vitality of English life.

In one of Leavis's earliest statements of his view of the positive nature of seventeenth-century society he discusses the conditions that made Shakespeare's language and writing possible:

> The dependence of the theatre on both court and populace ensured that Shakespeare should use his 'linguistic genius' – he incarnated the genius of the language – to the utmost. And what this position of advantage represents in particular form is the general advantage he enjoyed in belonging to a genuine national culture, to a community in which it was possible for the theatre to appeal to the cultivated and the populace at the same time.
>
> A national culture rooted in the soil – the commonplace

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> metaphor is too apt to be rejected: the popular basis of culture was agricultural.
>
> ...the strength and subtlety of English idiom derives from an agricultural way of life.[1]

Shakespeare's achievement, that is, was made possible by the existence of a rich social order, an organic society, out of which arose the richness of the English language.

It is important to understand the features of this culture that Leavis admires, for, whatever the truth of his view – a point to which I will return – it implicitly serves him as a social model. One aspect of this society Leavis considers absolutely essential for cultural health: its religious quality. Writing on Bunyan in 1938 Leavis insisted that *The Pilgrim's Progress* has a cultural content that the Marxists, for example, were blind to: he is referring to the religious sanction in the book and the nature of the affirmation made at the end of part two. He writes: '*The Pilgrim's Progress* must leave us asking whether without something corresponding to what is supremely affirmed in that exaltation... there can be such a thing as cultural health.'[2] In his later essay on Bunyan in 1964 Leavis is much more explicit about the religious quality which pervades Bunyan's work, a religious quality that overrides any doctrinal intention. Leavis argues that in considering the novel 'we have to recognize that we do very much need the two words "theological" and "religious". Bunyan's religion, like his art, comes from the whole man. And the man, we can't help telling ourselves as we reflect on the power of his masterpieces, belonged to a community and a culture, a culture that certainly could not be divined from the theology.'[3] As Bunyan the man cannot be seen apart from his culture, no more can his works: the religious quality of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the suggestion is, reflects something essential in the culture.

The feature of this society that Leavis especially directs our attention towards is the organic relation between popular and sophisticated culture. The theatre, Shakespeare, appealed to the cultivated and the populace at the same time. Moreover, 'Bunyan himself shows how the popular culture to which he bears witness could merge with literary culture at the level of great literature. The converse, regarding the advantages enjoyed by the literary writer, the "intellectual", need not be stated: they are apparent in English literature from Shakespeare to Marvell.'[4] This organic relation not only made the literature of the period possible, but all

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levels of society benefited; it was the necessary condition of a general cultural vitality.

Further clarification of Leavis's grounds of praise of rural, early seventeenth-century society is provided by his disagreement, in *Nor Shall My Sword*, with the negative view of that society that T. S. Eliot expresses in 'East Coker'. After quoting Eliot's poem Leavis objects:

> Yet the country-folk whom Eliot reduces to this created the English language that made Shakespeare possible . . . Their speech developed as the articulate utterance of a total organic culture, one that comprehended craft-skills of many kinds, arts of living formed in response to practical exigencies, and material necessity through generations of settled habitation, knowledge of life that transcended the experience of any one life-span, subtly responsive awareness of the natural environment.[5]

Unquestionably, this is an extremely generalized description, and, in the end, Leavis does not give us a totally clear understanding of his social model. But the vitality of language, exemplified pre-eminently by Shakespeare, the religious quality, and the close connection of popular and sophisticated culture are obviously central to the society he deeply admires.

It is of vital importance to understand how Leavis *arrives* at this view of the seventeenth century, for, while ultimately I think he presents a simplified, idealized picture of seventeenth-century life, he does, *qua* literary critic, call attention to certain key facts about the age. Although as a university student Leavis was a scholar in History who took English as a Second Part of the Tripos, his view of history is derived mainly from literature, and it is the use he makes of literature that gives his historical argument, whatever its shortcomings, a valid claim on our attention. Essentially he bases his case on his belief in the intimate connection between literature and society. While Shakespeare is the primary 'proof' of the cultural vitality of the period, Leavis proposes his view of the seventeenth century mainly in his writings on John Bunyan.* He

* He deals with Bunyan in two essays in *The Common Pursuit*, 'Bunyan Through Modern Eyes' (1938), and 'Literature and Society' (1943), and more fully in the introduction he wrote to *Pilgrim's Progress* in 1964.

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writes: 'Saying that there was in the seventeenth century, a real culture of the people, one thinks first...of Bunyan...A humane masterpiece resulted because he belonged to the civilization of his time, and that meant...participating in a rich traditional culture.'[6] And Leavis concludes: 'We must beware of idealizing, but the fact is plain. There would have been no Shakespeare and no Bunyan if in their time, with all its disadvantages by present day standards, there had not been, living in the daily life of the people, a positive culture which has disappeared.'[7] In Leavis's view, then, the existence of the positive culture makes possible Shakespeare and Bunyan. This question of the relation of literature and society is obviously a complex, and controversial one, and certainly there are critics like Northrop Frye, for example, who deny that particular social conditions nourish great literature.[8] But Frye's view cuts literature radically, in fact, entirely, off from life, and surely Leavis's insistence that literature, like the language it is a manifestation of, does arise out of the whole culture is the more acceptable, as well as the more traditional, view. Thus, for Leavis, literary achievement is a direct index of quality of life in a society. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* then he takes as 'evidence' of the richness of *popular* English cultural life.*

In a further way Leavis's approach to the seventeenth century, the kind of argument he presents, is distinctly that of a literary critic: he derives his evidence of the nature of this culture from the literary text by examining Bunyan's use of language. Leavis's comments reveal his basic assumptions about the nature of language:

> Bunyan the creative writer wrote out of a 'moral sense' that represented what was finest in that traditional culture. He used with a free idiomatic range and vividness

* It is perhaps necessary to explain what might appear to be a contradiction in Leavis's thinking on the relation of literature and society. Both Dickens in, say, *Little Dorrit* and Lawrence in *Women In Love* have written what Leavis considers great novels, but he does not regard them as indicating a correspondingly rich society. But in both cases he points to still remaining positive aspects of society that made possible the respective achievements: he claims that much of Dickens's strength comes from being in touch with the last traces of popular culture, and that Lawrence's work was nourished by the influence of the Nonconformist tradition. Bunyan was more fortunate in that he was part of, and his work reflects, a wider flourishing cultural life.

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> in preaching...the language he spoke...A language is much more than such phrases as 'means of expression' or 'instrument of communication' suggest; it is a vehicle of collective wisdom and basic assumptions, a currency of criteria and valuations collaboratively determined; itself it entails on the user a large measure of accepting participation in the culture of which it is the active living presence.
>
> The vigour of Bunyan's prose is more than a matter of earthy raciness.[9]

Leavis's argument for the existence of a rich, living traditional culture is based primarily on the quality of language in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, for, as he remarks, 'it is upon the reader approaching as a literary critic that this truth compels itself (others seem to miss it)'.[10] An historian approaching Bunyan's work and not responding to the language might well find in it only a doctrinal and sectarian Puritanism; Leavis, concentrating on the language, finds evidence of a rich way of life. Quoting an example of the typical use of dialogue in the novel, he comments:

> That is plainly traditional art and, equally plainly the life in it is of the people...The names and racy turns are organic with the general styles and the style, concentrating the life of popular idiom, is the expression of popular habit – the expression of a vigorous humane culture. For what is involved is not merely an idiomatic raciness of speech, expressing a strong vitality, but an art of social living, with its mature habits of valuation.[11]

Again, it is by commenting on style – the approach of the literary critic – that Leavis tries to establish his point.

If the strength of Leavis's approach is that he stays within his field, showing, as a literary critic, what literature can reveal about society – and what might be missed by the historian – the weakness in his argument seems obvious. While Leavis himself occasionally comments on the benefits that historians could get from literary criticism, asking them to accept an historical argument, the *entire* burden of proof of which is laid on literature is surely excessive. The nature of Leavis's evidence about the seventeenth century is simply too limited and selective. He in effect judges the society *only* by its literature and thus fails to provide a full perspective on seventeenth-

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