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978-0-521-31210-3 - Valuation in Criticism and Other Essays

F. R. Leavis

Excerpt

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## Editor's introduction

This volume is almost certain to be the last collection of F. R. Leavis's essays to include previously unpublished material. It also gathers together essays, reviews, articles and lectures which have not appeared in volume form before, or which are now relatively hard to find. An additional interest is that the contents range from his very first published articles to the things he was engaged in writing immediately before his final illness. This material, from the whole span of a long writing career, shows both the continuity of his preoccupations and important respects in which his judgments changed. This is especially the case with T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence. Leavis wrote more about Eliot than about any other writer, and he moved from a simple conviction of Eliot's greatness and importance to a more troubled sense that discriminations had to be made. The process can be traced in the essays reprinted here. With Lawrence the movement was in the other direction: from an obscure sense of challenge to a final conviction of unalloyed admiration.

The earliest essays are naturally placed first, in a group. The three articles in *The Cambridge Review* are fresh, challenging and entirely positive (compare, for instance, the remarks on Empson in the later essay 'The Literary Discipline and Liberal Education'). As Leavis said later, *The Cambridge Review* was a 'very institutional journal which is owned and, one hears, watched over, by an innominate committee of Dons'; he came to think that the publication was 'a Quixotic folly (I don't regret it)' – presumably because he thought it marked him out early as an anti-establishment troubler of the academic peace. Certainly the reputations of Eliot and Lawrence were not then the assured values that they are now, and it took some courage to champion them. In the piece on Eliot can be seen the first statement of Leavis's views about poetic language and the 'alteration of expression', and an adumbration of his later concept of 'The Third Realm'. This had its first explicit formulation in the celebrated Richmond Lecture on C. P. Snow, but it can be seen restated in several essays in this volume. The article on Lawrence is notable for the first statement of the parallel with Blake. Compare, however, the retrospective glance at this article in the later 'Lawrence After Thirty Years'.

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The second group of essays is chosen from *For Continuity*, Leavis's first collection, of 1933. 'Marxism and Cultural Continuity' has not been reprinted since; nor has 'Restatements for Critics'. They need to be read alongside 'Under Which King, Bezonian?'. The three articles together show Leavis engaging in the 1930s with the Marxist theory of culture, which he shows to have been at that time incoherent and insufficiently disengaged from the system it thought it was attacking: it was 'in the matter of values, too bourgeois, too much the product of the material environment'. 'The process of civilization that produced, among other things, the Marxian dogma, and makes it plausible, has made the cultural differences between the "classes" inessential. The essential differences are indeed now definable in economic terms, and to aim at solving the problems of civilization in terms of the "class war" is to aim, whether wittingly or not, at completing the work of capitalism [that is, modernization of society via its industrialization] and its products . . . ' That kind of utopianism was in the 1930s like the 'exaltation' of H. G. Wells and in the 1960s like the scientism of C. P. Snow: another aspect of the 'vast and increasing inattention' which was part of the plight of the industrial system, and where the offered nostrums were the undiagnosed symptoms of what Leavis later comprehensively summed up as technologico-Benthamism. The expressions of his distress at the blindness, and consciousness of his own Cassandra-role can be felt in the later essays as a real anguish.

In the third section, the Introductions to *Felix Holt*, *Daniel Deronda* and *Nostramo* offer readings of the novels in question – novels characterized by moral and artistic maturity, psychological acumen, imaginative humanity and social responsibility: things which for Leavis were the constitutive characteristics of 'The Great Tradition'. *Felix Holt* acquired classic status for this reason, while *Daniel Deronda* brings out George Eliot's greatness 'at its most Tolstoyan'. If the Zionist part of the novel is, as Henry James said, 'at bottom cold', it is not merely because it was 'done from the outside', but because it has its origin in 'an unreduced enclave of immaturity', where it is not so much the great intellect that is in control as something emotional – 'something that, in part at least, is a paradoxical immaturity'. *Nostramo*, on the other hand, dealing with 'the tormenting conscience' of the dedicated craftsman, invokes and exemplifies 'the conviction of a subtle rightness of expressive form to be achieved'. Leavis compares Conrad with Flaubert (whose conception of the art of the novel strongly influenced Conrad's) and finds that *Nostramo*, though the most Flaubertian of Conrad's works, attests to 'a full engagement in life, and (whatever the intensity of concern for "form") an art of which *that* can be said is radically unlike Flaubert's'. (The definition of the

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Flaubertian fear of life can be seen crystallizing itself in several of the other essays in this volume.)

In claiming ‘classical currency’ for Henry James’s first novel *Roderick Hudson*, Leavis emphasizes its ‘distinctly Jamesian’ qualities; its technical preoccupation, the choice and treatment of the theme, and the characteristic felicities of style. Even though it is a minor work, Leavis finds it ‘more worth reading and re-reading than the greater number of Victorian fictions that are commonly offered us as classics’.

The essay ‘Yeats: the Problem and the Challenge’ is a late reevaluation of Yeats, and so a reconsideration of Leavis’s own position *vis-à-vis* what he had written in *New Bearings* some thirty years before. Yeats’s stature as a major twentieth-century poet is assessed from the point of view of the critic who asks: ‘How much of the fully achieved thing is there in Yeats’s *œuvre* – what proportion of the wholly created poem that stands there unequivocally in its own right, self-sufficient?’ Leavis’s unequivocal answer is that it is not large.

‘Shaw Against Lawrence’, ‘Lawrence After Thirty Years’ and ‘Genius as Critic’ were published between Leavis’s book *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist* (1955) and the later full-length treatment of Lawrence: *Thought, Words and Creativity* (1976). The two essays state Leavis’s position on aspects of Lawrence’s work and art, including his preoccupation with sex and how it ‘transcends anything that the word “sex” suggests’. In ‘Lawrence After Thirty Years’, Leavis tells us that the theme ‘slips for me, to begin with, into another: myself thirty years ago’ (when he wrote the first piece on Lawrence in *The Cambridge Review*). Leavis’s conviction that Lawrence was a profoundly original genius, ‘a creative genius of the greatest kind’, someone who imposed ‘an extremely difficult adjustment’, and who had to be ‘lived with and lived into’, grew steadily but consistently – a process in the course of which he came to see Lawrence as ‘the great anti-Flaubertian’, ‘a radical and potent counter-influence to the aesthetic, the esoteric and the sophisticated’ and, in the age of Marxizing, ‘an essential enemy of the didactic’.

In ‘Genius as Critic’ Leavis is reviewing *Phoenix*, which contains ‘immeasurably the finest body of criticism in existence’ – the criticism of that ‘rare being who is alive in every fibre and has the centrality and easy swiftness of genius’ and which makes Lawrence so ‘un-Eliotic in [his] utterance’. This essay may be regarded as a foil to Leavis’s essay on ‘Eliot as Critic’ (in *Anna Karenina and Other Essays*).

‘T. S. Eliot’s Influence’ was found among Leavis’s papers as a typescript (possibly the text of a lecture, although I have not been able to establish when and where it was given; but it was written some years

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after the 'Retrospect' for the reprinted *Scrutiny*). This and 'T. S. Eliot and the Life of English Literature' complement each other in that both undertake to evaluate Eliot's achievement in the light of his influence – more 'a matter of mere fashion' than 'a profound or vital influence' – and his classical status examined by one who is not an 'uncritical admirer of T. S. Eliot'.

In the last section of the volume Leavis is expounding his concept of, his approach to and his convincingly exemplified views on criticism, literary studies, value judgment and the reading out of poetry. 'Dr Richards, Bentham and Coleridge' (a review of I. A. Richards's *Coleridge on Imagination*) brings out the fundamental difference of approach between Richards and Leavis – not only to Coleridge, but also to poetry and to literary criticism. One origin of Leavis's 'anti-philosophical' approach to criticism and the ground on which he was, in subsequent years, to call himself an 'anti-philosopher' may be traced to this essay, in which he takes Richards to task for 'heading away from the concrete' and for being 'the happy servant of a set of abstract terms'. (But the same resistance to abstraction is seen in 'Marxism and Cultural Continuity' and 'Restatements for Critics'.)

In 'Literary Studies: a Reply', Leavis is responding to what Professor W. W. Robson had written under the heading 'Literary Studies' (*Universities Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 2, February 1956). Leavis's comment challenges Robson's views on the 'separation' between the literary historian and the literary critic; between training intelligence (which Robson advocates) and training sensibility; between knowledge as such, and judgment, as well as Robson's use of the word 'aesthetic'.

Some years earlier, in 'The Literary Discipline and Liberal Education' – Leavis's contribution to the symposium on the teaching of literature organized by *Sewanee Review*, in which the contributors were Mark Van Doren, Rosemond Tuve, Austin Warren and René Wellek – Leavis had already developed some of these views while defining literature as a discipline of intelligence. He also commented on the working of what he called 'the institutional mind on the "humane" side of the universities', and put us on our guard against 'inert acquiescences, concessions to social amenity, tacit agreements to take the form for the reality and the running of the machine for the movement' – formulae that sum up what was increasingly to be the ethos of Leavis's subsequent writings and criticism.

'The Responsible Critic' – a polemical exchange with F. W. Bateson – has both an 'occasional' character and a permanent validity and relevance, like Leavis's exchange with René Wellek ('Philosophy and Literary Criticism'). On both occasions the challenge gave Leavis the

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opportunity of saying ‘some obvious but important things by way of reply’ as well as of redefining his own views on the nature and function of a responsible critic. The essay comes closest to expounding one part of Leavis’s theoretical position as a critic – his attitude to the role of ‘scholarship’ in literary criticism. Himself a trained historian, he could well appreciate the value of knowledge and scholarship, but what was of primary importance to Leavis was the criterion of relevance, and the logic with which he demolished Bateson’s case is as effective as the critical acumen.

‘*Scrutiny: a Retrospect*’, another ‘occasional’ piece written when Cambridge University Press brought out the 20-volume reprint of *Scrutiny* in 1963, is a landmark in twentieth-century literary criticism. Writing about *Scrutiny* – its origin and ethos, the odds it had to fight against in order to survive, and the revolutionary impact it made – Leavis recapitulates an important period in his own life and career as well as in his wife’s, and documents *Scrutiny*’s role in establishing what is new, unconventional and original in twentieth-century literature. The hostility *Scrutiny* aroused in some circles is for Leavis a proof of its decisive role in altering twentieth-century literary taste and sensibility, as well as in establishing ‘a new critical idiom and a new conception of the nature of critical thought’. ‘*Scrutiny: a Retrospect*’ is at once a piece of cultural and literary autobiography, the critique of an epoch, and the summing up of an ethos. Having come through the battles he and his wife had to fight in order to keep *Scrutiny* going, having established a new approach to the criticism of the novel as well as of poetry, Leavis – protagonist turned chronicler – could affirm what his journal had achieved with courage and frankness as well as with impassioned disinterestedness. A comment on what Leavis says in ‘*Scrutiny: a Retrospect*’, came from Q. D. Leavis herself. She meant to use this quotation from Sydney Smith as one of the epigraphs for her proposed Memoir of her husband:

To set on foot such a journal in such times, to contribute towards it for many years, to bear patiently the reproach and poverty which it caused, and to look back and see that I have nothing to retract, and no intemperance or violence to reproach myself with, is a career of life which I must think to be extremely fortunate.

(Preface to his *Collected Works*,  
on his founding and editing *The Edinburgh Review*)

Both the desirability and the difficulty of setting on foot such a journal as *Scrutiny* was, was further examined by Leavis in his seminar paper on ‘Standards of Criticism’ given at York University, probably in 1965. In analysing what constitutes those standards, and their dependence on the existence of an educated public, Leavis makes

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some key formulations of a theoretical nature. As for instance when he argues how 'few even of the respectable admired writers of a given time are original in the important sense' and how the critic 'helps to form the contemporary sensibility' which Leavis defines as 'a practised readiness of response over a certain selective range, a habit of implicit reference and expectation'. Such a habit was exemplified by 'the play of criticism on intellectual life and on the contemporary scene in general' in the nineteenth century, which saw the existence of so many established reviews, magazines and journals addressing 'a calculated, informed and morally responsible public'.

'Reading Out Poetry' is the text of a lecture Leavis gave in 1972 at Queen's University, Belfast. Starting from the premise that 'the mere reader of poetry who doesn't do a great deal of full reading out won't be able to read out in imagination', Leavis went on to demonstrate his own way of reading poetry out by quoting from Shakespeare, Pope, Hopkins, Hardy and Eliot, with critical comment on what he quoted. His lecture is based on the belief that one's way of reading out poetry determines and is determined by one's critical response to the text – to its rhythm, cadence and inflexion, which enact the subtlety and delicacy of thought and feeling. The drift of the lecture, of course, very much hinged on Leavis's voice and practical demonstration, but the accompanying commentary is of sufficient critical interest to merit inclusion in this volume. There is a special interest in that the text is a transcript of Leavis's partly extempore performance. It is only very lightly edited, and more than any other printed text gives a direct sense of him as speaker.

In 'Valuation in Criticism' Leavis formulates and sums up what criticism meant to him and how one arrives 'at intelligent and sensible judgments in the concrete' by means of *real* critical experience, which he characterizes as 'the most disturbing and inescapable way to a radical pondering, a new and profound realization, of the grounds of our most important determinations and choices'.

That the nature of value judgment continued to exercise his mind till the end is manifest from the last essay in this volume – part of what Leavis had been writing in his last two years. It bears moving and convincing testimony to his moral, intellectual and critical concerns, and shows him grappling with the problems and concepts that had long preoccupied him, with a depth of insight and complexity as well as originality of thought and perception which remained vigorously operative till the very end. One of the subjects that concerned Leavis in his last years was Wordsworth, whose 'profoundly original' genius, he said, enabled him 'to think vitally, that is profitably, about the *sui generis* nature of life' and 'to achieve articulate thought about meaning,

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value and art-speech'. 'Notes on Wordsworth' attributes a peculiar importance to Wordsworth, whose distinctive characteristics bring out for Leavis 'the sense in which creative genius pushes forward the frontiers of language and in the perception which is thought achieves the new'.

The essay is representative of Leavis's last phase, and brings us into contact with a man engaged in the revaluation of his life's work, and struggling with the complex distinctions and definitions arising out of it. It conveys the urgency of a man defining with poignant dignity and finality the meaning of his existence as a critic.

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# I

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## T. S. Eliot – a reply to the condescending

Under the title 'For Mr T. S. Eliot', there appeared in a recent number of the *New Statesman* a review of Mr Eliot's last book.

'Mr Eliot's great reputation among the young', pronounced the reviewer, 'is due to two facts: that, of those men who practise and criticize the more recent fashions in literature, he has some acquaintance with the past – an acquaintance that strikes with awe the young men whose reading begins with the Edwardians; that he holds very distinct and reasonably dogmatic opinions, and evidently writes from his mind rather than from his "dark inwards" or "the red pavilion of his heart."' One recognized the note. It tends to recur when the consciously adult, especially in the academic world, speak and write of Mr Eliot. One remembered the distinguished scholar who, reviewing not long ago some work of Mr Eliot's, spent a good deal of his column pointing out how much better it had been done by another distinguished scholar, a friend of the reviewer, but nevertheless conceded that Mr Eliot, though 'not a critic of the first trenchancy', was not wholly without critical gifts. Those of us who are aware of our debt to Mr Eliot have learnt not to be too provoked by this kind of condescension. It offsets the snobism attendant, inevitably, upon the vogue that Mr Eliot enjoys, and suffers from. But the challenge quoted above does seem to give one who still counts himself among the young, and who discusses literature a good deal with others of the young, a fair opportunity to acknowledge the debt and to define its nature.

First of all, we recognize in Mr Eliot a poet of profound originality, and of especial significance to all who are concerned for the future of English poetry. To describe him as 'practising the more recent fashions' is misleading, and betrays ignorance and prejudice. It suggests that he is one of a herd of 'modernist' poetasters. But there is no other poetry in the least like Mr Eliot's: he is an originator, and if he has his mimics, he could be confused with them only by the malicious or the incompetent. Nor is it his fault if he is included in the Sitwellian 'we'. 'Profound originality' were considered words. Mr Eliot says in *The Sacred Wood* that the historical sense is 'nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not

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only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.' Mr Eliot is now well beyond his twenty-fifth year, and his latest poetry has a new vitality. 'Salutation', which appeared in *The Criterion* for January, last year, and 'Perch' *io non spero*, which appeared in the last 'Printemps' number of *Commerce*, have a power and a beauty that might, one would think, compel recognition even from an anthologist. The poet bears out the critic. His poetry is more conscious of the past than any other that is being written in English to-day. This most modern of the moderns is more truly traditional than the 'traditionalists' – and he is a poet.

'By losing tradition,' he says in *The Sacred Wood*, 'we lose our hold on the present.' It is because of his hold on the present that he has his great reputation among the young. Poetry tends recurrently to confine itself by conventions of 'the poetic' which bar the poet from his most valuable material, the material that is most significant to sensitive and adequate minds in his own day; or else sensitive and adequate minds are barred out of poetry. Something of this kind has clearly been wrong with poetry in this century, and efforts at readjustment, those, for instance, of Mr Masefield, Mr Binyon, and Mr Squire, have commonly served only to call attention to its plight. Mr Eliot is so important because, with a mind of very rare sensitiveness and adequacy, he has, for himself, solved the problem, and so done more than solve the problem for himself. His influence will not be measured by the number of his imitators, but will manifest itself in indirect and subtle ways of which there can be no full account. In any case, the academic mind charting English poetry a century hence will not be tempted to condescend to Mr Eliot.

His influence has made itself so profoundly and so widely felt in so short a time because he is a critic as well as a poet, and his poetry and his criticism reinforce each other. One would hardly guess from the description of him as 'criticizing the more recent fashions in literature' that his criticism had been almost wholly confined to writers of the past. If Dryden and Donne are in fashion Mr Eliot may have had something to do with their being so; it is he alone who has made them more than fashions. 'The important critic', he says in *The Sacred*