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F.R. Leavis's Idea of Criticism

F.R. Leavis is best known for his decisive and provocative literary judgements — for his “case” against Milton, his defense of D.H. Lawrence, his argument about the great tradition. What has not received wide enough attention is the fact that lying behind these specific judgements is a very subtle and lucidly articulated idea of literary criticism. It should be recognized that Leavis's pronouncements on the function and nature of literary criticism are a central and major part of his achievement. Leavis insists that evaluation is the principal concern of criticism and, of perhaps equal importance, he insists that literary criticism is a distinct discipline with its own proper approaches and interests. In explaining and elaborating on these two focal points Leavis presents one of the most definite and coherent ideas of criticism of the twentieth century.

For nearly half of a century Leavis has struggled to win recognition for the central importance of the function of literary criticism in modern civilization. As Leavis conceives it this function involves, in the first place, insuring that English literature shall be a living reality operating as an informing spirit in society, but he also gives a wider explanation of its purpose. In an early essay of the 1930's, “Restatements for Critics”, he explains that the function of criticism involves shaping the contemporary sensibility:

And we know that, in such a time of disintegration as the present, formulae, credos, abstractions are extremely evasive of unambiguous and effective meaning and that, whatever else may also be necessary, no effort at integration can achieve anything real without a centre of real consensus — such a centre as is presupposed in the possibility of literary criticism and is tested in particular judgements. But ‘tested’ does not say enough; criticism, when it performs its function, not merely expresses and defines the ‘contemporary sensibility’; it helps to form it, . . . to persuade an effective ‘contemporary sensibility’ into being.¹

Criticism defines and organizes the contemporary sensibility — and, as Leavis points out, “contemporary” includes as much of the past as there is any access to — making conscious the standards implicit in it. In this way criticism provides the centre of value that is necessary to guide society.

This is obviously an ambitious conception of the function of criticism. One must keep clear, however, that, while in many ways Leavis places criticism at the centre of the intellectual life of civilization, he argues that criticism can have this importance only by fulfilling its specific function. He makes this point most lucidly in what is, perhaps, his fullest statement on the business of criticism, in the essay entitled “The Function of Criticism at any Time” (1953). In this essay Leavis challenges the conception of criticism advocated by F.W. Bateson, and it is entirely characteristic of Leavis that out of this disagreement with another critic should come a succinct presentation of his own position. Leavis’s disagreements with René Wellek and Laurence Lerner, as well as with Bateson, have been extremely fruitful in stimulating him to clarify his own idea of criticism. Bateson’s idea, which Leavis rejects, is that the literary critic *qua* critic has a special insight into society and that his function is fulfilled in this social diagnosis; with the emphasis Leavis places on the importance of literary criticism to the student of society one might almost be led to think that Leavis agrees with Bateson. He actually regards Bateson’s view as a betrayal of criticism, for he insists that the business of the literary critic is with literature and literary criticism. The responsibility of the critic, as such, is not primarily to analyze contemporary social processes but to serve the function of criticism, which Leavis explains as follows:

The *utile* of criticism is to see that the created work fulfills its *raison d'être*: that is, that it is read, understood and duly valued, and has the influence it should have in the contemporary sensibility. The critic who relates his business to a full conception of criticism conceives himself as helping, in a collaborative process, to define — that is, to form — the contemporary sensibility.²

Criticism is vindicated as a serious function by asserting its true responsibilities in the area of literature. Leavis regards Bateson’s attempt to place the importance of literary criticism in a non-literary-critical function as a sign of disbelief that criticism (and literature) really matters. This point, perhaps, needs further explanation. Bateson may sound Ar-

noldian (criticism is not only literary criticism), but he is simply bypassing literary criticism for social criticism. On the other hand, Leavis does not deny that the literary critic, or the "literary mind", has a concern with the health of society at large, but the critic's primary and essential concern is with literature.

Leavis goes on in the essay to contend that the function of criticism cannot be adequately discussed as a matter of critical method or theory; to understand the function one must have recourse to a concrete example. The example he gives is the achievement of *Scrutiny* in presenting a reevaluation of the past of English literature and in determining the significant points in the contemporary field — "placing" Auden, standing by Eliot while insisting on Lawrence's superiority. He explains:

My point is that *here*, in such work, we have the *utile* of criticism (and it is *creative* work). In the creating, with reference to the appropriate criteria — the creating in an intelligent public — of a valid sense of the contemporary chart (as it were), or sense of the distribution of value and significance as a mind truly alive in the age would perceive them, 'the function of criticism at the present time' has its fulfillment.³

The function of criticism, then, is neither social analysis, nor the formulation of a poetics or theory of literature; it entails the specific acts of evaluation which reveal the contemporary sensibility in a concrete form. Leavis explains the peculiar importance of this idea of the function of criticism: "Where there is a steady and responsible practice of criticism a 'centre of real consensus' will, even under present conditions, soon make itself felt. Out of agreement and disagreement with particular judgements of value a sense of relative value in the concrete will define itself, and without this, no amount of talk about 'values' in the abstract is worth anything."⁴

This relative sense of value which comprises the contemporary sensibility can be defined only by a collaborative process. Leavis has always regarded collaboration — the interplay of personal judgements in which values are established in the concrete and a world created that is neither public nor merely private — as an essentially creative process; the function of criticism, therefore, must be seen to be a creative achievement. In order for collaboration to be effective, and creative, Leavis claims that there must be a number of good critics practising: "The performance of that function implies a collaborative interplay, so that in a state of cultural health there would be more than one intelligent critic

practising — there would be a whole corps of them.”⁵ On his early 1932 essay “What’s Wrong With Criticism” he observes that for a healthy state of criticism we need not only a major critic like Eliot, but also a number of journalist critics of the quality of Desmond MacCarthy who engage in a full collaboration. The function of criticism cannot be fulfilled by the single critic acting in isolation, but only by the concerted action of a group of critics who compose part of the educated public.

To understand Leavis’s idea of criticism it is necessary to grasp both the point that he thinks of criticism as collaboration and the nature of collaboration. I think, in fact, that there is nothing more basic to an understanding of Leavis’s view of the critical process than realizing that the idea of collaboration is at the centre of it. Leavis has repeatedly insisted upon this, yet I continually encounter people who regard his critical position as dogmatic, absolutist and closed. A good example of this is Bernard Heyl, in his essay “The Absolutism of F.R. Leavis”. The title of Leavis’s 1952 collection of essays, *The Common Pursuit*, comes of course from Eliot’s description of criticism as “the common pursuit of true judgement.” Heyl, referring to Leavis’s use of this title, claims that “By this he seems to mean . . . that one, and only one, valuation of a work of art is valid or correct.”⁶ Heyl then goes on to attack the absolutist theory of value. But in the very preface to *The Common Pursuit* Leavis had explained that criticism is not a matter of one absolute judgement, but of collaboration, that the critic’s “perceptions and judgements are his, or they are nothing; but, whether or not he had consciously addressed himself to cooperative labour they are inevitably collaborative. Collaboration may take the form of disagreement, and one is grateful to the critic whom one has found worth disagreeing with.”⁷ There is not only one absolutely right judgement, but room for disagreement. The epigraph to *Education and the University*, it’s worth noting is, “Collaboration, a matter of differences as well as agreements.”

Leavis certainly believes in the need for decisive and firm judgement; a review he entitled “Catholicity or Narrowness” states this basic attitude of his very forcefully: “Discrimination is life, indiscriminatio is death: I offer this as obviously a very suitable maxim for a university school of English, and it seems to me very plain that a critical habit tending to carry severity even towards ‘narrowness’ constitutes for the student a more healthy climate than Sir Herbert Grierson’s and Dr. Smith’s kind of catholicity — which is the kind fostered almost universally in the academic world.”⁸ What needs to be emphasized in the light

of this comment is that his insistence on discrimination does *not* mean that the evaluation the critic advances closes the question, allowing for no possible difference. In one of his most concise pronouncements on the nature of criticism Leavis explains that

A judgement is a real judgement, or it is nothing. It must, that is, be a sincere personal judgement; but it aspires to be more than personal. Essentially it has the form: 'This is so, is it not?' But the argument appealed for must be real or it serves no critical purpose and can bring no satisfaction to the critic. What his activity of its very nature aims at, in fact, is a collaborative exchange or commerce. Without a many-sided real exchange — the collaboration by which the object, the poem (for example), in which individual minds meet and at the same time the true judgements concerning it are established — the function of criticism cannot be said to be working.⁹

Criticism does seek the true judgement, but not by the judgement of the single critic; it is determined collaboratively. Leavis clearly does not believe in critical relativism or subjectivism, but neither does he believe in "absolutism"; they are not the only alternatives.

Leavis contends that the collaborative exchange upon which criticism depends demands a corrective and creative interplay of judgements: "the response I expect at best will be of the form, 'Yes, but -', the 'but' standing for qualifications, corrections, shifts of emphasis, additions, refinements."¹⁰ "Yes, but," that is how Leavis expects a judgement to be answered, with a fully overt collaboration. It is well worth labouring this point, because it is so central, but also because Leavis is so often considered to hold a position like that of Yvor Winters. Winters does believe in absolute judgements, and when he advances his evaluations they are not open to any questioning or qualifying response; Leavis's position is both more complex and more flexible. I realize that one could try to argue ("Yes, but") that this is what Leavis says in theory but it is not what he does in practice; that with his judgements on the later James or on Auden's poetry he really does think that there can be no qualifications of his view. I think it is difficult to deny a certain element of truth in this, particularly in the two examples I have cited; yet in the case of Auden he has sought collaboration of his judgement from other writers in *Scrutiny* (a situation which raises other questions). What cannot be denied is that Leavis's idea of criticism demands that the critic's judgement be open to disagreement, qualification, and the fullest kind of collaboration.

Criticism depends on collaboration, but it begins with the discriminations made by the individual critic and Leavis has repeatedly explained the nature of the process by which the critic makes his evaluation or judgement. Leavis insists that the act of making an evaluation is not to be thought of as "imposing accepted values" or of providing "fixed standards" with legal backing. To describe the process in that way is to reveal a complete misunderstanding of the nature of evaluation:

So far from valuing being a matter of bringing up a scale, a set of measures, or an array of fixed and definite criteria to the given work, every work that makes itself felt as a challenge evokes, or generates, in the critic a fresh realization of the grounds and nature of judgement. A truly great work is realized to *be* that because it so decidedly modifies — alters — the sense of value and significance that judges. That is what is testified to in the commonplace that a great artist creates the taste by which he is appreciated.¹¹

This is an important statement of Leavis's position and describes a critical process that is *open* to modification in a way that the attempt to judge by definite, clearly defined, criteria would not likely be.

It was René Wellek's review of *Revaluation* that stimulated Leavis to give what is still his finest description of the process of evaluation. Wellek asked that Leavis define his standards, the norms by which he made his judgements, and in his reply Leavis tried to make clear that Wellek misunderstood the nature of evaluation:

The critic, — the reader of poetry — is indeed concerned with evaluation, but to figure him as measuring with a norm which he brings up to the object and applies from the outside is to misrepresent the process. The critic's aim is, first, to realize as sensitively and completely as possible this or that which claims his attention; and a certain valuing is implicit in the realizing. As he matures in experience of the new thing he asks, explicitly and implicitly: 'Where does this come? How does it stand in relation to . . .? How relatively important does it seem?' And the organization into which it settles as a constituent in becoming 'placed' is an organization of similarly 'placed' things, things that have found their bearings with regard to one another and not a theoretical system or a system determined by abstract considerations.¹²

The "norms" or "criteria" of the critic, it is clear, are not to be considered as matters for abstract definition. Leavis continues to further explain that the critic's concern

is to enter into possession of the given poem (let us say) in its concrete fullness, and his constant concern is never to lose his completeness of possession, but rather to increase it. In making value-judgements (and judgements as to significance), implicitly or explicitly, he does so out of that completeness of possession and with that fullness of response. He doesn't ask, 'How does this accord with these specifications of goodness in poetry?' he aims to make fully conscious and articulate the immediate sense of value that 'places' the poem.¹³

Wellek, being largely a philosopher, thinks of the critic's business as essentially involving the abstract definition of the qualities that are looked for in good poetry; what Leavis makes clear is that the critic operates by a living sense of value. (Leavis here is very close to D.H. Lawrence's view that you can develop an instinct for life instead of a theory of right or wrong.) I think it is instructive that Wellek should find it difficult to understand how Leavis can admire both Lawrence and Eliot, since in an abstract way their values are so different; here one can clearly see the advantage of responding, as Leavis does, from a sense of value. Wellek's position is not unlike that of Winters, who also thinks of the process of evaluation as a matter of bringing clearly formulated and defined criteria or principles to bear upon poetry. Wellek and Winters have a commitment to reason as the agent of judgement; moreover Winters has a strong distrust of emotion. Leavis's reference to a sense of value is a way of indicating that the whole being must be engaged in evaluation. And surely we must agree with Leavis on this point.

Leavis's high opinion of Arnold's literary criticism is a related matter to consider here — he ranks Arnold's achievement as a critic above that of Coleridge. This is a revealing judgement on Leavis's part, one that contrasts him with other modern critics, such as I.A. Richards, Kenneth Burke and Cleanth Brooks, who "descend" from Coleridge and have shown less interest in Arnold. Richards and Burke of course are primarily theoreticians, if not simply philosophers, rather than strictly literary critics. The very thing occasionally seen as Arnold's limitation — his lack of a systematic theory — Leavis regards as related to his strength, which is that he, unlike Richards and Burke, essentially is a literary critic. Leavis elucidates and defends the way in which Arnold makes his evaluations (and Leavis's approach is clearly similar). In explaining Arnold's description of poetry as a "criticism of life", Leavis writes that Arnold

intends not to define poetry, but . . . to remind us of the nature of the criteria by which comparative judgements are made. . . . To define the

criteria he was concerned with, those by which we make the most serious kind of comparative judgement, was not necessary, and I cannot see that anything would have been gained by his attempting to define them. His business was to evoke them effectively.¹⁴

This is similar to what Leavis told Wellek, that in *Revaluation* he had evoked and concretely defined the "criteria" by which he judged poetry.

The judgements of the literary critic should be distinct not only from those of the philosopher, but also from those of the moralist. Leavis's criticism is frequently referred to as "moral criticism"; perhaps the most notable example of this designation of his work comes from T.S. Eliot. In *To Criticize The Critic*, Eliot, categorizing the various kinds of modern critics, asks: "And where are we to place . . . another critic of importance, Dr. F.R. Leavis, who may be called the Critic as Moralist?"¹⁵ The implication of this view is that Leavis's work is not strictly literary criticism, but Leavis himself has consistently attempted to distinguish literary criticism from overtly moral criticism. Leavis remarks of Eliot's *After Strange Gods*, where Eliot had professed to speak as a moralist and not as a literary critic: "I think he would have done well to remind himself that one cannot 'apply moral principles to literature' without being a literary critic and engaging in literary criticism."¹⁶ Moral or religious criticism, Leavis insists, cannot be a substitute for literary criticism. In his essay on Samuel Johnson he observes that while Johnson is a great moralist, he is in criticism a classic *qua* critic. If we look back to the essay on Arnold, however, we find Leavis giving an explanation of the nature of judgement that does make it difficult to grasp the distinction:

We make (Arnold insists) our major judgements about poetry by bringing to bear the completest and profoundest sense of relative value that, aided by the work judged, we can focus from our total experience of life (which includes literature) and our judgement has intimate bearing on the most serious choices we have to make thereafter in our living.¹⁷

From this it would seem that the judgements we make about poetry are largely identical with the judgements we make about life and are therefore simply moral judgements. But as we read on in the essay Leavis clarifies the issue. Discussing the problem of "genuineness" in Arnold's criticism, the problem of how the critic makes the initial recognition of life and quality which must proceed and inform all discussion of poetry, Leavis observes that "Arnold goes on to insist . . . that the evaluation of poetry as 'criticism of life' is inseparable from its evalua-

tion as poetry; that the moral judgement that concerns us as critics must be at the same time a delicately relevant response of sensibility."¹⁸ Moral values certainly enter into the evaluation of the work of art, but they can only be invoked by the critic's sensibility bringing them in with due relevance.

The business of ensuring relevance, Leavis insists, is a difficult and delicate one; his objection to "Christian Discrimination", for instance, is that it knows beforehand what kind of response is called for, and the application of moral principles is divorced from the critic's sensibility — there is a failure of relevance. Leavis's completest statement on the problem of relevance comes, quite properly, in an essay on Samuel Johnson:

I don't think that for any critic who understands his job there are any 'unique literary values' or any 'realm of the exclusively aesthetic'. But there *is*, for a critic, a problem of relevance: it is, in fact, his ability to be relevant in his judgements and commentaries that makes him a critic, if he deserves the name. And the ability to be relevant, where works of literary art are concerned, is not a mere matter of good sense; it implies an understanding of the resources of language, the nature of conventions, and the possibilities of organization such as can come only from much intensive literary experiences accompanied by the habit of analysis. In this sense it certainly implies a specially developed sensibility.¹⁹

The comment that Leavis's criticism is moral criticism usually assumes a clear separation of literary and moral values; Leavis considers this an unreal distinction and refuses to make it. Instead his statement of his position is: "I don't believe in any 'literary values' and you won't find me talking about them; the judgements the literary critic is concerned with are judgements about life. What the critical discipline is concerned with is relevance and precision in making and developing them."²⁰ There is a tendency in thinking about Leavis's criticism to remember only the first part of this statement and to overlook the very necessary second sentence. The critic's ability to make his judgement about life demands a trained response to literature.

The way in which the critic makes his judgement can best be illustrated by contrasting Leavis's position with that of Northrop Frye. Frye of course advocates the view that evaluation is not a legitimate part of the function of criticism. He dismisses evaluative criticism as "what belongs only to the history of taste, and therefore follows the vacillations of fashionable prejudice."²¹ Quite typically, and somewhat cynically, Frye tries to reduce value judgement to the level of mere "prejudice" — a statement which is merely a rhetorical assertion on his part. One of the

main reasons for Frye's dismissal of evaluative criticism is that he thinks that a value judgement can be neither proven nor demonstrated, that, in fact, "a writer's value sense can never be logically a part of a critical discussion."²² It seems that for Frye judgement is largely intuitive and one cannot go beyond merely asserting it. Leavis agrees that a value judgement cannot be proven, but he does believe that the critic can make some approach towards enforcing his judgement:

In criticism, of course (one would emphasize), nothing can be proved; there can, in the nature of the case, be no laboratory-demonstration or anything like it. Nevertheless, it is nearly always possible to go further than merely asserting a judgement or inviting agreement with a general account. Commonly one can call attention to this, that or the other detail by way of making the nature and force of one's judgement plain.²³

Logically enough, Frye has devised a system or method of criticism which adopts a stance back from the work looking for the similarities between it and other works, while the "method" or approach of Leavis's evaluative criticism involves a stance close up to the work, concentrating on the "words on the page", where the critic can distinguish its differences from other works. Of course evaluation does not finally depend on any "method", but rather on the response of the whole man — or bringing to bear that fusion of intelligence and sensibility that, for Leavis, gives literary criticism its importance.

Leavis's efforts to restore the function of criticism have involved the attempt to get literary criticism recognized as a special and distinct discipline of intelligence and sensibility. His concern to define this conception of literary criticism is related to his problem as a teacher in making the study of literature a discipline. In *Education & The University* he writes:

There must be a training of intelligence that is at the same time a training of sensibility; a discipline of thought that is at the same time a discipline in scrupulous sensitiveness of response to delicate organizations of feeling, sensation and imagery. Without that appreciative habituation to the subtleties of language in its most charged and complex uses which the literary-critical discipline is, thinking — thinking to the ends with which humane education should be most concerned — is disabled. And the process of evaluative judgement, implicit or explicit, that is inseparable from the use of intelligence in that discipline is no mere matter of 'taste' that can be set over against intelligence.²⁴

(In the light of Frye's relegation of judgement to a mere matter of "taste", Leavis's last point should be particularly noted.) It is this kind of discipline Leavis believes that provides the best possible training for free, unspecialized, general intelligence, for the central kind of mind, the coordinating consciousness necessary for the educated public. It is literary criticism, rather than philosophy, history, or the classics, for instance, that has this central importance, because only literary criticism trains intelligence *and* sensibility.

But just what does Leavis mean by "sensibility" and how is it related to "intelligence"? When one thinks of the word "sensibility" the first association is with the physical senses. In *Twilight in Italy* in the chapter "The Theatre" Lawrence, in describing the men of the village, uses the word in this way: "There is a pathos of physical sensibility and mental inadequacy. Their mind is not sufficiently alert to run with their quick, warm senses".²⁵ Sensibility and mind are distinct here (and Lawrence's concern is for them to exist in a proper harmony). It seems likely, though, that Leavis derives the word from Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility", but he uses it somewhat differently. While Eliot is not entirely consistent in his use, since he sometimes equates sensibility with feeling, generally by a unified sensibility he means one where thought and emotion work together; that is, "sensibility" refers to the whole psyche. Leavis on the other hand does not use sensibility in that comprehensive way, but neither, since he thinks of real intelligence as an agent of the whole psyche, does he mean by it just "emotion" or "taste". In an early essay (very significantly Leavis's first essay in *Scrutiny*) entitled "The Literary Mind", Leavis tries to clarify in what way Max Eastman is deficient in intelligence and sensibility. Remarking that Eastman is obviously deficient in sensibility Leavis observes:

There is a pervasive debility, a lack of tension, outline and edge, in his thinking. The point might be made by saying that he has none of that sensitiveness of intelligence without which all apparent vigour of thought is illusory. And when such a phrase as "sensitiveness of intelligence" suggests itself it begins to appear that the relation between "intelligence" and "sensibility" is not the simple distinction that is readily assumed.²⁶

He then argues that Eastman's defect of sensibility *is* a defect of intelligence. One cannot lack sensibility and still be truly intelligent. Leavis concludes that "a certain fidelity to concrete particulars *is* required of him. And it may be regarded of all thinking, however abstract,

that is likely to interest those of us who are preoccupied with problems of living, that the criticism of it concerns its fidelity to concrete particulars and the quality of these. No easy distinction between intelligence and sensibility comes to hand here."²⁷ In Leavis's understanding intelligence and sensibility interpenetrate each other; yet, while no simple distinction can be made, they are different and both terms are necessary.

Leavis insists on the dual emphasis in explaining his conception of criticism, for while intelligence is essential, only a trained sensibility can ensure a proper approach; it is the sensibility that is initially responsive to the subtleties of language and feeling. Leavis finds fault with Bradley's Shakespeare criticism, asserting that "his method is not intelligent enough, and, to reverse my earlier stress, the defect of intelligence is a default on the part of sensibility; a failure to keep closely enough in touch with responses to particular arrangements of words." The idea of criticism as focused by the sensibility on the use of language is necessary, Leavis argues, not just with Shakespeare, but equally so with writers such as Wordsworth or Lawrence who "invite the discussion of doctrine or ideas as such; by intelligence, that is, apart from sensibility, or apart, at any rate, from the trained sensibility of the literary critic." It is only the critical sensibility that can maintain relevance of discussion. I think that we can more fully grasp the significance of Leavis's description of criticism as a discipline of intelligence and sensibility by thinking of Yvor Winters. Winters, it seems to me, frequently approaches literature by intelligence alone; in analyzing the poetry of Hart Crane or Robert Frost, for example, he discusses their ideas almost totally apart from their use of language. Winters remarks that Ezra Pound strikes him as a poet of sensibility without any intelligence; and it is tempting to reply to that Winters is a critic of intelligence without sensibility — or at least that his sensibility is not always fully engaged.

In "How To Teach Reading", the early educational pamphlet, Leavis indicated the central place of analysis in the training of sensibility: "Everything must start from and be associated with the training of sensibility. It should, by continual insistence and varied exercise in analysis, be enforced that literature is made of words and that everything worth saying in criticism of verse and prose can be related to judgements concerning particular arrangement of words on the page."²⁹ This emphasis on analysis, on a method of criticism which focuses on the "words on the page", is one of the most distinguishing aspects of Leavis's criticism and relates him to the revolution in criticism in the

1920's. I.A. Richards pioneered the training of sensibility through analysis, but Leavis has his own very distinctive formulation. He writes in *Education & The University* that "the cultivation of analysis that is not also a cultivation of the power of responding fully, delicately and with discriminating accuracy to the subtle and precise use of words is worthless. This would seem to be obvious enough. Yet in how many languages besides one's own can one hope to acquire even the beginning of a critical sensibility."³⁰ This last point is obviously of major importance in understanding Leavis's approach to literature; it is part of the explanation why, with the major exception of the essay on *Anna Karenina*, all of his criticism has been on the literature of his own language — it is only to that one can bring the full critical response. This point also determines Leavis's approach to literary education. In contrast to Northrop Frye, for whom the aim of literary study is to produce the "educated imagination", and who does not seem to think of the growth of the imagination as necessarily related to a response to language, for Leavis, literary training should produce an "educated sensibility" (and intelligence) and he thinks that this can only be done in response to the literature of one's own language. Leavis provides a precise description of what he means by analysis in the chapter "Literary Studies" in *Education & The University*. He states that the training of reading capacity is of primary importance in the attempt to justify literary criticism as a distinct discipline. Analysis, he explains,

is the process by which we seek to attain a complete reading of the poem — a reading that approaches as nearly as possible to the perfect reading. There is about it nothing in the nature of 'murdering to dissect', and suggestions that it can be anything in the nature of laboratory-method misrepresent it entirely. We can have the poem only by an inner kind of possession; it is 'there' for analysis only in so far as we are responding appropriately to words on the page. In pointing to them (and there is nothing else to point to) what we are doing is to bring into sharp focus, in turn, this, that and the other detail, juncture or relation in our total response; or . . . what we are doing is to dwell with a deliberate, considering responsiveness on this, that or the other mode or focal point in the complete organization that the poem is, in so far as we have it.³¹

This is a very succinct, lucid account of the nature of analysis, and Leavis then goes on to make what I think is his most important point about analysis:

Analysis is not a dissection of something that is already and passively there. What we call analysis is, of course, a constructive or creative process. It is a more deliberate following-through of that process of creation in response to the poet's words which reading is. It is a recreation in which, by considering attentiveness, we ensure a more than ordinary faithfulness and completeness.

I.A. Richards was largely responsible for developing the idea of practical criticism, but the description I've quoted makes clear how different Leavis's conception is. For Leavis analysis is a creative process and has nothing in common with Richards's view of it as a method amenable to laboratory technique.

For Richards (and Frye) criticism should attempt to become more scientific, more systematic; Leavis has remained inveterately against any notion that criticism is or should become a science. What Lawrence says on this issue can be taken to represent Leavis's position as well: "Criticism can never be a science: it is, in the first place, much too personal, and in the second, it is concerned with values that science ignores".³² In the debate on whether criticism is an art or a science Leavis in effect takes a position which rejects the either /or alternative as a false opposition. Analysis is creative, but essentially a discipline, although Leavis wants to make it clear that there is nothing technical or even remotely scientific about it:

To insist on this critical work as discipline is not to contemplate the elaboration of technical apparatus and drill. The training is to be one in the sensitive and scrupulous use of intelligence; to that end such help as can be given the student will not be in the nature of initiations into technical procedures, and there is no apparatus to be handed over — a show of such in analytic work will most likely turn out to be a substitute for the use of intelligence upon the text. Where help can and should be got, of course, is in examples of good practice, wherever these can be found.³³

The contrast with Frye, who conceives of such an apparatus or system, is extreme. It is not only, Leavis insists, that there is no technical apparatus to be taken over in criticism, but the very terms that the critic uses are not to be thought of in a technical way:

Terms must be made the means to the necessary precision by careful use in relation to the concrete; their use is justified in so far as it is shown to favour sensitive perception; and the precision in analysis aimed at is not to

be attained by seeking formal definition as its tools. It is as pointers for use — in use — in the direct discussion of pieces of poetry that our terms and definitions have to be judged.³⁴

This is a point of considerable importance; Leavis does have a few key terms (such as impersonality, concreteness, realization), but there is no point in trying to define them here in the abstract. They must be examined and understood as he used them in the different contexts of his actual criticism.

Leavis's view of analysis differs from that of Empson as well as Richards. In his insistence that analysis is a discipline Leavis cites *Seven Types of Ambiguity* as a warning against temptations that the analyst must resist, for "valid analytical practice is a strengthening of the sense of relevance: scrutiny of the parts must be at the same time an effort towards fuller realization of the whole."³⁵ Leavis claims that local analysis leads us to the core of the work, that the whole of the organism is present in the part; the part, however, must be seen as belonging to an ever widening context and the critic must not make Empson's mistake of extrapolating the part from its contexts. Leavis's idea of analysis should also be differentiated from that of the New Critics, or at least a critic like Cleanth Brooks. The relation between Leavis's conception of criticism and that of the New Critics is occasionally made because they both direct the attention of criticism away from external, historical factors to an internal approach centering on the language of poetry; but Leavis's social and cultural concerns have always remained an integral part of his criticism. I have explained his conception of analysis, but Leavis has never thought of criticism as ending there. He does not advocate the kind of practical criticism that would make it feasible to assimilate his position to that of Brooks:

To insist that literary criticism is, or should be, a specific discipline of intelligence is not to suggest that a serious interest in literature can confine itself to the kind of intensive local analysis associated with 'practical criticism' — to the scrutiny of 'words on the page' in their minute relations, their effects of imagery and so on; a real literary interest is an interest in man, society and civilization and its boundaries cannot be drawn; the adjective is not a circumscribing one.³⁶

If Leavis's method of analysis differs from those of Richards, Empson and Brooks, it is similar to, and probably derives from, the method of T.S. Eliot. When Leavis suggests that the student can learn from ex-

amples of good criticism, he refers specifically to the early Eliot; what Eliot demonstrates in the essays on Massinger and the seventeenth century, for example, is how local analysis can lead into a wider diagnosis.

There is another related aspect of Leavis's idea of criticism, of analysis, that must be understood: he argues that the sharp separation made between practical and theoretical criticism represents a false distinction. In the Introduction to *Determinations*, he writes that

the keener one's interest in the profitable discussion of literature, the less easily does one assume sharp distinctions between theoretical and practical criticism. Some of the essays . . . would commonly be called 'theoretical'; they seek, that is, by defining general ideas and relations to improve the equipment of the critic. . . . But it is particular perceptions that they generalize and relate, and without a fine capacity for particular immediate response to art there can be no good 'theoretical critic' just as the merely 'practical' critic is hardly conceivable.³⁷

This statement is of great importance for a proper understanding of Leavis's actual criticism and of his idea of criticism. If one ignores the point he makes here, and considers Leavis's own criticism as well as his negative attitude towards such "theoretical" critics as Kenneth Burke, Richards, and Wellek, it could be possible to mistakenly adopt the view taken by Laurence Lerner in his essay on Leavis and *Scrutiny*.³⁸ Lerner postulated a distinct separation between practical and theoretical criticism and argued that Leavis believed only in the former; of equal interest Lerner misread Leavis's essay on Coleridge, taking it to present a flat rejection of Coleridge as a theoretical critic. Lerner's mistakes, however, proved profitable because they provoked Leavis into a caustic, but extremely illuminating reply. Leavis wrote:

What I must comment on is that conception of 'practical criticism' (if it can be called a conception) which Mr. Lerner offers to define. The term, which I have never liked, . . . means, in common acceptance, elementary exercises in judgement and analysis, the specimens, in the nature of the conditions of work, necessarily being as a rule short poems or passages. One reason for my disliking it is that it encourages the kind of confusion into which Mr. Lerner is led when he elaborates his antithesis of 'practical' and 'theoretical'.³⁹

As Leavis explains to Lerner, in the essay on Coleridge he points out that where Coleridge's genius as a critic is evident it is impossible to disengage the dealings with principle from practical criticism, that in Coleridge's criticism principle emerges from practice and the master of

theoretical criticism who matters is the completion of the practical critic. Leavis's point is that this proposition applies not just to Coleridge, but is general, and must be taken both ways: "If I cannot imagine a great master of such critical theory as matters who is not a great critic — a great critic in critical practice, neither can I imagine a great or considerable critic who is not very much concerned with critical principle."⁴⁰ This is the key point. Leavis insists that he, and the other *Scrutiny* critics, were in fact essentially concerned with critical principles or fundamentals and that Lerner could think they were not only because he assumes the discussion of fundamentals must be philosophical. The issue here is of course the same as the issue between Leavis and Wellek, and Leavis contends that in his reply to Wellek he was "so far from disclaiming any intent in defining the criteria and grounds of my criticism, I point out that they are defined in the actual process of criticism with a precision (it seems to me) that makes the kind of defining Dr. Wellek favours intolerably clumsy and ineffective."⁴¹ His concern with principle in other words, he argues, was essentially that of literary criticism, which allows no sharp distinction between theoretical and practical criticism.

We shouldn't slide over this point, or accept Leavis's answer too easily. Lerner is not alone in his view of Leavis's criticism, and much of the dissatisfaction expressed with Leavis's work centres on what is taken to be his indifference or even hostility to "theoretical" enquiry. Yet it seems true to me that most of what is called "theoretical" criticism is undertaken by philosophers, or by people whose interests are as strongly philosophical as they are literary — Richards, Burke, Wellek and Eliseo Vivas, for instance. In certain of these cases there is a tendency to make literary criticism subsidiary to philosophical enquiry, or at the very least, a tendency to move away from any engagement with specific texts. We should note that in his Introduction to *Determinations* Leavis argues that the "theoretical" essays he includes all generalize from "particular perceptions" and that the critics all have a "fine capacity" for immediate response to art. Leavis himself only presents a general proposition about literature in terms of his own immediate response to a text. It is only by maintaining a fidelity to the concrete, Leavis believes, that literary criticism, as opposed to philosophy, shows its distinctive concern with fundamentals.

There is one last feature of Leavis's idea of criticism to consider, and that is its relation to literary history and scholarship. In his early dispute with F.W. Bateson Leavis made it clear that he does not think that

literary history can be considered as a field distinct from literary criticism; he insists that the only possible approach to literary history is that of the literary critic. In his review of Bateson's *English Poetry And The English Language* Leavis writes:

'critic' one gathers, is a description that he would repudiate. The nature of the distinction that, in his opening pages, he tries to elaborate between the critic and the literary historian is not clear, but he certainly intends a separation, and he calls his book "An Essay in Literary History". Yet the kind of essay he undertakes could be successfully attempted only by a critic and would then be essentially literary criticism.⁴²

That is, the literary historian, Leavis argues, cannot "take over" anything; only by being a critic, making a personal response, can he determine, for instance, even questions of influence.

The argument between Bateson and Leavis was renewed in 1953. In "The Responsible Critic: Or The Function of Criticism At Any Time", Leavis forcefully states his objections to the kind of literary history Bateson commits himself to; however, the disagreement with Bateson here belongs to the wider context of Leavis's quarrel with scholarship. Leavis begins the essay by objecting to the opposition that is usually made between scholarship and criticism: "I do not like, let me say at this point . . . , the way in which scholarship is commonly set over against criticism, as a thing separate and distinct from this, its distinctive nature being to cultivate the virtue of accuracy."⁴³ Accuracy, he goes on to explain "is a matter of relevance, and how in the literary field, in any delicate issue, can one hope to be duly relevant . . . without being intelligent about literature?" And in answer to this question Leavis replies that "the most important kind of knowledge will be acquired in the cultivation of the poetry of the period, and of other periods, with the literary critic's intelligence . . . insistence on an immense apparatus of scholarship before one can read intelligently or judge is characteristic of the academic over-emphasis on scholarly knowledge." Leavis's quarrel with scholars has run through his entire career, and one has only to glance through the essays in *The Common Pursuit* to find frequent acerbic references to academic scholars; this quarrel must be seen as part of his battle to gain recognition for literary criticism as a distinct and essential discipline. When Eliot had occasion to remark on the special competence, as a critic, of the scholar, Leavis objected:

The deference he exhibits towards the scholars seems to me wholly deplorable. . . . For the purposes of criticism, scholarship, unless directed by an intelligent interest in poetry — without, that is, critical sensibility and the skill that enables the critic to develop its responses in sensitive and closely relevant thinking — is useless. This skill is not common among scholars.⁴⁴

Part of the hostility Leavis generates comes from his intransigent opposition to scholarship, “work on”, about and around the great works of literature, which is not directed by a serious and relevant critical interest. The counter-charge is often levelled against him (for example by George Watson) that he is guilty of poor scholarship, but I know of only one concrete instance where it has been shown that he lacked the necessary knowledge.⁴⁵

To return to “The Responsible Critic”, Leavis objects to Bateson’s concept of “contextual reading”, the idea that in order to achieve a correct reading of a poem one must put it back into the “total context” of its world. But, Leavis argues, Bateson’s total social context is an illusion, the “‘context’ as something determinate is and can be, nothing but his postulate.”⁴⁶ On the other hand, the poem “is a determinate thing; it is *there*; but there is nothing to correspond — nothing answering to Mr. Bateson’s ‘social context’ that can be set over against the poem . . . and there never *was* anything.” Bateson’s approach would make literary criticism completely dependent on extra-literary studies in a way that is anathema to Leavis, who insists that the inordinate apparatus or contextual aids which Bateson deploys are unnecessary to the critic. Leavis of course assumes that the critic will have an understanding of the civilization that the poem is written out of, but his point is that no total social context could be established, and that Bateson is setting the student, and critic, after something no study could yield. Moreover, knowing about the civilization does not explain the poem in any direct manner. I think the crucial point in this argument is that made by Leavis in his rejoinder. After repeating that the essential knowledge the critic needs can come only from the reading of poetry and not from background knowledge, Leavis remarks: “Some of the essential meanings that one has to recognize are *created* by the poet, but this possibility . . . Mr. Bateson cannot permit himself to entertain.”⁴⁷ To pass directly from, say, the meaning in an emblem book to the meaning of a poem is to ignore the creative achievement of the poet. This is the gist of Leavis’s reply to Bateson about the nature of Marvell’s “A Dialogue Between the Soul and Body”:

To call it an allegory at all can only mislead, and to say, as Mr. Bateson does, that it 'dresses up' a 'more or less conventional concept' in some 'new clothes' (these being the 'real *raison d'être*') is to convey the opposite of the truth about it. For it is a profoundly critical and inquiring poem, devoted to some subtle exploratory thinking, and to the *questioning* of 'conventional concepts' and current habits of mind.⁴⁸

This creative exploration and questioning is precisely what gives literature its importance for Leavis, and neither scholarship nor literary history is fully adequate to grasp the nature of the poet's inquiry; only the discipline of literary criticism can properly come to terms with the poet's work.

Much of Leavis's own work has been devoted to expounding and defending the idea of criticism that I have outlined — and it seems to me that Leavis states his position with a compelling clarity and precision. He has continually asserted that literary criticism, as well as literature, is of the utmost importance in any attempt to restore cultural health to society. As he wrote in "Towards Standards of Criticism":

Literary criticism provides the test for life and concreteness; where it degenerates the instruments of thought degenerate too, and thinking, released from the testing and energizing contact with the full living consciousness, is debilitated and betrayed to the academic, the abstract and the verbal. It is of little use to discuss values if the sense for value in the concrete — the experience and perception of value — is absent.⁴⁹

In his poetry and novel criticism, and especially in his work on D.H. Lawrence, Leavis presents his perception of value: his sense of those sources of value and wisdom that he believes are urgently needed in modern civilization.

NOTES

1. F.R. Leavis, "Restatements For Critics", in *For Continuity* (Cambridge: The Minority Press, 1933), pp. 182-183.
2. F.R. Leavis, "The Responsible Critic: Or The Function Of Criticism At Any Time," in *A Selection From Scrutiny*, ed. F.R. Leavis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968) II, 297.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 301.
4. "Restatements For Critics," in *For Continuity*, p. 183.
5. F.R. Leavis, "'English', Unrest And Continuity," in *Nor Shall My Sword* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1972), p. 112.
6. Bernard Heyl, "The Absolutism of F.R. Leavis," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 13 (1954), 250.
7. F.R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (1952; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1966), p. V.

8. F.R. Leavis, "Catholicity Or Narrowness," rev. of *A Critical History of English Poetry*, by Herbert J.C. Grierson and J.C. Smith, *Scrutiny*, 12 (1944-45), 292.
9. F.R. Leavis, "Mr. Pryce-Jones. The British Council And British Culture," *A Selection From Scrutiny*, I, 183.
10. F.R. Leavis, *English Literature In Our Time And The University* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), p. 47.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
12. "Literary Criticism And Philosophy," in *The Common Pursuit*, p. 213.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 213-214.
14. "Arnold As Critic," *A Selection From Scrutiny*, I, 262.
15. T.S. Eliot, *To Criticize The Critic* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), p. 13.
16. F.R. Leavis, "Introduction," *Determinations* (1934; rpt. Folcraft, Pa: The Folcraft Press, Inc. 1969) p. 5.
17. "Arnold As Critic," *A Selection From Scrutiny*, I, 263.
18. *Ibid.*, I, 264.
19. "Johnson And Augustanism," in *The Common Pursuit*, p. 114.
20. F.R. Leavis, "Luddites? or There Is Only One Culture," in *Nor Shall My Sword* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1972), p. 97.
21. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy Of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 9.
22. Northrop Frye, "On Value Judgements," in *The Stubborn Structure* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 70.
23. F.R. Leavis, *Education And The University* (1943; rpt. London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 74.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
25. D.H. Lawrence, *Twilight in Italy* (1916; rpt. London: Heinemann, 1970), p. 57.
26. "The Literary Mind," in *For Continuity*, p. 50.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
29. *Education And The University*, p. 120.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
32. D.H. Lawrence, "John Galsworthy," in *Phoenix* (1936; rpt. London: Heinemann, 1970), p. 539.
33. *Education And The University*, p. 71.
34. "Imagery And Movement," *A Selection From Scrutiny*, I, 237.
35. *Education And The University*, p. 71.
36. "Sociology And Literature," in *The Common Pursuit*, p. 200.
37. "Introduction," *Determinations*, pp. 7-8.
38. Laurence Lerner, "The Life and Death of Scrutiny," *London Magazine*, 2, No. 1 (1955), 68-77.
39. F.R. Leavis, "Correspondence," *London Magazine*, 2, No. 3 (1955), 79-80.
40. *Ibid.*, 80.
41. *Ibid.*, 81.
42. F.R. Leavis, "Criticism and Literary History," *Scrutiny*, 4 (1935-36), 96.
43. "The Function of Criticism At Any Time," *A Selection From Scrutiny*, II, 281.
44. "Mr. Eliot And Milton," in *The Common Pursuit*, p. 9.
45. See Fredson Bowers, *Textual & Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1959), pp. 166-67. Leavis apparently mistook the revised version of *Roderick Hudson* for the original.
46. "The Function of Criticism At Any Time," *A Selection From Scrutiny*, II, 293-294.
47. "Rejoinder," *A Selection From Scrutiny*, II, 312-313.
48. "The Function Of Criticism At Any Time," *A Selection From Scrutiny*, II, 284.
49. F.R. Leavis, *Anna Karenina And Other Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), p. 224.