

The Literary Criticism of Q. D. Leavis

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Collected Essays 2: The American Novel and Reflections on the European Novel, by Q. D. Leavis; edited by G. Singh, *London: Cambridge University Press, 1985. 280 pp. \$47.50.*

IT IS ONLY since Q. D. Leavis's death that the full range and the diversity of her critical interests have become evident. There was the reissue of *Fiction and the Reading Public* late in her life, and also there have been her introductory essays to a number of Victorian classics; but the collaborative nature of *Dickens the Novelist* or *Lectures in America* tended, in the same way as *Scrutiny* had once done, to mask the distinctive individuality of her work. With the publication of the second volume of her *Collected Essays* this problem has largely been corrected and something like a general evaluation of her criticism ought now to be possible. Two preliminary but central thoughts arise here: first, that Mrs. Leavis never stopped reading or expanding her literary interests; and secondly, that the integrity and the astringency of her critical standards give to a collection of essays spanning a period of fifty years a real coherence and unity of achievement. It is probably unnecessary to do anything more than note that second point, because, under a variety of more or less flattering epithets, Mrs. Leavis's integrity is something that no one has ever denied her. So, in a volume that ranges from Koestler and Levi through Trollope and James to Melville, Hawthorne, and the nineteenth-century American novel, it is perhaps only proper that the initial

stress should fall on the sheer eclecticism of her fictional interests.

The essays printed here on the French, Russian, and Italian traditions are the unrevised texts of a series of lectures given at Queen's University of Belfast in 1980. It seems almost axiomatic that the good lecture seldom turns into a good article, and Professor G. Singh has obviously given their inclusion considerable thought. "But on balance," he writes in his introduction,

the grounds for publishing prevailed over those for not publishing. It is not that Q. D. Leavis was an authority on French, Russian or Italian literature—she would have been the first to disclaim such a title—but because in my view her unique authority as a critic of the novel makes what she has to say about the European novel interesting and thought provoking, even if one does not always agree with her.

Leaving aside the questionable notion of "authority," it would have been interesting to have seen that last remark given some critical substance, but Singh's introduction is couched in those reverential tones that have always been such a god-send to the Leavises' critics.

It seems to me that it is only on the Russian novel that Mrs. Leavis's criticism becomes genuinely persuasive; the chapter on the Italian is too sketchy, while her discussion of French fiction simply sets out to *épater* whatever academic or literary interests might have remained unruffled by her lecture on the English novel. The essay on the Russian tradition, too, carries the inevitable limitations of its original form, and she has written more penetrat-

ingly, because in greater depth, on Tolstoy in relation to Dickens elsewhere. But one sentence from this essay perhaps sufficiently illustrates its strength and justifies Singh's decision to include it here: "For a country to have a great writer is like having another government." There is that sense of the centrality and importance of the artist that is at the core of Mrs. Leavis's commitment to literature; and the significant fact that the quotation is from Aleksandr Solzhenitzyn's *The First Circle* again emphasizes what a vital and living commitment that always remained.

Mrs. Leavis's work on the Russian, French, and Italian traditions grew naturally out of the material touched upon in her 1980 lecture on "The Englishness of the English Novel." And that really is the clue to all her criticism, because it was that lecture that offered the most comprehensive statement of her critical position. It is not only that it is to the English novel that Mrs. Leavis responds most sensitively, but also that it is the achievement of the major Victorian writers that has shaped her critical sense of the full possibilities of fiction. Whether it is French "ideas" in question or the failure of Italy to produce a genuinely national literature, then, it is by the standards of the English novelists that these matters are judged.

Central to her reconstruction of the achievement of English fiction is her belief in its essentially Protestant character. The fact that George Eliot's youthful Evangelicalism could provide the emotional impulse for the dreary and secularized determinism of her novels or that Charlotte Brontë's Protestantism degenerates into a narrow provincialism is conveniently ignored: the novel is a Protestant achievement, Shakespeare is Protestant, and Chaucer—had he but known it—is also Protestant. This is of course only the reverse of a vision of Catholicism that owed as much to *Villette* and *Tancred* as any more contemporary reality, but it is a credo that makes one turn to Mrs. Leavis's work on the classical American novel with a certain expectant relish. For here was a fiction deeply rooted in a New England

culture of a Puritan theocracy. What were the implications of this for literature and for the writer? What kind of a tradition was it to work in, and what sort of intelligent readership could it provide to sustain a novelist like Hawthorne? Mrs. Leavis does not shirk these questions. It was precisely this dilemma that she confronted in her Belfast lecture on the American novel: the ambiguous inheritance of exclusivity and disappointment that was the common lot of the nineteenth-century American novelist, and the search, the *need* for a cultural identity in the face of a failed religious revolution and a colonial insecurity that links Hawthorne, Melville, and Henry James in a continuous literary tradition.

I find it difficult to follow Mrs. Leavis's enthusiasm for Melville, but the essays on James collected together here are evidence of a lifetime's vigorous critical involvement with his fiction: an acerbic review from *Scrutiny* of David Garnett's collection of the short stories; major essays based on her Belfast lectures; and "A Note on Literary Indebtedness" reprinted here from a 1955 *Hudson Review*. There are inevitably grounds for disagreement; from that "Note," for instance, what passage of fiction could stand alongside George Eliot's use of Rome in the awakening consciousness of Dorothea Brooke and not come off a distant second best? Or Mrs. Leavis's point about James's "loss of ear" for the rhythms of American speech, for surely no one can have ever thought that what the characters of his late novels speak is an English idiom? Or, again, I am not sure Mrs. Leavis is fair to James over his indebtedness to Trollope, because it seems to me that James is a good deal more generous about him than she gives him credit for. These, though, are details. What is amply demonstrated is the uneasy awareness of the claims of an American "National Literature" founded by Hawthorne that lies awkwardly behind so much of James's fiction.

It is the essays on Hawthorne, which first appeared in 1959 in *The Sewanee Review*, that form the most interesting part of the volume. The figures in that

literary debate from which they once originated have lost their representative significance, but what is not lost is any of the critical freshness of a study rooted so completely in the texts themselves. This is the strength of her criticism and nowhere is it better exemplified. The lectures have a swashbuckling freedom about them, but it is as a close and detailed reader that Mrs. Leavis is at her best. There is nothing arbitrary about her sociology here, none of that occasional selectivity as to facts that gives her literary history its familiar biases. The cultural milieu of the nineteenth-century American novelist that she examines emerges ultimately through a sensitive openness to the nature of Hawthorne's achievement in the novels and tales. And the title of the essay sufficiently underlines what that is—"Hawthorne as Poet": not as an "allegorist" in the limiting sense that James used the word, but as a writer who in his best work "can have gone to school with no one but Shakespeare for his inspiration and model." Hawthorne's best work for Mrs. Leavis is a collection of tales that leads naturally up to *The Scarlet Letter*, that explores and interprets, in such stories as "The Maypole of Merry Mount" and "My Kinsman Major Molineaux," the cultural inheritance of nineteenth-century America. Her interest here is as always that of the sociologist and historian; the tools, though, are the literary critic's and they are employed with a keen awareness of the poetic richness of Hawthorne's language and symbols that makes it all the more curious and disappointing that she never wrote on poetry itself.

But that is perhaps no more than an accident of literary history because it is diffi-

cult not to envisage those early *Scrutiny* years in terms of a systematic carving up of English literature, something on the lines of, say, the partitioning of Poland. With *Revaluation* and *The Great Tradition*, F. R. Leavis mapped out the major lines of development in both English fiction and poetry and established a literary canon that is still perhaps the central "fact" of modern criticism; Shakespeare became L. C. Knights's province, and, Silesia gone, Mrs. Leavis was left to make the best of what remained: intransigent subjects, indefensible borders, and a saddening sense that her work never really achieved the recognition it deserved. So even when she has dealt with a major novelist, it is the minor works she has written on—George Eliot's *Silas Marner* or *Adam Bede*; James's tales (or his relationship to Trollope or Edith Wharton). But in a sense this is a field to which Mrs. Leavis's talents were particularly well-suited. Her interest in what she termed the sociology of literature made her unusually responsive to the claims and value of the minor talent, while her skills as a close reader of texts underlined the power to enforce judgments that radically challenge accepted critical orthodoxies. And that is her greatest gift as a critic, the ability to send a reader back to a novel or a tale with a fresh sense of possibilities and with a new openness to what is there. Dissent often remains the essential option, because there is a good healthy streak of perversity and of the debater's methods in much of what Mrs. Leavis writes. Yet it is disagreement of a kind that owes a far greater debt to the vigor of her insights than could ever be had out of a more anodyne critic.