



# F. R. Leavis: From ‘Culture’ To ‘Canon’

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The term ‘culture’ occupies an important place in the works of literary critics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Notable among them are Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis. For each of them the term ‘culture’ meant different things. For Arnold, ‘culture’ was something as opposed to anarchy; for Eliot ‘culture’ had different associations depending on whether it had to do with the development of an individual or a group or class or a whole society; for Leavis ‘culture’ had associations with ‘life’ and hence living, concrete and tactuality. This paper aims at studying Leavis’s notion of ‘culture’ and its relation to the ‘canon’ propounded by him.

For Leavis ‘culture’ could stay alive in the language and when he found the language being defaced in popular fiction, journalism, school essays, advertisements, he felt that the English culture was dying. Hence he felt the need to keep alive the living culture of England. It is for this reason that he stressed on the need to study advertisements and other such works where stylistic tricks are used for commercial profit. In *Culture and Environment*, written in collaboration with Denys Thompson, he gives us the example of George Sturt and the wheelwright’s craft to show that it embodied “the experience of centuries and was part of the national culture” (80). It is in this work where he says “At the centre of our culture is language, and while we’ve our language, tradition is . . . still alive” (81). It is therefore important to keep

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the literary tradition alive and it is only in literature where the best use of language is 'preserved'.

There are different and interesting notions of 'culture' throughout Leavis's works. For him, it meant more than one thing – it is not anything abstract but something concrete and particular, it is 'this' and not 'that'. He constantly deals with the notion of culture in terms of binaries, just like Arnold had differentiated between 'culture' and 'anarchy'.

In his pamphlet *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*, Leavis lays down the importance of "minority culture":

In any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends: it is ... only a few who are capable of unprompted, first-hand judgment.... The minority capable not only of appreciating Dante, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Hardy (to take major instances) but of recognising their latest successors constitute the consciousness of the race (or of a branch of it) at a given time... Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition. Upon them depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age, the sense that this is worth more than that, this rather than that is the direction in which to go, that the centre is here rather than there. In their keeping, to use a metaphor that is metonymy also and will bear a good deal of pondering, is the language, the changing idiom, upon which fine living depends, and without which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent. By 'culture' I mean the use of such language (13-15).

From this we come to some of the important aspects of Leavis's notion of culture, like those relating to language, criticism, life/living among others like education and university, other arts (music, painting, etc.), the idea of 'Englishness', tradition, the 'living principle' and so on. In this context Raymond Williams's definition of culture can be brought in:

... *culture*... had meant, primarily, the 'tending of natural growth', and then, by analogy, a process of human training. But this latter use, which had usually been a culture *of* something, was changed, in the nineteenth century, to *culture* as such, a thing in itself. It came to mean, first, 'a general state or habit of the mind', having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second, it came to mean 'the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a

whole'. Third, it came to mean 'the general body of the arts'. Fourth, later in the century, it came to mean 'a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual'. It came also, as we know, to be a word which often provoked either hostility or embarrassment (*Culture and Society* xiv-xv).

Williams also refers to the influence of Arnold on Leavis and traces the meaning of culture to Coleridge as well. At the same time he shows the difference in their meanings of culture. Herein he brings in Leavis's importance in literary studies.

Moreover, the notion of an 'organic community' is constantly referred to by Leavis and he relates it to George Bourne's *The Wheelwright Shop* and *Change in the Village*. Even in the book reviews done by him one can find a constant reference to the 'organic community' and the loss of it. In "A Serious Artist", in *Scrutiny* Vol. 1 No. 2, where Leavis reviewed the novels of John Dos Passos, he says,

The organic community has virtually disappeared, and with it the only basis for a genuine national culture; so neatly disappeared that when one speaks of the old popular culture that existed in innumerable local variations people cannot grasp what one means (177-78).

He wanted a revision of the educational system and tried to resist the debasing influence of 'mass civilization' by training young minds in critical analysis. This is evident in his work *Culture and Environment*, written jointly with Denys Thompson.

The moral for the educator is to be more ambitious: the training of literary taste must be supplemented by something more.(p 4) We cannot, as we might in a healthy state of culture, leave the citizen to be formed unconsciously by his environment; if anything like a worthy idea of satisfactory living is to be saved, he must be trained to discriminate and to resist.... But to train critical awareness of the cultural environment in the ways contemplated is to train in discrimination and to imply positive standards (5).

Even the *Scrutiny* movement had to do with the propagation of education and training and hence for the continuity of cultural consciousness.

His interest in language is evident, when in *The Living Principle*, he argues, "In major literary works we have the fullest use of language" or when he says, "The nature of livingness in human life is manifest in language..." (qtd. in Hayman 116-17). In *Culture and Environment* it is written,

At the centre of our culture is language, and while we have our language tradition is...still alive... For if language tends to be debased...then it is to literature alone, where its subtlest and finest use is preserved...(81-82).

He believed that language was inherited by a writer from his/her culture; he/she only makes creative use of it rather than creating it. “A literature grows out of a culture”, says Leavis in “Literature and the University: The Wrong Question” in *English Literature in our Time and the University* (41). He further says that ‘a language really exists in full actuality, only in individual users’ (49). Thus language in Leavis is linked to culture and literature. It is only in certain writers that Leavis finds such a use of language by which he means ‘culture’. For him these writers are ‘canonical’. Andrew Milner defines ‘canon’ in *Literature, Culture and Society*:

The term ‘canon’ (spelt with two rather than three ‘n’s) denotes a set of officially recognized ‘sacred’ books. In Christian theology, it had referred to the books of the Bible recognized by the Church as genuine and divinely inspired, and therefore ‘true’ . . . (6)

Leavis equates criticism to culture and his method of criticism shows the importance he gives to the endeavour of literary criticism in keeping the culture alive. Since there are only a few critics who really indulge in ‘unprompted first-hand judgment’ (refer to the quotation from “Mass Civilization and Minority Culture” cited above) he calls them a ‘minority’. This minority is the preserver of culture as well as the one who would take the endeavour of the ‘common pursuit’ ahead and hence keep it alive. The critic can be equated to the wheelwright of George Bourne, whom Leavis has referred to extensively in *Culture and Environment*. This would also be related to the *Scrutiny* project and the reviews of works done by Leavis in the quarterly. In “*Scrutiny: A Manifesto*” in *Scrutiny* Vol. 1 No. 1, the editors put forward that:

“*Scrutiny* will print critical articles on literature and the arts and on various significant aspects of contemporary life” (5).

Within English Literature there are numerous strands having to do with the literature of different cultures, for example African, American, Indian writings in English. Leavis is important because he did talk about music, paintings, science, and philosophy. His response to C.P. Snow in *The Two Cultures? The Significance of C.P. Snow* and to Rene Wellek in “Literary Criticism and Philosophy” is noteworthy. The significance of the ‘culture’ he brought into the literary paradigm is something one cannot ignore – for instance the importance he gives to training of literary taste for ‘a healthy state of culture’ is evident in *Culture and Environment*, where he

extends the 'practical criticism' of I.A. Richards to 'the analysis of advertisements...followed up by comparison with representative passages of journalese and popular fiction' (6).

'Culture' is not an isolated concept in Leavis – it is something which is living/alive, serious, and continuous; it has to do with criticism, language, education; it is as Raymond Williams says 'a whole way of life'. He tried to establish a continuity when he talked of the 'great tradition' and the 'line of wit'- the former includes Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad, while the latter 'runs from Ben Jonson (and Donne) through Carew and Marvell to Pope' (*Revaluation* 34). He tried to protect a particular 'culture' from the debasing influence of another 'culture' (for example, media). The kind of 'culture' he tried to preserve is very much alive today in the sense that when one responds to a literary text it is by way of comparison and contrast with other texts, the value of a literary text is realized not by the number of copies sold but by its 'relevance' in the present. Leavis found Donne 'a living poet' (*Revaluation* 18) because he was not only a 'potent influence in the seventeenth century'(18), but also a contemporary in terms of his 'extraordinary force of originality' (18). His spirit of 'this is so, isn't it? Yes, but...' keeps the 'culture' going, it starts a dialogue or a discussion and hence carries on the fervor. Steiner is of the opinion that the notion of a 'fruitful dialogue...is central to Leavis' (*Language and Silence* 230).

'Culture', for Leavis is closely associated with education and the university. According to him, university is the centre for intelligence and for cultural continuity. It is the place for the organic growth of students. He also relates the English School to the growth and preservation of 'culture'. 'Continuity' is a term closely associated with 'culture' in Leavis's vocabulary.

His views on 'culture' resulted in his formulation of the 'canon' he propounded. There were a number of writers who found a place in his 'canon' which may perhaps be called "the great tradition" or the "line of wit" and included writers like Donne, George Eliot, T.S. Eliot, Keats, Hopkins, Lawrence, Sturt, Whitehead, Collingwood, Polanyi, Marjorie Grene, Austen, Dickens, Yeats, Tolstoy, Montale, Wordsworth, Pope, Conrad, James. It is from his views on 'culture' that he believes that these writers through their literary works keep the 'living' culture alive. He constantly talks of the English language and culture as 'living' because he is not familiar with the other cultures and languages, and hence can relate only to the one he knows and is familiar with.

Thus, we may conclude that ‘culture’ in Leavis is related to the ‘canon’ propounded by him and later followed by many of his pupils. The literary ‘canon’ in the present times has moved away from that propounded by Leavis. The shift is now to emerging canons and new literatures. But it should also not be forgotten that the syllabi of most universities still follow the Leavisite canon.

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