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FIFTY KEY LITERARY THEORISTS

Richard J. Lane
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FRANK RAYMOND LEAVIS (1895–1978)

A sense of crisis pervades the work of F.R. Leavis, one that reflected the shift in Britain during his lifetime from a hierarchical society to one dominated by the values of mass-culture. Ironically, while Leavis is best known as a critic who wanted to uphold specific aesthetic and cultural values as a buffer against commodity culture, his continual championing of modern English literature as the essential mode of study in the university system, encouraged younger critics to move more firmly into the direction of popular or contemporary mass-cultural literary forms. Leavis’s lifelong outspoken views led in part to his own personal struggle with the Oxford faculty system: after receiving his BA in English from Emmanuel College, Cambridge, in 1921, and his Ph.D. on the relationship between journalism and literature in 1924, Leavis became a probationary lecturer at Emmanuel, a post that was not renewed, ending in 1931. During the early 1930s Leavis had a part-time post of Supervisor at Downing College which turned into the position of Director of Studies; he gained a teaching post once more in 1936; subsequent promotions included a readership (1959–1962) and Fellowship of Downing College (1962–1964). What such a condensed biographical sketch fails to reveal, is the enormous impact Leavis had on the world of English literature, at the levels of teaching and research. Leavis’s crusade to maintain the cultural health of Britain involved an intense suspicion and at times rigorous analysis of the discourses of advertising, journalism, film and the worlds of industry and science; this crusade was given most powerful manifestation in pedagogic projects and the literary critical essays published in the journal Santiny, which Leavis and his cohort had founded in 1932. The most important intellectual companion in Leavis’s life, closely involved in shared critical projects, was his wife

Queenie Dorothy; known as Q.D. Leavis, her own groundbreaking study of mass-culture, popular fiction and the novel form – Fiction and the Reading Public – was published in 1932. Between F.R. and Q.D., the Leavis’s were a formidable and influential critical force. Leavis’s critical works read like manifestos; this is simultaneously their strength and their weakness because it gives them a vitality and a force, but also a sense of dogmatic and egotistical self-certainty. The manifesto mode is needed when the writer believes that he or she is on a crusade to change something in the world, here, the way in which literary aesthetics are perceived as a way of combating social decline; this is not as far-fetched as it might sound, given the predilection of the contemporary humanities towards strong ethical and ideological readings of texts, readings that largely critique the traditional values of Western colonialism, and Eurocentric culture and society. In his pamphlet Mass Civilization and Minority Culture (1930), Leavis argues that the minority values of the cultural guardians of society are being undermined by industrialization and new media such as film. As Chris Baldick argues, for Leavis:

what was new and threatening in the post-war world was precisely that the ‘mass’ was beginning actively to challenge the status of the minority, creating an oppositional language subversive of cultural authority. The appearance of the word ‘high-brow’ is identified by Leavis as the most alarming evidence of this trend.

In other words, the once respected cultural elite – or the guardians of high culture – are now placed under suspicion, ‘high-brow’ being a derogatory term for someone who is ‘elitist’ in the pejorative sense that the word now carries. How does Leavis define this cultural ‘minority’ or elite? In an amazing piece of literary-critical eugenics, he defines them as constituting ‘the consciousness of the race’ and keeping ‘alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition’; they are also the guardians of ‘the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age’ as well as the language ‘upon which fine living depends’. In no way does Leavis qualify or define further such a series of sweeping statements, as those who form part of this cultural elite should already instinctively or intuitively know what he is talking about. While ‘eugenics’ may appear too strong a word to use in this context, it must be acknowledged that Leavis’s works are produced using a series of key terms that are clustered around notions of critical and societal ‘health’, ‘strength’ and the opposite, i.e. ‘decline',
terms which are, in part, derived from Ezra Pound, for example his
*How to Read* (1931): ‘Has literature a function in the state, in the
aggregation of humans, in the republic . . .? . . . It has to do with
maintaining the very cleanliness of the tools, the health of the very
matter of thought itself.’ As with most manifesto writers, Leavis
needed a new outlet or vehicle for his ideas: in 1932, this took two
forms, first, the publication of Leavis’s *New Bearings in English Poetry*,
and second, with the formation of a new critical journal called
*Scrutiny*. In *New Bearings in English Poetry*, Leavis asserts that the great
poets of the age are ‘more alive than other people, more alive in his
[sic] own age’ as well as constituting part of the healthy cultural elite;
the poet ‘is unusually sensitive, unusually aware, more sincere and
more himself than the ordinary man can be’.5 In arguing that it is
impossible to convince those who are not already converted to this
argument of the veracity of such widespread assertions of superiority,
Leavis makes another argumentative leap to suggest that the lack of
interest in poetry among ‘the intelligent’ means that something has
gone wrong with modern society. Who are these great poets? Leavis
argues that they are T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Germaine
Hopkins (in a later list, one that opens Leavis’s *The Great Tradition*
(1948) the great novelists are added to the new canon: Jane Austen,
George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad). What is it that causes
Leavis to anoint these poets with such high praise? They are each,
in their own ways, ‘more aware of the general plight than his
contemporaries, and more articulate’ with Eliot transcending all to
make himself ‘the consciousness of his age’.6 Concomitantly, this holy
trinity of poets reach such profound insight into the age, the
‘ordinary cultivated reader is ceasing to be able to read poetry’ because
of a deluge of mass-media texts, a ‘perpetual avalanche of print’ that
is incapacitating.7 What is to be done? The answer was *Scrutiny*.

F.R. and Q.D. Leavis launched *Scrutiny* with the help of a group
of followers in 1932; the journal would go on to exert an enormous
influence on the study of English literature in Britain and elsewhere.
In his essay ‘Under Which King, Bezonian?’, Leavis responded to
George Santayana and others, who had asked for an expanded defini-
tion of the journal’s underlying philosophy. Refusing to pin himself
down to finding salvation in a single formula or creed, such as
Marxism, Leavis did provide an elegiac narrative or vision of a pre-
industrial England, where the arts were in accord with the everyday
‘real’ lives of the common folk; deliberately and provocatively
couching his argument in a Marxist discourse, Leavis suggests that this
accord

was an art of living, involving codes, developed in ages of
continuous experience, of relations between man and man,
and man and the environment in its seasonal rhythm. This
culture the progress of the nineteenth century destroyed,
country and town; it destroyed (to repeat a phrase that has
been used in *Scrutiny* before, and will be, no doubt, again) the
organic community. And what survives of cultural tradition in
any important sense survives in spite of the rapidly changing
‘means of production’.8

For Leavis, industrialization was a process of ongoing abstraction and
separation of the high arts from the real, or the concrete; even though
the utopian ‘organic community’ had been transformed by the
dystopia of modernity, it was essential to still maintain a ‘living rela-
tion’ or mediation between high culture and the masses. *Scrutiny*’s task
was, therefore, to be ‘vigilant and scrupulous’ concerning this medi-
atation, its primary, but not exclusive, vehicle being literary criticism
and its ‘special educational interest’.9 True to his word, Leavis pro-
duced a number of texts that provided a framework for educationalists
at all levels, including: *How to Teach Reading: A Primer for Ezra Pound*
(1932), *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (with
Denys Thompson, 1933) and *Education and the University: A Sketch for
an ‘English School’* (1943). The restorative pedagogic project involves
repairing the damage to traditional cultural values and standards caused
by the chaos and crisis of modernity via the study of select authors;
Leavis’s list of ‘positive suggestions’ in *How to Teach Reading* includes:
the training of sensitivity rather than technique; reading lots of ‘good
criticism’ (such as the critical essays of T.S. Eliot and presumably any-
thing published in *Scrutiny*); reading Shakespeare properly; gaining a
knowledge of literary and social history; and above all reading the lit-
erature of the present. Leavis suggests that: ‘Out of a School of English
that provided the training suggested here might come, not only a real
literary criticism of Shakespeare, but a beginning in the criticism of the
novel.’10 Once more, proclamation was followed by serious critical
output, with two groundbreaking books: *The Great Tradition: George
Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (1948) and *D.H. Lawrence: Novelist*
(1955). For Leavis, these novelists are the modern tradition,
making one aware of ‘the possibilities of life’, expressing their genius
through prose fiction, and in Lawrence’s case in particular, writing a
profound ‘study of contemporary civilization’.11 Leavis continued to
interrelate literary criticism with a wider ideological and pedagogic
programme, widened to include a stronger critique of science and
technology, in publications such as *Two Cultures? The Significance of C.P. Snow* (1962), *English Literature in Our Time and the University* (1967) and *The Living Principle: 'English' as a Discipline of Thought* (1975). Leavis’s collected essays and posthumous publications also added to an immense output. In retrospect, while critical trends have long left behind the ‘Leavisite’ approach, the word itself has become part of the English language, although it is often creatively misused. The standing of English as a discipline has long since lost ground to the very scientific and technological society that Leavis abhorred, but the subject itself stands firmly upon the critical foundations that Q.D. and F.R. Leavis developed.

**Notes**

4 Quoted in F.R. Leavis, *For Continuity*, quoted in Baldick, p. 167.
6 Ibid., p. 196.
7 Ibid., p. 213.
9 Ibid., p. 174.

**See also in this book**

Empson, Richards

**Major works**

*How to Teach Reading: A Primer for Ezra Pound* (1932). Cambridge: Gordon Fraser.

**Further reading**


**GEORG (GYÖRGY) LUKÁCS** (1885–1971)

The Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács wrote his key works during a time of great political upheaval and revolution in Europe; the