

Leavis' critical engagement with Samuel Johnson

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Abstract:

This study examines Leavis' arguments, which are concerning the history of English literary criticism and culture as represented by Dr. Samuel Johnson. The analysis includes discussion of several of Leavis' notions, such as the relationship between criticism and poetry, the revaluation of the past critics, the concept of 'Responsible' and 'Principle and Perception' in Leavis' thought, Leavis' and Johnson's language, Johnson's strengths and weaknesses. Then Leavis argues that the difference in cultural traditions between Johnson's eighteenth century and his own twentieth century is proved in conceptions of language.

Key words: Leavis, Dr. Samuel Johnson, criticism, poetry, Responsible, Principle and Perception

1. INTRODUCTION

Leavis' essays on Samuel Johnson are remarkable pieces of literary criticism. The essays are an important try to understand how Leavis as the major critic of the twentieth century examines his relationship to the tradition of criticism in the last two centuries before him. Leavis examined the criticism of his major predecessors and he identified some of

their strengths and weaknesses, as well as some of their successes and failures. Leavis makes a kind of revaluations of critics and criticism and this is not surprise because it was having major revaluations of poets and poetry from the sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries. The questions that are aroused , what is the relationship between modern critic as Leavis and those critics who have made major statements in the past? Why is exploring the relations with the critics of the past necessary? If one wants to answer these questions, he must attend to the most significant phrase in the passage: "critically responsible."

2. THE CONCEPT OF "RESPONSIBLE" IN LEAVIS' THOUGHT

What does Leavis mean by "responsible"? The word is connected with the idea of "response," it is another important term in Leavis' diction. "Response" is often used to imply an answer or reply to some problems or questions, which are presented by a poem, but as I mentioned earlier, Leavis' notion is more a combination of the active and the passive. The critic's response means "creative" or "re-creative." The critic does not simply passively receive, but is also actively involved in making the relationship more related to a conversation. The response means, 'answer to something', and the critic needs to be active in the answering, listening and speaking. Leavis' sense of responsibility is closely related to his ideas about 'language.' Language is a collaborative enterprise, and the individuals who use language are closely tied to each other through their common use of words. Individuals become responsible to each other in their living through the connectedness that language creates. How are we responsible? It is through language that we collaboratively create the world that we live in, it is through language that we are a part of a continuously collaborative enterprise of making meaning and creating significance. To

participate with other human beings in that enterprise means that we are all accountable to one another.

3. THE REVALUATION OF PAST CRITICS

The revaluation of past critics is part of Leavis' constant work in the practice of criticism. His thought is focused much on illustration what the business of literary critic should be as he is on the actual critical argument about the particular work. If the "business of the critic" is to attempt "to see the poetry of the present as continuation and development; that is as the decisive, the most significant, contemporary life of tradition"(Revaluation 1- 2), then the critic must make a similar attempt with criticism itself. What are the major continuities? Where are the significant changes and developments? I can only assume that in choosing to reevaluate Johnson, Coleridge and Arnold, Leavis thinks, as in his arguments about poetry, that his aim does not comprise exhaustiveness; on the contrary, it involves a strict economy. It is to give as clearly as can be given without misleading simplification the main lines of development in the English tradition – to give, as it were, the essential structure. (Revaluation 2)

For Leavis, the three critics represent the "essential structure" of the tradition of English criticism that I will choose (Samuel Johnson).

Leavis' critical engagement undertakes with (Samuel Johnson) to exemplify the interconnectedness of judgment and collaboration. In his judgments about the critical practice of his predecessors, Leavis reveals his own ideas about the nature of literary criticism. When Leavis praises or blames other critics, he is partly informed by his own standards about what makes to get good criticism and what does not. What does Leavis value in the other critics? How does Leavis value the other critics? Where does he identify their significant arguments, ideas, language, and style? Leavis' thought is also essentially

collaborative because he clarifies his own position as a literary critic through these examinations that establish his relation to those past critics. How does Leavis praise and blame his predecessors? In what language, in what style do his engagements proceed? What elements does Leavis identify as the essential elements in the tradition of English criticism? For students trying to make sense of Leavis as a critic, the essays represent an excellent example of how a critic goes about examining the work of other critics. What does Leavis teach students about critical thought? How is reading criticism different from reading other literature?

4. JOHNSON'S PHRASE "NOT DOGMATICALLY BUT DELIBERATELY."

It is clear to any reader or searcher that Leavis has great respect for Samuel Johnson. Leavis presents a number of quotations of Johnson through his writings and especially when Leavis repeats Johnson's phrase "not dogmatically but deliberately." The most famous place that phrase appears at the head of *The Great Tradition*, also Leavis provides more of hints as to what the true importance of the phrase is for him in the introduction of *Revaluation*:

I think it is the business of the critic to perceive for himself, to make the fines and sharpest relevant discriminations, and to state his findings as responsibly, clearly and forcibly as possible. Then even if he is wrong he has forwarded the business of criticism - he has exposed himself as openly as possible to correction; for what criticism undertakes is the profitable discussion of literature. Anyone who works strenuously in the spirit of this conception must expect to be accused of being both dogmatic and narrow, though, naturally, where my own criticism is concerned I think the accusations unfair. (9)

The argument of this paragraph is an apt introduction to Leavis' thought about the importance of Samuel Johnson in the

history of criticism; they include many of the arguments and significances that Leavis makes in his essays on Johnson's criticism. Leavis defines the nature of Johnson's criticism and recognizes it in his own thinking; he sets many of the major points that are necessary of his relation to Johnson: the importance of fine and sharp recognitions and judgments; the responsibility for the critic to the collaborative pursuit, which is criticism; and resistance towards those who make doubtful judgments. Leavis' arguments about Johnson's criticism identify his own strengths as a critic and recognize the changes that have occurred in critical thought and language from the time of Johnson to his own.

5. JOHNSON'S STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Leavis has two major essays on Johnson entitled "Johnson and Augustanism" and "Johnson as Critic," there are many passages in which Leavis reveals his identification with Johnson as a critic but perhaps unknowingly. The readers can often hear Leavis himself describing of Johnson's strengths and weaknesses. In the opening paragraph of the former essay, Leavis writes

Johnson, one finds oneself having again and again to insist, was not only the Great Clubman; he was a great writer and a great highbrow –or would have been, if the word, and the conditions that have produced it, had existed; that is, he assumed a serious interest in things of the mind, and, for all his appeal to the common reader, was constantly engaged in the business of bringing home to his public and his associates, whose cult of him was a tribute to the force with which he did it, that there were standards in these things above the ordinary level of the ordinary man.(Common 97)

In the present time the same situation happens of "having again and again to insist" that Leavis too is a great writer. Leavis also took a serious interest in "things of the mind," and his writings demonstrate that his life was dedicated to the

"business of bringing home to his public and his associates," for Leavis, those associates were students.

6. LEAVIS' AND JOHNSON'S LANGUAGE

Although Leavis thinks that Johnson's "cult" may be a "tribute" to him as a critic, but in the present time, Leavis' cult has been more of a detriment to his reputation and standing as a great critic. When Leavis' "disciples" appropriate his rhetoric or attempt to recreate or explain his methods, the results are emptying and troubling imitation in which the imitator does not realize that no one can simply adopt another writer's style. Leavis' style likes Johnson in manifesting "the vigour that comes from a powerful mind and a profoundly serious nature, and the weight that seems to me a matter of bringing to bear at every point the ordered experience of a lifetime" (Anna 197). Leavis' and Johnson's language is informed by the minds and serious natures of the critics who recognize that criticism is a "matter of bringing to bear at every point the ordered experience of a lifetime." A critic cannot adopt another's judgments and another's methods. Both critics' judgments are based upon their own experience. With both Johnson's and Leavis' writings, we can say with emphatic conviction that is really criticism. Why is it criticism? To use Leavis' criteria, "the critic knows what he means and says it with inescapable directness and force ('deliberately, not dogmatically'), and what he says is clearly the expression of intense and relevant interest" (Anna 198). The critic knows what he means and writes in the language that he means. The directness and force are the result of the best attempt at clarity with one's self about what one means and how one means. If any critic is using the language or methods of another critic to explain his own response, he will create a confused and mixed argument. Whose

response is it then? Is the response of the reader or the theorist from whom the language is taken? Whose thought does the response represent?

7. THE IMPORTANT RESPECT

Leavis identifies with Johnson the important respect, and it considers the most important elements for criticism:

Johnson is not invariably just or complete; but the judgment - and he never fails to judge - is always stated with classical force and point, and based beyond question on strong first-hand impressions. He addresses himself deliberately and disinterestedly to what is in front of him; he consults his experience with unequivocal directness and always has the courage of it. Concerned as he is for principle, he refers with characteristic contempt to the cant of those who judge by principles rather than perception' ("Life of Pope"). (Anna 212)

No one can claim that Leavis is invariably or complete and also no critic has this property. It is impossible for any individual to have the ability to respond in a comprehensive manner. All critics have areas of blindness in their reading and thinking, as well as we all have disabling habits of perception and response.

8. " PRINCIPLES" AND "PERCEPTION"

Leavis expresses that his agreement with Johnson's opposition of "perception" and "principles." Johnson's formulation of the repellent terms agrees well with Leavis' notion that critics must judge literature by their own perception, rather than by principles applied to the writers and language. Leavis notes approvingly "Johnson's recourse to experience is so constant and uncompromising and so subversive of Neo-classic authority that it is misleading to bring him under the Neo-classic head" (Anna 213). Leavis does not argue against the importance or the necessity of principles; he argues that principles must always be open to revision if there is experience. Principles are

like rules, but they are not absolute; they must operate as guidelines. Leavis' use of "standards" is related to this issue. Leavis does not mean that standards are not changing; as the values of the common sense in language, the standards always open to change. Leavis himself effected significant changes in the standards of poetry, making room for Eliot, Hopkins, and Pound in the poetic tradition in *New Bearings in English Poetry*.

The word "perception" is closely related to the use of the word "impression." Although it is not a common word in Leavis' critical vocabulary, but it is worth considering. If we remember when Leavis argues, that analysis is a creative or re-creative process, we find that "Impression" is a strange word-idea. The word has a dual meanings in that it can mean; a pressure is applied to something to produce an imprint, or that something is pressed upon so that a sensible influence is exerted from out. "Impression" is passive and active in the same time. One can be impressed by, or one can impress upon another. I take the strange duality of the word because it agrees well with Leavis' notion of the critic's relation to the language of a poem. The relation cannot be one-side. The "impression" is produced from both directions. The language of the poem impresses the critic because this impression is a re-creative process. The recreation of the thought of a poem requires a conversation between the critic and the language that is used by the author.

9. THE CONTRAST BETWEEN LEAVIS AND JOHNSON

Leavis' relationship with Johnson is not one of the simple identification because he knows that deep changes have occurred in English culture and literary traditions since Johnson's time. Readers can witness Leavis' identification changing to an emphasis upon difference or opposition. Leavis describes his central interested in Johnson in the terms, which occurred to us:

a genius of robust and racy individuality, notably direct and strong in his appeal to firsthand experience, he nevertheless finds himself very much at home in a cultural tradition that lays a peculiarly heavy stress on the conventional and social conditioning of individual achievement, and is peculiarly insistent in its belief that individual expression must exemplify a social discipline, and enlist tradition as a collaborator, or be worthless. Johnson is not, like the Romantic poet, the enemy of society, but consciously its representative and its voice, and it is his strength – something inseparable from his greatness - to be so. (Common 105)

In this passage, the contrast between Leavis and Johnson comes into focus. Though both display a "racy individuality," but Leavis does not find himself at home in his own cultural tradition and he could not be at home in a culture that stresses the "conventional and social conditioning of individual achievement," because he is determined to criticize and question the social conditioning of individuals. Leavis would be the last critic to advocate, "individual expression must exemplify a social discipline," because social discipline is partly responsible for strangling the creativity of individuals. From the last view discussed, eliminating the creation of individuals who can think and judge for themselves, rather than the dictates of social and literary fashion or taste. Leavis is not an "enemy" of the society because he recognizes that human beings only exist in their relationships with others. Could one make the argument that Leavis is the "representative" voice of his age? Would that be possible for a critic whose arguments are often made in opposition to the accepted notions of his culture and society? Leavis' thought is largely concerned with questioning literary standards and culturally accepted standards about the importance of literature and the function of the university. Leavis sees himself as different from Johnson, who he perceives as the representative voice of his age, and he was "trained" in the "extremely positive tradition" (Common 105) of Augustan culture. Leavis was not "trained" in a similar

culture because there is no comparable tradition available in his England.

10. AUGUSTAN'S USE OF LANGUAGE

Leavis argues that the difference in cultural traditions between Johnson's eighteenth century and his own twentieth century is proved in their respective understandings and conceptions of language. Leavis developed his argument about language in relation to Johnson and the collaborative nature of his criticism became more clear. In making a negative criticism of the Augustan's use of language, Leavis is able to formulate his own conception of the Shakespearean use of language, or what he calls the "exploratory-creative use of words" (Common 109). Leavis' criticism of Johnson is the motivation for provocation of the other argument.

For Leavis, the Augustan use of language is largely a matter of social forms and manners. He argues that characteristically for the Augustan

The ideas he wants to express are adequately provided for - and this is true of poetry as of prose - in the common currency of terms, put together according to the conventions of grammar and logic. He doesn't feel that the current concepts of ordinary discourse muffle or misrepresent anything he has to convey. His business is, while observing the ordinary rules in arranging them, to achieve further a formal pattern of meaning-structure and versification. He can express himself congenially in modes that are in such a sense, and at such a conventions of social manners and public deportment. It is an age in which everyone of any cultivation knows so well what Reason, Truth, and Nature, the presiding trinity, are that no one feels any pressing need of definitions (and here we have an essential mark of a strong positive culture). (Anna 206)

The assurance in language of Augustan culture produced a "period idiom" that "informed the linguistic conventions and habits of expression that seemed to the age natural and

inevitable" (Common 103). Leavis could not recognize culture identification to the Augustan in his own. The "pattern of meaning-structure" was not available to Leavis in the early twentieth century. There was not any agreement about what "Reason, Truth, and Nature" represent.

I would think that Leavis sees himself as inhabiting the anti-type of the Augustan age. Leavis' Modernist age is without standards, without a common set of conventions and terms to judge literature and life. There is a real loss for Leavis in the changes that have occurred since the eighteenth century. Whatever the gains in the concrete and the individuals are seen especially in terms of creativity, but in the same time the loss of standards and conventions are significant. The critic is left without firm standards for evaluating and judging. Where would the balance exist? Is it possible to have both a strong positive culture as well as questioning critics who expose the problems in that culture? Where should the limits exist, either for the strength of the culture or the power of the critics? In the introduction to *Revaluation* Leavis explains the necessity of "close analysis" or as he calls "particular analysis" (3). In his argument in practicing close analysis, the critic practices a kind of "self-denial" which limits his "freedom" (3). The relevant passage of critical limits reads "but there are kinds of freedom he should not aspire to" (3). But there is question aroused in this point that Leavis does not explain his idea of limitations any further. In our modern age, freedom and play are often valued as absolute goods. What are the consequences? Is there no need for limitations? Shall freedoms not be tempered or limited by a sense of responsibility?

11. CONCLUSION

There is one important thing that we must put in our consideration before leaving Leavis' engagement with Johnson. Leavis refers to Johnson many times as "the great moralist" (Anna 197). Leavis himself has something of a moralist, a

matter that I have discussed at length in my dissertation (*A Study of the Influence of F.R. Leavis on Modern Literary Criticism*). Nevertheless, more importantly, Leavis makes the argument that "with [Johnson's] radically undramatic habit we may reasonably associate his bondage to moralistic fallacy" (209).

Leavis argues that Johnson's primary failing lies in his "inability to appreciate... dramatic organization" (Anna 210):

Johnson cannot understand that works of art enact their moral valuations. It is not enough that Shakespeare, on the evidence of his works, thinks' (and feels) morally; for Johnson a moral judgment that isn't stated isn't there." (Common 111)

This argument deserves some contemplation. Is Johnson's inability to write, think and this cause of his "moralistic fallacy"? If so, what do we make of Leavis' inability to write dramatically? It is one thing important for him to recognize that the dramatic enactment of thoughts is important, but at the same time, he writes in the essay form. What does it matter that Leavis does not write in a dramatic form? Does this limit the possibilities of his criticism? Does this limit the possibilities of his relational thinking? What is the significance of the change that "criticism of life" suffers after the death of Lawrence, who marks the end of Leavis' great tradition? Why does the "criticism of life" go into the essay form? Why does it not continue in the novel? I raise the questions here for further consideration later.

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