

# ÍNDICE

## UNIT 1 Post-War Literature

<b>1. F.R. Leavis and the Moral Centrality of English Studies: Literature as Moral and Social Inquiry .....</b>	<b>15</b>
Study questions .....	27
Bibliography .....	27
Further Reading .....	28
Useful web sites .....	28
<b>2. Fiction: The Novel as Exploration of the Ethos of the Age ....</b>	<b>29</b>
2.1. Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966). <i>A World in Decline: A Handful of Dust</i> (1934), <i>Brideshead Revisited</i> (1945) .....	29
Study questions .....	37
Bibliography .....	41
Useful web sites .....	41
2.2. Graham Greene (1904-1991). «Greeneland»: Life on «the Dangerous Edge»: <i>The Quiet American</i> (1955) .....	42
Study questions .....	53
Bibliography .....	54
Useful web sites .....	54
2.3. Kingsley Amis (1922-1995). The University Campus as Microcosm of the State of Culture: <i>Lucky Jim</i> (1953) .....	55
Study questions .....	61
Bibliography .....	65
Useful web sites .....	65
2.4. Muriel Spark (1918-2006). The Novel as Exploration of Evil: <i>The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie</i> (1961), <i>The Driver's Seat</i> (1970) .....	66

Study questions .....	75
Bibliography .....	76
Useful web sites .....	76
2.5. William Golding (1911-1993). Questioning the Ethos of Englishness and the Empire: <i>Lord of the Flies</i> (1954) .....	77
Study questions .....	85
Bibliography .....	86
Useful web sites .....	87

## UNIT 2

### Poetry in the Fifties: Writing against the Grain

1. «The Movement»: Philip Larkin (1922-1985). The Democratizing of Poetry .....	91
Philip Larkin (1922-1985) .....	94
Study questions .....	99
Bibliography .....	99
Useful web sites .....	100
2. John Betjeman (1906-1984). Delighting in the Well-Made Poem: Technical Skill and Dramatic Urgency .....	101
Study questions .....	104
Bibliography .....	107
Useful web sites .....	107
3. Stevie Smith (1902-1971). Dark Emotions Cloaked in Humour .....	109
Study questions .....	113
Bibliography .....	114
Useful web sites .....	114

## UNIT 3

### Drama in the Sixties and the Seventies. Anger and Counter Culture

1. John Osborne (1929-1994). Revolution on the Scene: <i>Look Back in Anger</i> (1956) .....	117
Study questions .....	124
Bibliography .....	124
Useful web sites .....	125

<b>2. Arnold Wesker (1932-). The Conflict between Utopian and Revolutionary Socialism. Working-class Plays: <i>The Kitchen</i> (1961)</b>	127
Study questions .....	134
Bibliography .....	135
Useful web sites .....	135
<b>3. Edward Bond (1934-). Explorations of Contemporary Violence and Oppression. Revisions of Shakespeare: <i>Lear</i> (1971) and <i>Bingo</i> (1973)</b>	137
Study questions .....	148
Bibliography .....	148
Useful web sites .....	149
<b>4. David Hare (1947-). The Theatre as Exploration of Political and Social Issues: <i>Plenty</i> (1978), <i>The Asian Plays</i>, <i>Pravda</i> (1985)</b>	151
Study questions .....	159
Bibliography .....	160
Useful web sites .....	160
<b>5. Harold Pinter (1930-). Power Plays and the «Comedy of Menace»: <i>The Dumb Waiter</i></b>	161
Study questions .....	166
Bibliography .....	166
Useful web sites .....	166
<b>6. Caryl Churchill (1938-). Women, Power and Subjection: <i>Top Girls</i> (1982)</b>	169
Study questions .....	177
Bibliography .....	177
Useful web sites .....	178
<b>7. Tom Stoppard (1937-). Theatricality and the Comedy of Ideas: <i>The Real Inspector Hound</i> (1968), and <i>Travesties</i> (1974)</b>	179
Study questions .....	186
Bibliography .....	186
Useful web sites .....	187

## UNIT 4

### The Postmodern Turn. Fiction

<b>1. Brief Account of the Postulates of Postmodernism</b>	191
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Study questions .....	198
Bibliography .....	198
Useful web sites .....	199
<b>2. Doris Lessing (1919-). The Novel as Exploration of the «Great Whirlwind of Change». <i>The Golden Notebook</i> (1962). «To Room Nineteen» (1963) .....</b>	<b>201</b>
Study questions .....	216
Bibliography .....	217
Useful web sites .....	218
<b>3. Jean Rhys (1894-1979). Rewriting the Canon: <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i> (1966) .....</b>	<b>219</b>
Study questions .....	232
Bibliography .....	236
Useful web sites .....	236
<b>4. John Fowles (1926-2005). Metafiction: the Novel's Self-conscious Reflection upon its Own Structure as Language: <i>The French Lieutenant's Woman</i> (1969).....</b>	<b>237</b>
Study questions .....	249
Bibliography .....	250
Useful web sites .....	251
<b>5. Julian Barnes (1946-). Historiographic Metafiction: <i>A History of the World in Ten 1/2 Chapters</i> (1989) .....</b>	<b>253</b>
Study questions .....	262
Bibliography .....	262
Useful web sites .....	263
<b>6. Margaret Drabble (1939-). The State-of-the-Nation Novel: <i>The Radiant Way Trilogy</i> (<i>The Radiant Way</i>, 1987; <i>A Natural Curiosity</i>, 1989; <i>The Gates of Ivory</i>, 1991) .....</b>	<b>265</b>
Study questions .....	274
Bibliography .....	275
Useful web sites .....	276
<b>7. Martin Amis (1949-). Tapping the Contemporary, Grappling with History: <i>Time's Arrow</i> (1991) .....</b>	<b>277</b>
Study questions .....	291
Bibliography .....	292
Useful web sites .....	293

<b>8. From Canonical English to Multicultural British .....</b>	<b>295</b>
8.1. Introduction to postcolonial writing.....	295
8.2. Significant writers and themes .....	298
8.3. Rewriting the Canon .....	309
Study questions .....	317
Bibliography.....	320
Useful web sites .....	320
<b>9. Ian McEwan (1948- ) Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel:     «Butterflies». <i>Atonement</i> (2001) .....</b>	<b>323</b>
Study questions .....	334
Bibliography .....	334
Useful web sites .....	335

## UNIT 5

### The New Poetry

<b>1. Influence of the American Confessional Poets .....</b>	<b>339</b>
1.1. Ted Hughes (1930-1998). The World of Primitivism, Folk-tales and Myth. <i>Fantasies of Animal Violence</i> . <i>Crow</i> (1970), <i>Wolf Watching</i> (1989) .....	342
Study questions .....	348
Bibliography.....	349
Useful web sites .....	349
1.2. Sylvia Plath (1932-1963). Decentred and Fragmented Self- hood: <i>The Colossus</i> (1960), <i>Ariel</i> (1965) .....	350
Study questions .....	357
Bibliography.....	357
Useful web sites .....	358
<b>2. Geoffrey Hill (1932-). Combination of Historical Violence     and Poetic Discipline: <i>Mercian Hymns</i> (1971), <i>Tenebrae</i>     (1978) .....</b>	<b>359</b>
Study questions .....	367
Bibliography .....	367
Useful web sites .....	368
<b>3. Douglas Dunn (1942-). Nostalgia and Self-observation Made     Universal: <i>Elegies</i> (1985) .....</b>	<b>369</b>
Study questions .....	376

Bibliography .....	376
Useful web sites .....	376
<b>4. Tony Harrison (1937-). Blending of the Political and the Personal: <i>Selected Poems</i> (1989) .....</b>	<b>377</b>
Study questions .....	385
Bibliography .....	386
Useful web sites .....	386
<b>5. Multicultural Poetry. Benjamin Zephaniah (1958-). Popularising Poetry. <i>The Return of Orality</i> .....</b>	<b>387</b>
Study questions .....	397
Bibliography .....	398
Useful websites .....	398
<b>6. Postcolonial Issues .....</b>	<b>399</b>
6.1. Introduction .....	399
6.2. Caribbean Verse: Grace Nichols (1950-) and Fred D'Aguiar (1960-) .....	403
Study questions .....	418
Bibliography .....	419
Useful web sites .....	419

## F.R. LEAVIS AND THE MORAL CENTRALITY OF ENGLISH STUDIES. LITERATURE AS MORAL AND SOCIAL INQUIRY\*



Frank Raymond Leavis (1895-1978) was one of the most influential literary critics from the earlier to the mid-twentieth century. He read and taught English Literature at Downing College, Oxford. His strong intellectual and moral convictions on the value of literature, his interests in culture, society and education, and his concern for an increasingly materialist world caused him to engage in permanent debate on the role of the University, the responsibility of the critic, and the value of meaningful tradition, specifically of English

Literature. «The novel can help us to live, as nothing else can», Lawrence had claimed in his essay «Morality and the Novel» (1961: 113) and Leavis fully agreed. Despite all the controversy that F.R. Leavis's critical works may have raised, few would deny that no one has promoted the study of English literature and discussion of its value more than he did. Leavis gave new value to the function of literary criticism by combining the roles of teacher and critic and

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\* Please notice that this chapter is not strictly original work but is largely a selection of notes drawn from different relevant critical sources duly acknowledged.

making criticism a university discipline. When both he and his wife, Queeny D. Leavis, began teaching and writing, the literary-academic climate did not favour what they stood for. The university looked down on criticism as a poor relation of scholarship and as a close cousin of dilettantism. The world of letters outside the university was equally suspicious and hostile, seeing Leavis and *Scrutiny*, the Journal he co-founded, which lasted from 1932 to 1953, as another highbrow movement to intellectualise literature for an elite. Yet, as Terry Eagleton puts it in his influential work *Literary Theory. An Introduction*: «If in the early 1920s it was desperately unclear why English [Literature] was worth studying at all, by the early 1930s it had become a question of why it was worth wasting your time on anything else. English was not only a subject worth studying, but *the* supremely civilizing pursuit, the spiritual essence of the social formation. Far from constituting some amateur or impressionistic enterprise, English was an arena in which the most fundamental questions of human existence —what it meant to be a person, to engage in significant relationship with others, to live from the vital centre of the most essential values— were thrown into vivid relief and made the object of the most intensive scrutiny (1983: 31).»

As Lars Ole Sauerberg argues in an interesting analysis of the canon formation carried out by critics such as T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom «in his faith in education, Leavis was the true inheritor of Mathew Arnold. In fact, Leavis's is a project not so much in literary criticism and appreciation as in education —*Bildung*— through literature. It is through teaching that the cultural standards transmitted by tradition can be maintained. Just as the ideal subject is English literature, but not any text, nor any method, the ideal classroom is the university, but not any university. Although his position in the academic community was often more than problematic, his idea of the university as the centre for the dissemination of his views and attitudes is very much modelled on the Oxbridge tutorial as the ideal forum for the exchange of educated opinion. The idea of the university represents in itself the continuity of culture in that the universities are, according to Leavis, 'recognized symbols of cultural tradition —of cultural tradition still conceived as a directing force, representing a wisdom older than modern civilization and having an authority that should check and control the blind drive onward of material and mechanical development, with its human consequences' (Leavis 1943: 16). 'The ancient universities are more than symbols; they, at any rate, may fairly be called foci of such



a force, capable, by reason of their prestige and their part in the life of the country, of exercising an enormous influence' (ibid:16). Similarly, for Leavis, literary criticism 'trains, in a way no other discipline can, intelligence and sensibility together, cultivating a sensitiveness and precision of response and a delicate integrity of intelligence' (ibid: 34). The result of such an education would be a human being shaped in the spirit of *humanitas*, with a cultural heritage unmistakably from the period when civilization equalled culture, that is the Augustan age, and the ages on which the Augustans modelled themselves and their society.» (Sauerberg 1997: 94-98).

In his essay *The Leavises on Fiction. An Historic Partnership* (1988), from which what follows is taken either literally or paraphrased, P.J.M. Robertson explains the process by which, despite his interest in poetry, Leavis turned more and more to novelists rather than poets to argue his case for literary studies as a humane education. To Leavis, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, novelists have portrayed individual lives in their social interaction more effectively and more frequently than poets; the outstanding novelists were the most effective critics of the Industrial Age, which continues now in its technological phase; and they wrote greater poetry than the poets writing in the same period. With the exception of T. S. Eliot and Blake, he finds no poets of the modern age to match Dickens, Lawrence and the novelists of the *Great Tradition* —Jane Austen, George Eliot, Joseph Conrad and Henry James. And this is because «in the nineteenth century and later the strength —the poetic and creative strength— of the English language goes into prose fiction». As he argues in *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist* (19), «in comparison the formal poetry is a marginal affair.» Thus Leavis's writings on the novel in *The Great Tradition*, *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist* and *Dickens the Novelist* mark with progressive intensity his search to justify the human and humane values he puts on the study of literature.

For Leavis, Shakespeare becomes the touchstone for criticism of the novel, and the great novelists are the «natural successors» of Shakespeare. His early criticism of poetry, which includes his early appreciations of Shakespeare, provided the foundation for his criticism of the novel. His concept of the novel as «a dramatic poem» and his insistence that the most important novels have the same kind of poetic complexity made the novel gain serious recognition as a major genre of art (Robertson: 1-26).

In *The Great Tradition* (hereafter *GT*), Leavis seeks to establish an order of importance and excellence in the novel in the manner of Arnold and Eliot. One should be careful here, however, not to interpret the designation «great tradition» in the sense of the greatness of the English novel tradition, but in the sense of the «tradition to which what is great in English fiction belongs» (*GT*, 16) which is quite different. Several features are essential to this tradition. He begins by claiming that literature must be judged as an expression of life seen as a complex ethical reality, like Johnson and Arnold had done previously. He also stresses energy as a chief quality in his great novelists. «They are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience» (*GT*, 17), he says; and he speaks of the «energy of vision» (*GT*, 29, 232) that relates Conrad to Dickens. But energy, he argues, must be directed toward affirming life. For Leavis, for example, Joyce's «elaborate analogical structure», the extraordinary variety of technical devices, the attempts at an exhaustive rendering of consciousness, for which *Ulysses* is remarkable, and which caused it to be embraced by the cosmopolitan literary world as a new start, are a dead end (*GT*, 37). *Ulysses* is rebuked on the grounds that there is no organic principle determining, informing, and controlling the stuff into a vital whole. To him, all these features signify an intensity of art for art's sake and not for life's sake. When «form» is pursued at the expense of subject matter, he argues, the writer cuts himself off from his richest material: human experience; life. Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad —and Dickens somewhat belatedly— on the other hand, constitute a tradition by reason of their «common concern...with essential human issues» (*GT*, 19) and because they devote their art to promoting «awareness of the possibilities of life» (*GT*, 10).

One of the basic tenets in Leavis's criticism of the novel is, thus, the intensity with which a novel corresponds to life and its air of reality. For Leavis, the noblest art deals with human experience; the truly great writer creates a vision of life; and the energy of his vision is a moral energy. The art of the great novelist is distinguished by a «marked moral intensity». Yet, in emphasising life as the subject-matter of great art, Leavis does not ignore aesthetic considerations. Rather, he insists that in the great novelist or poet the subject-matter determines the form it takes, the vision defines the art that expresses it. As a critic of the novel he places a great deal of importance on a novelist's style and technique, well aware that the novelist makes clear his vision of art through his style, by the way he uses language.

Moreover, the novel as art is not a moral essay disguised as fiction. A great novel «enacts its moral significance» (GT, 43). To him, the novelists in the great tradition of the English novel are great because they are individually great as explorers of human morality, and as innovators and masters of the English language. In speaking of human morality, Robertson warns us not to make the mistake of defining too narrowly Leavis's use of the word «moral». Leavis always implies far more than a narrow puritanical outlook with his use of «moral». He invariably qualifies «moral» with the terms «life» and «richness» and «depth of interest» and «human significance». The «marked moral intensity» of his great novelists has nothing to do with contracting or reducing life. On the contrary, it goes with a «reverent openness before life»: a capacity to look at and into life with imaginative sympathy rather than with prejudice, wonderingly rather than knowingly.

Two major criteria emerge from these premises. First, that the great novelist creates out of a deep, personal engagement with reality. The process is not one of self-indulgence, but rather of his striving toward a more complete, more disinterested understanding of his relationship to life. Consequently he or she achieves a vision of reality unvitiated by personality. This kind of impersonality, Leavis is to instance again and again, indicates the writer's maturity in his attitude to both literature and life. It is neither T. S. Eliot's «escape from personality», nor James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus's nail-paring indifference, but rather a kind of aesthetic control of his or her material.

Leavis went on to clarify what he himself meant by impersonality in the first of the essays belonging to *Notes in the Analysis of Poetry* called, «Thought and Emotional Quality». There, by means of comparison and contrast of a large variety of poems by Wordsworth, Tennyson, Lawrence, Marvell, Blake and Shelley, he aimed to demonstrate that, when the emotional life of a poem is seen to be controlled and objectified by the poet's thought, the result is a sincere, mature and impersonal evocation of reality; but that, when this has not happened, the result is personal indulgence and a falsification of reality. «The 'impersonal poem', he says, «unmistakably derives from a seismic personal experience.» Indeed, first-hand experience generates the emotional life in the poem and gives it vitality. However, for the poem to become fully impersonalised and to be more than a mere overflow of personal emotion, feeling must be controlled by the

«thought» or critical attitude which the poet adopts towards it. Similarly, as he observes of their finest work, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad indeed write out of «urgent personal experience» but they do so in order to maintain a «distinction between experiencer and experience». It is a matter of the novelist's knowing the experience or situation he or she portrays from the «inside» while at the same time adopts a critical attitude to it from «outside». (From Robertson, chapter «F.R. Leavis and *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*», 29-49).

Leavis exemplifies the operation of impersonality in Lawrence's two masterpieces, *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. He sees them as much greater works of art than *Sons and Lovers* because, by this stage—he argues—Lawrence knows himself better and knows how to transmute intensely personal experience into impersonal art. He can do this, Leavis says, because he has put the «catharsis» of *Sons and Lovers* behind him, and in his new maturity he has a surer grasp of realising by dramatic means, and so objectifying, the issues of life that most concern him (Robertson, 136). For instance, he notes that the relation that Paul Morel has with his mother in *Sons and Lovers* is still too transparently and poignantly autobiographical of Lawrence's «notorious relation» with his own mother. And, though critics have called this Lawrence's «misfortune», warping him for life, Leavis disagrees. He argues that in *The Rainbow* Lawrence has fully understood his relationship with his mother, and has distanced and impersonalised it in the relationship between the child Ursula and her father. Citing a passage from chapter 8, «The Child», which begins, «Still she set towards him like a quivering needle», Leavis comments, (quoted in the Chapter «F. R. Leavis and D. H. Lawrence», 89)

'Replace 'father' by 'mother', and 'he' by 'she' and this is Lawrence describing what happened to him in his childhood. I spoke above of his 'misfortune'; but the question forced upon us by the comparison between *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow* is: What, for genius, is misfortune? The personal note of the earlier...book has vanished in *The Rainbow*; the catharsis was complete and final.... There is in fact no more impressive mark of his genius than what he did with his 'misfortune'; he turned it into insight. It was a triumph of supreme intelligence—the intelligence that is inseparable from imagination and self knowledge.

In its use in *The Rainbow* the experience is wholly impersonalised... it is experience that understands itself. (136-7)

This example gives the idea of impersonality as already seen in *The Great Tradition*: an objectifying, or «realisation», of deeply-felt personal experience by critical and dramatic means. But, in his analysis of Tom

Brangwen in *The Rainbow*, Leavis goes further, suggesting that impersonality in Lawrence has a deeply religious character. What, in fact, strikes us as religious is the intensity with which his men and women, hearkening to their deepest needs and promptings as they seek «fulfilment» in marriage, know that they «do not belong to themselves», but are responsible to something that, in transcending the individual, transcends love and sex as well.

Leavis's terms are almost mystical, not because he is being purposely portentous but because Lawrence's uncanny rendering of life forces him to be allusive rather than explicit and definite. And this is because «life» itself, the «something that ... transcends love and sex», is an undefinable mystery, and «reverenced» as such by Lawrence. As he has said just previously of «The Daughters of the Vicar», the meaning of «reverence» and «life» ... is inferred from the course of the tale (Robertson, 78). This tale also contains a Lawrence reflector, Louisa Lindley, who in her staunch refusal either to give up or to be given up by her lover Alfred Durant, the collier and socially inferior to her, exhibits a class-transcending commitment to essential human values that Leavis describes as «a passionate sense for what is real, and a firm allegiance to it» (80). «Her moral judgements are unmistakably vital judgements» (86), says Leavis. According to Robertson, by «what is real» Leavis can only mean a grasp of what it means to be humanly and spiritually alive, and the phrase «firm allegiance» seems clearly a different way of saying a religious attitude to life.

Of course, most critics have been troubled by Leavis's use of the term «religious», arguing that it implies belief. Yet, in what, they ask, does Leavis's belief consist? Indeed if there is a poet to whom these two terms could be applied it would surely be T. S. Eliot. But to Leavis, despite the poet's claim to the contrary, Eliot lacks the «necessary impersonality» for truly constructive thought (232). By «necessary impersonality» Leavis means the deepest convictions about life, sanctioned and tested by intense personal exploration of experience, the religious depth of Blake or Lawrence. But in Eliot «religious» involves, according to Leavis, less personal responsibility: it describes the adoption by the individual of a tradition of faith outside himself, the adherence to a formal creed. A great poet needs no theological apology. A great poet quickens our sense of life as reverent, wonderful, mysterious and so, whatever the odds, as full of possibility and hope. This is indeed a deeply romantic outlook. The result is a new transcendently great line in English literature composed

of one poet and a few novelists (or «dramatic poets»): Blake, Austen, George Eliot, Dickens, Conrad, James and Lawrence, with Shakespeare at the head.

One of Leavis's most cherished convictions is that the truly relevant and really significant writers are those who defend human values and human life in the face of the dehumanising forces in, as he terms it, the «technologic-Benthamite age», and who do so not by overt propagandising but by creating insights into what human values are and by imagining and dramatising in a richly poetic art possibilities of living humanely. Hence, his criticism becomes progressively sociological in direction, and more deeply rooted in the spiritual qualities of creative literature. He becomes more and more urgently interested in poetry and fiction that vindicate man's essential humanity and individuality. It is in this sense that he makes Lawrence the touchstone for *The Great Tradition* on the grounds of what, to him, are the manifestly Lawrentian criteria: «vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity» (*GT*, 17).

Let us now turn to his conceptualisation of the novel as «a dramatic poem in prose». By «poem» Leavis means far more than poetic prose, imagery, symbolism, or other obviously poetical effects. He means the whole novel conceived as a poetic creation, that is, as having the density and complexity of meaning and organisation usually associated with formally poetic works. From this perspective, of course, he is a practitioner of the current of criticism based on «close reading» that would flourish in America from the late 30s to the 1950s, and would be known as New Criticism. «Coherence» and «integration» were the keynotes. Accordingly, Leavis wants the reader to consider that every element in the novel —action, scene, episode, dialogue, character, irony, contrast, variety of mode and style, the very use of language, as well as symbolism, imagery and so on— has been so organised by the novelist as to result in a complex organism of meaning, and fertile with the richness of evocation he would expect in Shakespearean drama (*GT*, 18). Such novels, then, are not novels of plot in the conventional sense. They do not yield their meaning only through what *happens* in the story as it unfolds and through such traditional devices of plot as *peripeteia* and *dénouement*. Rather, plot means the total design, the whole imaginative vision. Nor are they novels of ideas as such, in which the novelist uses his story as a disguised essay about life. In the novel-as-dramatic-poem, meaning is

conveyed not only by the novelist's dramatic methods, but also by his sheer power of poetic evocation with words in the narrative parts which integrate the dramatic action. Hence «poetic» for him is synonymous with «creative», not «poetical». In other words, Lawrence's poetic prose does not merely paint picturesque effects but —Leavis argues— creates substances, meanings and concepts which are essential to his total vision.

What exalts Shakespeare above his contemporaries is his indissoluble unity of the notions of *what* and *how*; any separation of the two is unimaginable in his art and so this is what F. R. Leavis and his wife Queenie D. Leavis value most highly of every novel or poem they judge to be great. They are both strongly anti-theorist and both demonstrate criticism in action. Habitually, they confront a literary work, quoting from it, analysing it, and commenting on it in a way that reveals the process of their criticism, showing the reader how he or she may practise criticism for her or himself, and encouraging him or her to reread the work in question. For Leavis, the masterpiece the critic points to is far more important than anything that could be said about it, since it conveys by poetic means and as a poetic whole what the critic can only allude and point to in discursive prose.

«Where, in conclusion, are we to place Leavis as a critic of the novel and as a critic in general?» —asks P.J.M. Robertson in the work I am closely following: *The Leavises on Fiction*. «In earlier ages,» Robertson claims, «it would have been enough to call Leavis a critic and everyone would have known what he was: one endowed with common sense and moral tact and skilled in logic who, while making his criteria clear and clearly based on an ethical view of reality, undertook to advise readers what was worth reading and what was not. It would then have been for his readers to interrogate their own common sense and moral tact to decide whether he gave good advice or bad, whether he was a good or bad critic.» (129).

In the present, however, the answer is far more complex. Our postmodern condition has made us profoundly suspicious of language. Words and concepts such as «common sense truths and values», «man's essential humanity», «religious intensity», «moral awareness», «engagement with reality», «reverent openness to life» and many others, typical of Leavis's vocabulary, have been made to show their deeply problematic nature. The same applies to his concept of tradition, a «transcendental/symbolic» tradition which has its roots in «the old English way of looking at things... from Shakespeare's