

The last of these Cambridge pioneers was F. R. Leavis, probably the most influential figure in twentieth-century British criticism. In 1929 he met and married Q. D. Roth, subsequently known as Q. D. Leavis. He had written his doctoral thesis on the relationship between journalism and literature. She had written hers on popular fiction. These were revolutionary topics, and a certain excitement and glamour attached to this couple in the 1930s. In 1932 they founded an important journal called *Scrutiny* and produced it together for twenty-one years. As the title implies, it extended the 'close-reading' method beyond poetry to novels and other material.

Leavis's faults as a critic are that his close readings often turn out to contain lengthy quotations on which there is surprisingly little comment. The assumption is that the competent reader will see there what Leavis sees. As has been said of him, he often gives the impression that he is analysing the text when he is really just paraphrasing it. Secondly, his approach to literature is overwhelmingly moral; its purpose is to teach us about life, to transmit humane values. His critical terms are never properly defined. He famously refused the invitation offered by the critic René Wellek in the 1930s that he should 'spell out the principles on which he operated in a more explicit way than hitherto'. The result was one more degree of isolation for literary studies. In the period of its growth just surveyed, it claimed independence from language studies, from historical considerations, and from philosophical questions. The consensus which held the subject together from the 1930s to the 1960s rested upon the acceptance of these demarcations. The 'project' of 'theory' from the 1960s onwards is in essence to re-establish connections between literary study and these three academic fields from which it had so resolutely separated itself.

Ten tenets of liberal humanism

The personal account on pp. 9–10 mainly responds to the second and third of the four questions given earlier. I'm now going to

expand on the implications of the fourth question, which asked what it is, exactly, that we learn when we 'do' English in the traditional way. Of course, we learn things about specific books and authors, but I mean here the more general values and attitudes which we absorb from English, and which remain as a kind of distilled essence of the subject when all these specific details have been forgotten. These are not usually formulated and stated, but they are, in a sense, all the more real for that, being simultaneously both pervasive and invisible. They can only be brought to the surface by a conscious effort of will, of the kind we are now trying to make. So what follows is a list of some of the elements which seem to constitute this 'distilled essence' of the subject, that is, the corpus of attitudes, assumptions, and ideas which we pick up, probably unawares, as we do it. These seem to have been what we were learning when we studied English – these are the values and beliefs which formed the subject's half-hidden curriculum:

1. The first thing, naturally, is an attitude to literature itself; good literature is of timeless significance; it somehow transcends the limitations and peculiarities of the age it was written in, and thereby speaks to what is constant in human nature. Such writing is 'not for an age, but for all time' (as Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare): it is 'news which stays news' (Ezra Pound's definition of literature).
2. The second point is the logical consequence of the first. The literary text contains its own meaning within itself. It doesn't require any elaborate process of placing it within a context, whether this be:
 - (a) *Socio-political* – the context of a particular social 'background' or political situation, or
 - (b) *Literary-historical* – whereby the work could be seen as the product of the literary influences of other writers, or as shaped by the conventions of particular genres, or
 - (c) *Autobiographical* – that is, as determined by the personal details of the author's life and thought.

Of course, as scholars, most academics would assert the value

- of studying these contexts, but as critics their adherence to the approach which insists upon the primacy and self-sufficiency of the 'words on the page' commits them to the process which has been called 'on-sight close reading'. Essentially, this removes the text from all these contexts and presents it 'unseen' for unaided explication by the trained mind.
3. To understand the text well it must be detached from these contexts and studied in isolation. What is needed is the close verbal analysis of the text without prior ideological assumptions, or political pre-conditions, or, indeed, specific expectations of any kind, since all these are likely to interfere fatally with what the nineteenth-century critic Matthew Arnold said was the true business of criticism, 'to see the object as in itself it really is'.
 4. Human nature is essentially unchanging. The same passions, emotions, and even situations are seen again and again throughout human history. It follows that continuity in literature is more important and significant than innovation. Thus, a well-known eighteenth-century definition of poetry maintains that it is 'what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed'. Likewise, Samuel Johnson famously denigrated Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy* on the grounds of its novelty, that is, its originality.
 5. Individuality is something securely possessed within each of us as our unique 'essence'. This transcends our environmental influences, and though individuality can change and develop (as do characters in novels), it can't be transformed – hence our uneasiness with those scenes (quite common, for instance, in Dickens) which involve a 'change of heart' in a character, so that the whole personality is shifted into a new dimension by force of circumstance – the miser is transformed and changes his ways, or the good man or woman becomes corrupted by wealth. Such scenes imply a malleability in the essence of character which is at odds with this underlying assumption of English studies. The discipline as a whole believed in what is now called the 'transcendent subject', which is the belief that the individual ('the subject') is antecedent to, or transcends, the forces of society, experience,

- and language.
6. The purpose of literature is essentially the enhancement of life and the propagation of humane values; but not in a programmatic way: if literature, and criticism, become overtly and directly political they necessarily tend towards propaganda. And as Keats said, 'we distrust literature which has a palpable design upon us', that is, literature which too obviously wants to convert us or influence our views.
 7. Form and content in literature must be fused in an organic way, so that the one grows inevitably from the other. Literary form should not be like a decoration which is applied externally to a completed structure. Imagery, for instance, or any other poetic form which is detachable from the substance of the work in this way, rather than being integrated with it, is merely 'fanciful' and not truly 'imaginative' (the distinction made by Coleridge in the *Biographia Literaria*).
 8. This point about organic form applies above all to 'sincerity'. Sincerity (comprising truth-to-experience, honesty towards the self, and the capacity for human empathy and compassion) is a quality which resides within the language of literature. It isn't a fact or an intention *behind* the work, which could be gleaned by comparing, say, a poet's view of an event with other more 'factual' versions, or from discovering independent, external information about an author's history or conduct. Rather, sincerity is to be discovered within the text in such matters as the avoidance of cliché, or of over-inflated forms of expression; it shows in the use of first hand, individualistic description, in the understated expression of feeling, whereby (preferably) the emotion is allowed to emerge implicitly from the presentation of an event. Moreover, when the language achieves these qualities, then the truly sincere poet can transcend the sense of distance between language and material, and can make the language seem to 'enact' what it depicts, thus apparently abolishing the necessary distance between words and things.
 9. Again, the next idea follows from the previous one. What is valued in literature is the 'silent' showing and demonstrating of something, rather than the explaining, or saying, of it.

Hence, ideas as such are worthless in literature until given the concrete embodiment of 'enactment'. Thus, several of the explicit comments and formulations often cited in literary history contain specific denigrations of ideas as such and have a distinct anti-intellectual flavour to them. Here we see the elevation of the characteristic 'Eng Lit' idea of *tactile enactment*, of sensuous immediacy, of the concrete representation of thought, and so on. According to this idea (which is, of course, itself an idea, in spite of the fact that the idea in question is a professed distrust of ideas) words should mime, or demonstrate, or act out, or sound out what they signify, rather than just representing it in an abstract way. This idea is stated with special fervency in the work of F. R. Leavis. (For a critique of the 'enactment' idea see 'The Enactment Fallacy', by the present author, in *Essays in Criticism*, July 1980. For a general discussion see James Gribble's *Literary Education: a Reevaluation*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, Chapter 2).

10. The job of criticism is to interpret the text, to mediate between it and the reader. A theoretical account of the nature of reading, or of literature in general, isn't useful in criticism, and will simply, if attempted, encumber critics with 'preconceived ideas' which will get between them and the text. Perhaps in this phrase 'preconceived ideas' we get another glimpse into the nature of this pervasive distrust of ideas within liberal humanism, for there seems to be the notion that somehow *all* ideas are 'preconceived', in the sense that they will come between the reader and text if given half a chance. There is, in fact, the clear mark here of what is called 'English empiricism', which can be defined as a determination to trust only what is made evident to the senses or experienced directly. Ultimately this attitude goes back at least to the philosophy of John Locke (1632–1704), which gives a philosophical expression to it. His book *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) puts forward the view that ideas are formed when direct sense impressions from the world are imprinted on the mind. The mind then assembles these, so giving rise to the process of thinking. Locke rejected introspective speculation as a source of valid knowledge and

insisted on the need for direct experience and evidence of things. Traditional English studies, we might say, has always been Lockean in this sense.

The above list contains a series of propositions which I think many traditional critics would, on the whole, subscribe to, if they were in the habit of making their assumptions explicit. Together, ideas like these, and the literary practice which went with them, are now often referred to as 'liberal humanism'.

Literary theorising from Aristotle to Leavis – some key moments

So far I have perhaps given the impression that theoretical positions about literature were never explicitly formulated by liberal humanists, at least in Britain, and that everything remained implicit. Yet a widely current body of theoretical work existed from the start within English studies, and references were often made to it in books and essays. The average student or teacher of 'Eng Lit' up to the 1970s would probably have had a fairly limited direct contact with this body of work, since the whole thrust of the subject was away from this kind of generalised position-taking.

What, then, constituted the body of theory about literature that has existed for many centuries as an available under-pinning for the study of literature, even if literary students seldom had any extensive first hand acquaintance with it? Well, the material goes back to Greek and Latin originals. Critical theory, in fact, long pre-dates the literary criticism of individual works. The earliest work of theory was Aristotle's *Poetics*, which, in spite of its title, is about the nature of literature itself: Aristotle offers famous definitions of tragedy, insists that literature is about character, and that character is revealed through action, and he tries to identify the required stages in the progress of a plot. Aristotle was also the first critic to develop a 'reader-centred' approach to literature, since his consideration of drama tried to describe how it affected the audience. Tragedy, he said, should stimulate the emotions of pity and fear, these being, roughly, sympathy for and empathy