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WORKS ON THE FICTION CRITICISM OF F.R. LEAVIS

K.ESWARA REDDY¹, K.VIJAYA BHASKAR REDDY²

^{1,2}Assistant Professor in English

K.S.R.M College of Engineering

Kadapa , A.P, INDIA



K.ESWARA REDDY



K.VIJAYA BHASKAR REDDY

ABSTRACT

We find the earliest criticism on the fiction criticism of F.R. Leavis in 1958 in George Steiner's *Language and Silence*. George Steiner regards Leavis as a better critic of fiction than of poetry. According to him Leavis admitted that the novel had concentrated the major energies "after the decline of the epic and the verse drama."¹ He admires Leavis for bringing about revaluation in the criticism of English novel with his comparison of *The Heart of Darkness* with *Macbeth*. But he denounces his obsession for Lawrence, his omission of Dickens from the great tradition, his preference of *Hard Times* to *Bleak House*, his absolute choice between Lawrence and James Joyce and his unwillingness to welcome anything new.

Keywords : Criticism, Fiction, Decline, Revaluation, Tradition

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A.Alvarez traces the influence of *The Calendar of Modern Letters* and Q.D. Leavis's *Fiction and The Reading Public on Scrutiny*. W.J. Harvey disagrees with the view of Leavis that *The Mill on the Floss* fails on account of the idealization of Maggie. He thinks that the failure of this novel is due to the disproportion of its structure. He believes that Leavis does less than justice to *Adam Bede* when he denies its greatness. When Leavis asks about Arthur Donnithorne and Hatty Scoreel episode, "Does one want ever to read that large part of the book again?,"² Harvey replies, "Yes, I do want to read that part of the book again and it does gain by re-reading".³

He disagrees with the view of Leavis that Dorothea in *Middlemarch* achieves maturity only in the first few chapters. He extends her mature treatment upto the death of Casaubon.

W.W. Robson shares Leavis's praise of the earlier part of *The Rainbow* which contains pastoral idyllic beauty. He agrees with the judgment of Leavis that the Lawrence of *The Rainbow* is the successor of the George Eliot of *The Mill on the Floss*.⁴ Yet he does not spare Leavis about his weaknesses. He denounces his method of analyzing the novel which, though illuminating, does not bring out the total structure of work. He does not regard the Birkin- Ursula relationship in *Women in Love* as setting up a standard because Birkin, he

believes, is a sick man. There is excellent criticism on Leavis in *F.R. Leavis: Some Aspects of His Work* (1963). Which includes essays by Narasimhaiah, Betsky, essay "Leavis, Lawrence, and The State of Criticism". He proposes to establish Lawrence's influence on Leavis's work. But he does not work out the proposal. He studies "the significance of Leavis for Lawrences's"⁵. He remarks that Leavis changes the conventional view that Lawrence was a genius and not an artist, and feels delighted in his belief that "the new Lawrence caught on"⁶. He does not know that Leavis's partial Judgment of Lawrence has not been accepted.

John Gross blames Leavis for excluding important writers from his tradition and for making absolute choice between Lawrence and Joyce. He challenges, like R.P. Bilan, Leavis's concept of tradition⁷. He blames him for being uncritical about his favourite authors. Like Buckley's book, Ronald Hayman's *Leavis* is a landmark in the history of criticism on Leavis. Unlike Steiner, Hayman regards Leavis as a better critic of poetry than of fiction. He finds the chapter of Leavis on James unsatisfactory. But he agrees with his view that James's art declined in his last novels. Some penetrating criticism on Leavis is found in *William Empson and F.R. Leavis* (1976) written by Cicely Havely and Richard Allen. The "Preliminary" to this book is written by Graham Martin who believes that the moral and formal elements run parallel in the criticism of Leavis.⁸ Garry Watson observes that the wisdom of Leavises did not "drop out of the sky."⁹ He says that the achievement of Leavis could not have been possible without the influence of Eliot and Lawrence.

Critics have praised Leavis either for his poetry criticism or for his fiction-criticism. *But Robert Boyers in his book F.R. Leavis* (1978) discards such a view¹⁰. Though he endorses some of the views of Leavis he is very critical of his weaknesses. He denounces him for changing his views about Dickens without recantation. He criticizes him for excluding many important novelists from his tradition. He selects for his criticism two novelists, Henry James and Lawrence in Leavis's tradition.

He believes that James does not fully satisfy qualifications laid down for the novelists by Leavis in *The Great Tradition*. He agrees with Leavis for his rejection of the late novels of James. But he objects to his equivocating about *The Portrait of a Lady* which he finds in a comparative analysis with Daniel Deronda "deficient."¹¹

He criticizes Leavis for his "operation" on Daniel Doranda. He disagrees with his view that Gwendolen Harleth is a better novel than *The Portrait of a Lady*. He, however, crowns him with honour when he says that "if Leavis's stature as a great critic is still open to debate, the reason may have to do with our uncertainty about standards of evaluation than with any radical incapacities in Leavis or in his work"¹²

Edward Greenwood offers an illuminating study of Leavis's criticism. He remarks that Leavis does not suffer from the parti-pris of the practioners.¹³

R.P. Bilan is one fo the greatest critics of Leavis. Like Steiner, he regards Leavis as a better critic of fiction than of poetry. He states, like good heart, that Leavis prefers "cultural tradition" to "traditional culture."¹⁴ He explains Leavis's concept of the novel as dramatic poem. He thinks that whereas Leavis's poetry-criticism lays emphasis on language, his novel-criticism lays emphasis on the moral aspect. He is not surprised by Leavis's high praise of Dickens in *Dickens the Novelist* (1970). He believes that this high praise is inherent in Leavis's account of Dickens in *The Great Tradition* (1948). He is very harsh on some of the concepts of Leavis. He exposes and flays him. He disapproves of his concept of the great tradition. He thinks that Leavis's definition of influence as "the realization of unlikeness"¹⁵ is "vague."¹⁶ He takes Leavis to task for forcing Conrad into the tradition and outsting Hardy form it. He thinks that Leavis has abandoned the great tradition because he compares Dickens not with other novelists but with Shakespeare and Blake. He condemns the view of Graham Hough that Leavis writers as a moral critic He argues that though, for Leavis, the work is moral, the moral value of a work depends on its being a work of art.¹⁷ But he contradicts when he says that Leavis is a Marxist critic in his criticism on *Silas Marner* and *Hard Times*. He thinks that though Leavis judges by criteria, yet he does't formulate them. He discusses the two criteria of Leavis' the relationship between fiction and morality and, the affirmation of life implicit in his novel-criticism. He discusses at length Leavis's evaluation of Lawrence. He thinks that *Thought, Words. And Creativity* (1976) does not contain anything new to his criticism on Lawrence.

He disagrees with Leavis that Lawrence was formed by tradition. He argues that Lawrence's criterion "normative", which Leavis uses for the first time in *D.H. Lawrence: Novelist* (1955) is "a more specific way of characterizing Lawrence's affirmation of life".¹⁸ He complains that sometimes Leavis bends this criterion to suit Lawrence's aberration from it. He believes that whereas for Leavis intelligence is conscious and critical, for Lawrence it is unconscious and creative.

William Walsh can be included in the galaxy of such great critics of Leavis as Vincent Buckley, Ronald Hayman, Robert Boyers, Edward Greenwood and R.P. Bilan. He admires Leavis for treating Fielding, Richardson, C. Bronte, and L.H. Myres "with insight and sympathy".¹⁹

The praise can be only partially justified. The reason is that though Leavis possess insight, yet he is not sympathetic to some of these novelists. He believes that we have in Leavis a trinity of critics. His early work "belongs to the Johnsonian persona, the longer middle to the Arnoldian and the final period to the Coleridgian"²⁰.

He thinks that "Leavis was Johnsonian in temperament, Arnoldian in the practice of criticism and Coleridgian in his conclusions".²¹

This study shows that there are many aspects in Leavis's criticism which have not been touched on. Our efforts will be to investigate the aspects which still remain untouched.

CONCLUSION

Leavis has been praised by critics both for his poetry- criticism and for his fiction-criticism. Ronald Hayman in his book *Leavis* exalts Leavis's poetry-criticism above his fiction-criticism. But, as we have seen, Leavis's inclination lies in fiction-criticism. He judges the poets especially by the principle of life, and, as a consequence, fiction above poetry. As he is a moral critic, he mostly exalts life above language. Moreover, he annihilates the distinction of genre when he praises the novelists as poets and their novels as dramatic poems. He regards the novels like *The Europeans*, *Silas Marner* and *Hard Times* as moral fables and the more complex novels like *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* as dramatic poems. This elimination of the distinction of genre is not a new thing in English criticism. Wordsworth had eliminated the difference between prose and poetry with the remark that "there neither is, nor can be any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition.

Notes

1. *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958), p. 258
2. Leavis's words in *The Great Tradition*, p.37. quoted by Harvey in *The Art of George Eliot*, p.164.
3. *The Art of George Eliot*, p.165.
4. *Critical Essays* (London: Routledge & Keganpaul, 1966), p.272
5. *F.R. Leavis; Some Aspects of His Work*, p. 127.
6. *Ibid.*, p.130
7. *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* (Palican books,1973), p.303.
8. *William Empson and F.R.Leavis* 1976;rpt. Walton Hall, Milton Keynes: The Open University press, 1980)p.5.
9. *The Leavises, The Social and The Left* (Brynmill: The Brynmill publishing Company, 1977),p.229.
10. *F.R. Leavis: Judgment and the Discipline of Thought* (London: University of Missouri Press, 1978),p.69
11. *Ibid.*, p.72
12. *Ibid.*, p.2
13. *F.R. Leavis* (London: Longman Group, 1978), p.15.
14. Leavis's words quoted by R.P. Bilan in *The Literary Criticism of F.R. Leavis* (London: Cambridge University press, 1979), p.37.
15. Leavis's words in *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (London & windus, 1948), p.10, quoted by Bilan in *The Literary Criticism of F.R. Leavis*, p.140.
16. *The Literary Criticism of F.R. Leavis*, p.140.
17. *Novel*, IX, 3 (spring 1976), p. 204.
18. *The Literary Criticism of F.R. Leavis*, p.231.

19. *F.R. Leavis* (London : Chatto & Windus, 1980), p.75.
 20. *Ibid.*, p.37
 21. *Ibid.*, p.37

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