

F. R. Leavis, or the Function of Criticism under Specialist Modernity

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Literary criticism's most important function is to try books as to the influence which they are calculated to have upon the general culture of single nations or of the world at large. Of this culture literary criticism is the appointed guardian.

-- Matthew Arnold, "The Bishop and the Philosopher," *Essays* 41.

One of the interesting facts in the history of English criticism is that a series of (quasi-) manifestoes with the title 'the function of criticism' have appeared recurrently in the course of deepening modernity since Arnold's epoch-making essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864). This Arnoldian title, continually employed as one way of intervening in literary and social realities and reflecting more than the individual critic's tastes and sensibilities, has been forming a kind of order among the writings with the same title as the critical discourse of modernity in modern criticism. The title serves for the map of contemporary values and preoccupations under ever-changing modernity, always demanding to read those writings as the function of criticism at the contemporary stage of modernity. It is that by speaking of "the 'function' of anything", as Eliot points out, "we are likely to be thinking of what the thing *ought* to do rather than of what it does do or has done" (*Poetry* 15). It is true of the function of criticism. Behind the critic's concern with what criticism *ought* to do "today, here and now," in response to what it does do or has done or rather to the "present literary discontents," lies the persistent urge to address the critical function under the Arnoldian essay title as a

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"stalking-horse," to put it in Bateson's words ("Function" 1). It is how modern criticism finds its way to the present-centred circumstantial project of modernity, which is to say, as Said reminds us, criticism comes to be "always situated; sceptical, secular, reflectively open to its own failings" under modernity (26).

Frank Raymond Leavis (1895-1978), in this sense, is no exception particularly in his essay "The Responsible Critic: or the Function of Criticism at Any Time" (1953). For the function of criticism also turns out to be a "main preoccupation" in his present-centred project of modernity ("Task" 83). Leavis the "engaged" critic even observes that Eliot's essay "The Function of Criticism" (1923), by omitting from its title the Arnoldian limiting phrase 'at the Present Time', "proceeds in terms of a generality" with a "blankness about the here and now" (*Valuation* 124). It suggests that Leavis's own essay with the tricky title is to be read as 'the function of criticism at any *present* time'. In addition, it was primarily an extended controversy that prompted him to write this essay, for it was a response to F. W. Bateson's manifesto with another Arnoldian title "The function of Criticism at the Present time" (1953). And it was more than a historical accident that Leavis wrote this significant document for the penultimate issue of the journal *Scrutiny*: chronologically, this essay marks the end of the first half of his critical activities centred on *Scrutiny* (1932-1953) and the beginning of a new life devoted more freely to a "fresh approach to fundamentals" at the same time (*Principle* 12). Now in the very middle of his critical career, unlike Arnold and Eliot who were also challenged to write respectively on the same topic at the early stage of their critical activities, Leavis is given an opportunity to restate his main conceptions "with the changing suggestiveness" of a critical purpose (57). The essay, for this reason, provides a vantage point from which to perceive as a coherent whole Leavis's critical project to cope with various kinds of

cultural disintegration, to re-establish an "educated public," and to secure the status of English studies as a liaison centre at the university, in the age of specialized modernity.

I

Leavis, from the beginning, engages himself with the soul of man under modernity. He hardly shows any interest in the age before Shakespeare, and his only concern is with the formation of modernity or rather with the age in which the "technologico-Benthamite" modernity cannot produce a Shakespeare or sustain the "Shakespearean use of language" any longer (*Sword* 184; *Pursuit* 123). He describes modernity as "unprecedented", "irreversible", "inevitable" (*Principle* 67): "triumphant modernity" in the "Machine Age" has seen the "organic community" disappear, cultural traditions disintegrate, the "quantity-addicted" civilisation predominate, and various kinds of reductionism irreversible (11 & 58). Likewise, for Leavis, the contemporary state of affairs has its direction determined already in the long process of modernity originated in the great seventeenth-century change propelled by the "machine-applied power" (*Environment* 3). It is one phase, in the course of ever-deepening modernity, characterized with "cultural disintegration, mechanical organization and constant rapid change" (*Anti-Philosopher* 127).

In effect, in his view, what the Civil War did in the seventeenth century the 1914 Great War did in his own age: "prodigiously [accelerating] the inherent processes of our civilization," it has "so rapidly achieved that portentous cultural change" (*Thought* 36). Along the way, he argues, the Second World War, "by providing imperious immediate ends and immediately all-sufficient motives," "has produced a simplification that enables the machinery, now more

tyrannically complex than ever before, to run with marvelous efficiency" (*Education* 23). Full of the consciousness of "great and rapid changes," he describes his age in a range of ways (*Literature* 39): "the machinery becomes more and more overwhelming" (*Valuation* 36); "the traditions are bankrupt, the cultures uprooted and withering" (*Bearings* 165); "the gap in continuity is almost complete" ("Babbitt" 279); "rapid and immense change is in front of us" (*Literature* 184); "the problem is to avoid both a breakdown of the machinery and its triumph" (*Education* 24); "humanity has a desperate sense of the vacuum" (*Thought* 146); the "helplessness is ours" (152). At the "deep sick centre of the modern psyche," he goes on, there lie "spiritual philistinism," "reductive enlightenment," "general blankness" and the "vacuity of life in a technological world" (*Sword* 122, 110, 206, 142 & 181). All these descriptions amount to his sense of "present human crisis" (*Thought* 15). He grasps the age in terms of sweeping dissolution and drastic discontinuity when he says that it is a "period marked by a collapse of standards" (*Literature* 56).

The contemporary stage of modernity, according to Leavis, proposes problems different from those of Arnold's age, for "one must face problems of definition and formulation where Arnold could pass lightly on" (*Education* 143). The fundamental difference in the course of modernity is that, if it was possible for Arnold just to see his age as an epoch of expansion, Leavis perceives his own as an age of overwhelming disintegration. One of the problematic facts would be that, as the compartmentalisation of knowledge renders standards extensively dissolved, the age sees "the same words" employed "with different meanings" in different areas of specialized knowledge, to put it in Eliot's words (*Wood* 9). As a result, for Leavis, it is all but impossible to acquire "Arnoldian distinction" or discrimination as one goes along in this age of advanced modernity (*Valuation* 214):

The modern is exposed to a concourse of signals so bewildering in their variety and number that, unless he is especially gifted or especially favoured, he can hardly begin to discriminate. Here we have the plight of culture in general. The landmarks have shifted, multiplied and crowded upon one another, the distinctions and dividing lines have blurred away, the boundaries are gone, and the arts and literatures of different countries and periods have flowed together.

("Mass Civilization and Minority Culture," *Education* 158)

Modernity is no longer the world in which you can tell directions by way of inherited wisdom. It is rather the age of a concourse of signals and a multiplicity of ever-shifting landmarks. Behind the modern kind of heterogeneity, for Leavis, lies the complexity which Eliot identifies as an index of compartmentalised modernity: "when there is so much to be known, when there are so many fields of knowledge, it becomes increasingly difficult for anyone to know whether he knows what he is talking about or not" (*Wood* 10 & qtd. in *Education* 158). Leavis, in the above passage, echoes Arnoldian two-world vision: traditional standards no longer hold good, but the 'signals' and 'landmarks' which the age provides are too heterogeneous for new ones to be born out of. Standards of Leavis's conception are none other than the ideological order of things which, manifesting itself in "collaborative interplay," secures for a society homogeneity in a living tradition (*Literature* 57). For lack of discrimination or "implicit standards" which "order the finer living of an age," modernity finds itself losing the sense of direction in an ironical situation (*Education* 144): as specialized knowledge is confined to its own isolated compartment at the highest level, it becomes difficult everywhere below to make 'distinctions', draw 'dividing lines' and set up the boundaries. In this age of specialization, in Leavis's view, modernity undergoes a wider bifurcation of specialized 'high-brow'

and popular culture than the eighteenth-century separation of sophisticated polite culture from popular one (*Education* 164).

The sense of boundless "directionlessness" (*Bearings* 64), Leavis sees, culminates in the dissolution of the "Common Reader" (*Education* 107), who has represented the "standards of criticism", in the course of modernity (*Karenina* 223). As for critical standards, he argues, it is the "common mind" or "something more-than-individual" that is a necessary condition particularly "in a civilization of which the machinery becomes more and more overwhelming" (221). It is why he shows a consistent concern for the vanished "reading public" in his conceptualization of an educated public as a "centre of concentration and a maintainer of standards," and a "minority," as the "core" of that educated public, who can "change the spiritual climate" (*Sword* 204).¹ He sometimes calls them the "critically adult public" (*Education* 159) and a "strong educated nucleus" respectively (*Sword* 215). Insofar as critical standards are concerned, the "disintegration of the educated reading public" means for Leavis that the critical function has also failed even if it might be only "one aspect of a very large and complex fact" (*Bearings* 185). For this reason, in the essay of our primary concern, "The Responsible Critic: or The Function of Criticism at Any Time," he argues that the "function of criticism at the present time" has "its fulfilment" in the creating of such a kind of "intelligent public" and in it of "a valid sense of the contemporary chart" as well (*Valuation* 204).

¹ Leavis's life-long interest in readership goes back to his PhD research work on "The Relationship of Journalism and Literature: Studied in the Rise and Earlier Development of the Press in England" (1924), in which Leavis, according to Ian MacKillop, "[focusing] on the eighteenth century," "surveyed journalism from the Elizabethan period to that of the great reviews, the *Edinburgh* and the *Quarterly*, of the nineteenth century," and out of which, MacKillop goes on, there emerged a "sociological" theme about "different readership groups" later in Leavis's own works and particularly in his wife Q. D. Leavis's PhD dissertation *Fiction and the Reading Public* in 1932 (71).

Now in terms of an 'educated public', for Leavis, ever-changing modernity betrays another historical difference between his and Arnold's times that Arnold could address, and rely on, a "large and immensely influential educated class" (*Literature* 43). In reality, Arnold allows Leavis to catch a glimpse of the integrity of the 'educated public', when he says in the essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" that "whoever sets himself to see things as they are will find himself one of a very small circle; but it is only by this small circle resolutely doing its own work that adequate ideas will ever get current at all" (*Essays* 274). The fact that there existed "so generous a provision of organs", that is, "established reviews, magazines and journals", which addressed a "cultivated, informed and morally responsible public" in the Victorian age, for Leavis, bears witness to the "existence of such a public on a large scale" (*Valuation* 252). Leavis differentiates this public both from a mere "*public* public" and from the "coterie" with the elitist "consciousness of solidarity" (*Letters* 44), because it is characterized as a "coherent, educated and influential reading-public ... capable of responding intelligently and making its [corroborative] response felt" (*Karenina* 192), only in whose existence "standards are 'there' for the critic to appeal to" (*Valuation* 244). His idea, in a sense, is a derivative of Arnoldian "aliens" or "remnant" who are not affected by their class ideologies but led by "the general humane spirit and love of human perfection" (*Anarchy* 146). It is why Leavis thinks the 'educated public' cannot be a social class "in the Benthamite and post-Marxist way": comprehending "people of widely varied social position, economic self-interest and political standing", he goes on, it is "conditioned by the diversity of presumable bent and its lack of anything like ideological unity" (*Sword* 213). In Leavis's view, it transpires, an educated public is an influential entity which provides a

whole society homogeneous standards over "sectional interest or bias" (213).

Among the great rapid changes which the 1914 War precipitated, however, Leavis sees the absence of an educated reading public evidenced in the early demise of a literary journal, *The Calendar of Modern Letters* (1925-1927) (*Thought* 141). It means, for him, the educated and cultivated cannot show their previous collaborative and creative participation in fine values any longer in the climate of the advanced technological age. A "real educated public," he goes on, would be equipped with "the profound active knowledge that human nature and human need transcend the blind assumptions of technologico-Benthamism" (*Sword* 205). Without re-integrating those blind and indifferent individuals into a proper conscious and influential public, in his view, there could not be the "general sensibility of an age to which the individual sensibility ... is always related" (*Valuation* 247), for "the contemporary sensibility is 'there' in a responsive educated public" ("Renaissance" 68). It is inevitable, for him, that the disappearance of an educated public should also lead to the complete failure of the country's "continuity of consciousness" and its "conservation of collective experience": in the absence of this human agency, he goes on, "what has lapsed is lost or ceases to live as memory," and past literature is no longer a "living influence" (*Thought* 148 & 144). Where there is a "strong and vital educated public [representing] a living cultural continuity" against the technologico-Benthamite modernity (*Sword* 186), he argues, "the living principle will be a living presence" (*Principle* 69). It is why, after all the circumstantial differences in the course of ever-changing modernity, he still feels the need for an educated public as "representative and guarantor of the cultural continuity, without which there can be no hope of checking the confident destructive follies of enlightened statesmen, intellectuals, bureaucrats, educational

reformers" (*Sword* 159). This consciousness of cultural plight now awakens Leavis to the fact that, in terms of Althusserian ideological state apparatus, there is no other proper and "proposable" agent but the university for the establishment of another kind of effective educated public at the contemporary stage of modernity (*Literature* 183).

II

In Leavis's view, though, the university is not free from the "technologico-Benthamite ethos" of triumphant modernity, in which terms he postulates "the Idea of a University" in his project of criticism. In his Idea, more than anything else, the university assumes the role of a "creative centre, for the civilized world, of real human responsibility" in the technological world, because, if properly conceived, it is "the only place where standards *can* be maintained" (*Sword* 151). It may not be an "ultimate human goal," but it is the only place in which he finds "the answer to a present extremely urgent need of civilization" (27). It is why he sometimes calls it "a nucleus ... of the great public," or "the spiritual community the country needs as its mind and conscience" (*Literature* 30). The universities, for him, are 'recognized symbols of cultural tradition ... still conceived as a direct force', "having an authority that should check and control the blind drive onward of material and mechanical development, with its human consequence" (*Education* 16). At the same time, though, he sees the modern university as a product of the specialist mentality derived from the division of labour in the process of mass-production: specialism in the university means the self-contained compartmentalisation of knowledge in the course of modernity, on the one hand, and on the other, as he points out, "the production of specialists ... tends to be regarded as the supreme end of the university,

its *raison d'être*" (*Education* 25). He is fully conscious that "advancing specialization" is, if not "necessary" in every respect, "inevitable" as a process of modernization (25).² The problem for him, however, is the "functionless purity of pure specialisms" (62): he asks, "What is the specialist's contribution if it is a contribution only to specialist knowledge and thought?" (*Literature* 166). It is that a "smattering, or even a good deal more, of half a dozen specialisms doesn't make an educated mind" (*Education* 26) and that fragments don't "adequately express the inadequacy [specialists] could not escape" ("Webb" 176).

With his penetrating consciousness of modernity that there is no reversal in the direction of fragmentising overspecialization, Leavis seeks to bridge the discrepancy between the Idea of a University and the modern university as it is. He elaborates on the function of the university as a "centre of consciousness for the community" at the contemporary stage of modernity (*Literature* 59):

An urgently necessary work ... is to explore the means of bringing the various essential kinds of specialist knowledge and training into effective relation with informed general intelligence, humane culture, social conscience and political will. Here, in this work, we have the function that is pre-eminently the university's; if the work is not done there it will not be done anywhere.

("The Idea of a University," *Education* 24)

² A typical response to Leavis's view of specialism comes from Francis Mulhern when he says that it is "manifestly inadequate simply to evade the objective contemporary need for specialists" (193). But it hardly bears scrutiny, because Leavis holds that some kinds of specialisation are obviously necessary under compartmentalised modernity. As always with his other discussions of modernity, however, Leavis's concern here is not with specialisation itself but with "how to train a kind of central intelligence by and through which [those kinds of specialisation] can, somehow, be brought into relation" (*Education* 25).

To achieve this goal in the modern university, in his view, a liberal education assumes a special role to play against modernity's overshadowing demand for specialism. In a similar spirit of the liberal arts in the medieval university, he proposes, "to restore in relation to the modern world the idea of a liberal education" (*Education* 18). He intends his ideal of a liberal education to stand for "non-specialist intelligence and sensibility" in the presence of all the other specialist disciplines (*Sword* 217): it is that a liberal education, for him, does not "start with a doctrinal frame," nor is it "directed at inculcating one" (*Education* 20). However, it does not necessarily follow that Leavis excludes the "indispensable positive parts" which specialist disciplines and specialist branches of knowledge have to play in the university or rather the "creative centre" of modern world (*Sword* 186). On the contrary, it is not a "mere collocation of specialist departments" that is a necessary condition for his interdisciplinary ideal of a liberal education (*Literature* 3), but "the co-presence of the different specialist disciplines and fields of study" in the modern university (*Sword* 98 & 203).

Against "the centrifugal forces of specialization" (Mulhern 109), in Leavis's critical project of modernity, the modern University needs a "focal centre in which the Idea of a University would be present and alive as it nowhere is now" (*Education* 65). To realize his ideal of a liberal education at the contemporary stage of modernity, he proposes the English School, and not, say, classics, to be a "liaison centre" (*Literature* 8) or "centre of co-ordination and of consciousness" amongst intra-university disciplines (*Education* 25). In this fact, his project manifests itself as a product of modernity. In the course of ever-changing modernity, Leavis's idea of a liaison centre which follows in the wake of Arnold's notion of critical function (*Essays* 41) obliquely echoes, and seeks to supersede, Kant's view of the status of philosophy as an autonomous arbiter over all the other faculties in the

late eighteenth-century university. Early at that stage of modernity, interestingly enough, Kant suggests that it would not be "a bad idea to handle the entire content of learning ... *like a factory*, so to speak by a division of labour" in "a kind of learned community called a *university*" (247). But he proposes to set the "lower faculty" of philosophy in conflict with, if not at war against, the "higher faculties" of law, theology and medicine, which division is made "with reference to the government rather than the learned professions" (248). In terms of modernity, as Bill Readings puts it, the contest of faculties is "entirely analogous to the conflict between tradition and reason ... that supposedly goes on in the breast of every truly fervent seeker after knowledge" in this age of Enlightenment (55). In contrast to the higher faculties conditioned heteronomously by their authority of established tradition and their influence on the people, according to Kant, philosophy is not only "independent of the government's command" but is also free to evaluate the other faculties' activities and to concern itself "with the interest of the sciences, that is, with truth" (249). At that stage of modernity, in his view, philosophy is the only faculty in which "reason is authorised to speak out publicly" and without which "the truth would not come to light" (249). On the juridical basis of reason, philosophy assumes the role of resolving inter-faculty conflicts in the Kantian university. In terms of a disinterested free play of reason, Kant identifies philosophy as "the queen of the sciences" which oversees all the higher faculties in the late eighteenth-century university (Readings 57).

As implied in the phrase of a 'liaison centre', on the other hand, Leavis does not necessarily make "a bid for English Literature as queen of studies" (MacKillop 239). Nor is Leavis "tempted to think of English as the evangelising presence among lesser breeds who must be taught the way to salvation" (*Sword* 186). For him, as Gary Day points out, university English is a modern institutionalization not only

"due to bureaucratic expansion" but also for "its complement" (229). Leavis sees English as a speciality amongst other university disciplines in this age of specialization under modernity, but literary studies, in his view, cannot remain merely another self-stultifying specialist "discipline of scholarly industry and academic method" (*Education* 7). English literature, he argues, is "magnificent and matchless in its diversity and range, and so full and profound in its registration of changing life" (*Literature* 60). In addition, he goes on, literary criticism is "a specific discipline ... of intelligence, with its own field, and its own approaches within that field" (*Literature* 45; *Valuation* 167). 'English', 'literary studies' and 'literary criticism' turn out to be employed in almost the same sense in his writing, for he thinks that 'English' is based on an idea of "the critical study of literature as a training of sensibility and intelligence" (*Education* 40):

'English' ... is a humane school, and the non-specialist intelligence in which the various studies are to find their centre is to be one that gets its own special training in literature. Its special but not specialist discipline is to be the literary-critical, a discipline of sensibility, judgement and thought which, of its essential nature, is concerned with training a non-specialist intelligence.

("A Sketch for an 'English School'," *Education* 43)

In this short passage, there are four Leavisian keywords for his conception of English as a university discipline: non-specialist, intelligence, special and sensibility. English or literary studies, in his vision, rise up to a 'liaison centre' by singularising themselves as a "discipline *sui generis* that is special though not specialist" in the age of specialized modernity (*Sword* 203). This nature of English as a unique university discipline, according to him, makes it possible to concern itself with "the profounder problems of our civilization" which "sociologists, social scientists, social workers, anti-racialists, statesmen, and the enlightened in general ignore" (122).

Leavis finds the non-specialist special virtue of literary studies in the two correlated facts. First, he characterizes them with their interdisciplinary concerns in that "they lead constantly outside themselves" into other fields, "controlled by a concern for the essential discipline" (*Valuation* 176 & 38; *Determinations* 2). As he himself illustrates already in his historiography of modernity, for example, literary studies not only give "an incomparable initiation into the idea of tradition" (*Valuation* 175) but "a study of tradition in literature" also "involves a great deal more than the literary" (*Education* 19). Through its "perception of relations with things and conditions outside the literary order" (*Valuation* 175), in his view, the nature of literary study ensures that the extra-literary knowledge contributes to "the creation of a human meaning" (*Literature* 96). In this sense, literary study which he locates "at the other extreme from mathematics" (65) involves "a consciousness of one's full human responsibility, purpose and the whole range of human valuations" (*Principle* 21). It means for him that, as a real literary interest is "in man, society and civilization," the boundaries of literary study "cannot be drawn" (*Pursuit* 200). But that is not the whole story at all. Leavis argues that even with their inter- or pan-disciplinary approach, say, the specialist "social studies ... cannot perform the function" of a "humane centre" (*Literature* 173), as they do not train "intelligence and sensibility together" (*Education* 34). He holds that any discipline, if not associated with the training of sensibility, "becomes, infallibly, 'academic' and barren" (120). It is only the literary-critical discipline, in his view, that "makes intelligence inseparable from sensibility" (*Sword* 204): that is to say, he goes on, literary criticism is "a training of intelligence that is at the same time a training of sensibility; a discipline of thought that is at the same time a discipline in scrupulous sensitiveness of response to delicate organisations of feeling, sensation and imagery" (*Education*

38). When he subtitles one of his essay collections, *The Living Principle*, as "'English' as a Discipline of Thought", he intends thought, as a "heuristic" or "living activity," to comprise intelligence and sensibility (12 & 41). In his synthetical vision, it is possible for literary criticism to grapple with specialised modernity because it approaches in terms of the unity of intelligence and sensibility.

When it comes to his critical project of modernity, it transpires, Leavis calls literary criticism "non-specialist" because it goes against the age's trend of academic compartmentalisation, and "special" because it is a "focus of cultural continuity" in the age of disintegration (*Literature* 60). Just as his discussion of the Idea of a university and the status of English in it begins with the problem of how to re-establish an educated public as a way of coping with fragmentising modernity, so is his critical project committed to the contemporary stage of modernity. His present-centred project goes so far as to be "anti-academic" in this age of specialist knowledge, in which he envisages English not confined to "the peculiarly academic academicism," but coming to be "the play of criticism that arises out of, or promises, a vigor of life in contemporary life" ("Task" 84). Insofar as literature goes, he argues, "a lack of interest in the present means usually an incapacity for any real interest ... in literature at all" (*Education* 130). He does not believe in "so much claiming permanent value" of great literature, for "inert concurrence in conventional valuations and reputations" gets "in the way of life" (*Anti-Philosopher* 24). By his repeated assertion that English literature has "its reality and life (if at all) only in the present" or not at all, he does not mean only to see in new literary creation the "continuation and development" of the past literature, or rather "the decisive, the most significant, contemporary life of tradition," but also to actualize the human meaning of the cultural past at the present stage of modernity (*Sword* 111 & 120, *Valuation* 130; *Revaluation* 9). If

"life is growth" (*Valuation* 223), as he puts it, the signification of literature "in and of our time," which is not necessarily the same as that in the original context, is performed in accordance with the age's demand (*Sword* 23). It is exactly the case with the function of criticism in his project of modernity, when he says that criticism is "concerned with the life in the present of the literature of the past" (*Valuation* 283). The disinterestedness of a critic which Leavis argues expresses "an intense interest in life" here and now (*Literature* 77), likewise, is not lifeless neutrality but a "living responsiveness, and therefore discriminating, and creative in regard to the sensibility of his time" (*Valuation* 137). This "right" kind of a critic's inevitable "partialness," in his view, is difficult to dismiss merely as "provincial" (*Literature* 179-80).

III

Now in the essay "The Responsible Critic: or The Function of Criticism at Any Time" culminates Leavis's critical project to run counter to compartmentalised modernity, which has not ceased its attempt to set up literary criticism as another specialist discipline. The age of specialization has witnessed in literary studies the "psychological" or "pseudo-scientific" enterprises (*Valuation* 205), the asking for the generalized philosophical norms in criticism (*Pursuit* 211), the attempt to demarcate literary scholarship from criticism, etc (*Valuation* 185). In opposition to the "scientifico-psychological ambition" in literary studies, to begin with, Leavis conceives his project of literary criticism as a non-specialist special discipline, on which he in turn elaborates against the venture to transform it to a more specialist discipline in philosophical or theoretical terms (*Pursuit* 135). Along the way, Leavis's essay of our

primary concern, as for its genesis, was an immediate response to F. W. Bateson's essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time". As implied in their similar titles, Bateson and Leavis did nothing other than emulate and appropriate Arnold's project in their different ways at the same stage of modernity. Their controversy, in other words, betrays which was the creative Arnoldian at their 'present' time. Through the polemics against the contemporaries, likewise, it was possible for Leavis to articulate the present-centred project of criticism in his synthetic vision.

When it comes to the modernity's demand for literary criticism to be a specialist discipline, first of all, the "neo-Benthamite" I. A. Richards catches Leavis's attention for his venture to recast critical analysis into a "laboratory technique" (*Pursuit* 135) and to reduce the English language of living culture to mechanical "Basic English" (*Education* 72). Leavis dismisses Richards's conception of "practical criticism," not only for its implicit dichotomous division from theoretical discussion but also because of its suggestion that it be "a specialized kind of gymnastic skill to be cultivated and practiced as something apart" (*Principle* 19). Richards thinks, according to Leavis, that "for the purpose of the new science," literary experience must be "reducible to unit impulses, so that evaluation may be quantitative" (*Pursuit* 134). In Richards's kind of practical criticism Leavis hardly finds a "perfect reading" about which there is "nothing in the nature of 'murdering to dissect' and ... laboratory-method" (*Education* 70). Proposing the "living principle" as opposed to practical criticism, on the contrary, Leavis prefers to call it "criticism in practice," which he particularises as "judgment and analysis" (*Principle* 19). In Leavis's view, not only is a sincere personal judgment, in whose collaborative interplay "values are established and a world created," "more than a mere external or conventional gesture" (*Valuation* 223 & 277), but analysis is also "not a dissection of

something that is already and passively there" (*Education* 70). When he defines 'analysis' as "a more deliberate following-through of the process of creation" in response to the "words on the page," he intends criticism to be no less "constructive and creative" than creation itself (70). It is that literary criticism, for him, is a "re-creation in which, by a considering attentiveness, we ensure a more than ordinary faithfulness and completeness" (70). It means that "what is ordinarily called 'creative criticism' is neither criticism nor creative" (*Valuation* 283) in his idiosyncratic sense that "the creativity in me is not mine it does not belong to me; yet I am responsible for what it does" (*Thought* 136). Both creation and criticism, in his view, depend on the collaborative kind of "human creativity that created the [living] language" (*Principle* 41).

The attempt to make literary criticism a kind of science, however, is not confined to Richards in this age of specialized modernity. It also finds its way into Northrop Frye: it manifests itself in his essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1954) which was later incorporated into "Polemical Introduction" to *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Under the Arnoldian essay title with which he engages our attention, Frye was convinced that he succeeded to both Arnold's and Eliot's critical project in his perspective "to see literature as showing a progressive evolution in time," in relation to which he seeks, by establishing the scientific study of critical genres, "the possibility of a critical progress toward a total comprehension of literature which no critical history gives any hint of" (667). He begins this ambitious project with the suggestion that "what if criticism is a science as well as an art?" (660). But what he means by art is in the sense that "the writing of history is an art" (660). Diagnosing that "literary criticism is now in such a state of nave induction as we find in a primitive science," he suggests that "it is time for criticism to leap to a new ground from which it can

discover what the organizing or containing forms of its conceptual framework are" (662). Unlike Leavis who sees literary criticism as "antithetically remote from mathematics" (*Principle* 21), Frye finds some parallel in both fields: just as "form and content become the same thing" in mathematics which, having begun with "a form of understanding an objective world regarded as its content," "conceives of the content as being itself mathematical in form," so can literature at first begin with "a commentary on an external 'life' or 'reality'" and end up with "an autonomous language" in "a verbal universe" (665-66). This 'verbal universe' is for Frye "the first postulate" of a science of criticism, in which life and reality are contained in "a system of verbal relationships" without any "direct reference to external criteria" (666). In his view, the 'verbal' universe is not only one of the compartmentalised universes which similarly "exist for all the arts," but it is also shared in by other specialist disciplines such as metaphysics and social sciences (666). In this argument, it is no wonder that Frye sees 'English literature' merely as "the miscellaneous pile of literary works that happened to get written in English" (663). In this way he relegates language to a "secondary aspect of literature" (663). In his new science of literary criticism, 'research' is naturally set in opposition to a 'value-judgment' of which Leavis thinks so highly, and criticism "proper" is deprived of value judgments which Frye suggests are likely to be "either unorganized and tentative or over-organized and irrelevant" (665 & 658).

The age of specialized modernity, by the same token, also witnesses the attempt to make literary criticism another 'philosophical' discipline. This aspect of modernity's demand turns up for Leavis to be problematic particularly in Rene Wellek's response to his own critical writings collected in *Revaluation* (1936). To sum up, Wellek's basic contention is that a critic should make his position or "assumptions" set out more explicitly, systematically and "abstractly"

into a theory in which the "ethical," "philosophical" and "aesthetic" presuppositions are involved (376, and qtd. in *Pursuit* 211). However, Leavis's immediate response is that a "philosophic training" in literary criticism will bring about the "consequences of queering one discipline with the habits of another," because criticism and philosophy are quite distinct and different kinds of discipline (*Pursuit* 213). 'Non-specialist' criticism, in Leavis's view, belongs to the different order of discourse from that of 'specialist' philosophy, which is to say that "the reading demanded by [concrete] poetry is of a different kind from that demanded by [abstract] philosophy" (212). He expatiates on the "perfect" or "complete" reading in literary criticism (*Education* 70; *Pursuit* 212):

Words in poetry invite us, not to 'think about' and judge but to 'feel into' or 'become'—to realize a complex experience that is given in the words. They demand, not merely a fuller-bodied response, but a completer responsiveness a kind of responsiveness—that is incompatible with the judicial, one-eye-on-the-standard approach. The critic—the reader of poetry—is indeed concerned with evaluation, but to figure him as measuring with a norm which he brings up to the object and applies from the outside is to misrepresent the process.

("Literary Criticism and Philosophy," *Pursuit* 212-13)

Leavis implicitly contrasts two different orders of discourse in this passage: if the theoretical discourse is to 'think about and judge' words with the standard 'from the outside', the literary-critical one is to 'feel into' or 'realize' them with the 'fuller-bodied response'. That is, it is possible and desirable in the former to generalize the given text, whereas the "constant concern" in the latter is "to enter into possession" of the text "in its concrete fullness" and then "to increase it" (213). For this reason, he argues, what the poet essentially

believes is not to be "most readily extracted ... from his works by a philosopher" (222).

Besides, for Leavis, the literary critic is not equipped with Procrustes's bed, but instead he works "in terms of concrete judgments and particular analyses" (215). In his view, as in Arnold's, literary criticism is not only circumstantial, but the 'complete' reading at which it aims is also far from dogmatic. In this way, Leavis characterizes the discourse of literary criticism with its inability "to disengage the dealings with principle from the practical criticism" (*Letters* 47). He thinks that, if a critic should be inspired and informed by the 'standard' or 'norm' 'from the outside', it is just by the 'living principle' which he defines as "an apprehended totality of what, as registered in the language, has been won or established in immemorial human living" (*Principle* 68). By the word 'apprehended' in this definition, he means that the living principle is "concrete," temporary, unfixed, unfinished and ever on its way (14). It means that the 'living principle' is not a theoretical assumption in the ordinary sense. In a sense, the conceptualization of the 'living principle' can be Leavis's idiosyncratic answer to the demand of theorization under modernity, which is based on his unswerving assurance that "it is necessary to have a strict literary criticism somewhere and to vindicate literary criticism as a distinct and separate discipline" even at the contemporary stage of specialized modernity (*Pursuit* 212).

In terms of the assumptions 'from the outside', on the other hand, F. W. Bateson assumes a more complicated aspect in the age of specialization when he seeks to establish literary studies as a socially responsible and academically respectable discipline by distinguishing historical scholarship from criticism proper. Already in the course of specialized modernity, Bateson observes in his Arnoldian essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," there have appeared extremely compartmentalised criticisms disregarding their "social

duty" irresponsibly, one of which trends, for example, he calls "Desert Island criticism" for lack of its consideration of "large poetic context"(12 & 11). However, in his view, the problem is that this kind of "critical irresponsibility" is more conspicuous at the 'present' time than at any other previous stage of modernity (12). The reason for him is that "modern criticism has lost the sense of literary context" (13). Bateson's fetishising of 'context' sounds like a variation of Eliot's "sense of fact" when the latter claims that factual information has "a value of its own, as history" (*Poetry & Poets* 117). But Bateson differentiates the knowledge of intrinsic 'context' from the information of extrinsic "background," actually identifying the latter with Eliot's "fact" (14). By 'context', on the other hand, he means "the framework of reference within which the work achieves meaning" in line with the historicist perspective (14). Without reconstructing the "human situation" in which the poem was written, he goes on, it is unavoidable to "misread" it, while the ignorance of its 'background' may make the poem "a little more difficult to understand" but with "no positive harm" (14).

Bateson's contention, in other words, is that to recover the full meaning of a literary text "we have to ask what [it] meant to [its] author and his original readers" in its "original social context," to which he asserts "there is no alternative except to invent the meanings ourselves" ("Reply" 307) or rather to make any "appropriation" in Sinfield's word (181). Defining 'appropriation' as "the attempt to juggle the text into acceptability" (182), Sinfield obliquely elaborates on Bateson's idea when he says "we must reconstruct the ideological specificity of the text in its original context, all the historical work involved, because otherwise we will slide back into the self-indulgence of finding what we want to find" (193). Fredric Jameson also means exactly the same thing when he exclaims "Always historicise!" (9). To put it in the Arnoldian way, their historicist

approach intends "to see the literary object as it is" in the original context, seeking to find "the real relevance of [past] literature ... precisely in its *otherness*" ("Postscript" 316; Sinfield 182). Against this kind of appropriation, Bateson argues, literary studies have to aspire to a more specialized "discipline of contextual reading" (19), in which the responsible "scholar-critic," "both critic *and* historian," reads literature as a kind of historical document ("Retrospect" 356), instead of treating "everything written in English as though it was written yesterday" ("Reply" 305). In terms of advancing modernity, Bateson can be said to follow its course, if obliquely, by proposing to develop compartmentalised criticisms into a specialist discipline.

One of the problems involved in Bateson's 'discipline of contextual reading', though, is that we cannot establish the 'original social context' correctly or fix what the literary text meant to its author and his original readers exactly. It is the same kind of problem as Arnold already pointed out when, formulating the phrase "to see the object as in itself it really is" for the first time, he discussed the translation of Homer: against one of the contemporary views that "the translator's first duty" is "to be *faithful*" to the original "with the greater care the more foreign it may happen to be," Arnold advises "the translators not to try to rear on the basis of *Iliad*, a poem that shall affect our countrymen as the original may be conceived to have affected its natural hearers" (*Tradition* 98). It is simply that "no one can tell how Homer affected the Greeks" (98-99). It is exactly what Leavis says of 'the discipline of contextual reading': he contends that "the total 'social context' that [Bateson] postulates is an illusion" (*Valuation* 196). According to Leavis, the further and wider one goes to reconstruct the original historical setting "from his reading in the period, the more is it *his* construction (insofar as he produces anything more than a mass of heterogeneous information alleged to be

relevant)" (196). To put it in Bateson's own words, the so-called 'context' cannot but turn out to be another kind of 'background'.

On the other hand, Leavis actually sees the text as its context itself, for the poem is "a determinate thing" (*Valuation* 197) or "something indubitably *there*" (196), by which statement he hardly means the poem is a kind of 'verbal icon' or 'well-wrought urn' to put it in the language of "New Criticism's cloistered aestheticism" (Eagleton, *Function* 85). On the contrary, for Leavis, a poem is far from a closed self-satisfying structure. It is "to creative literature, read *as* creative literature," in his view, that "we must look for our main insights into those characteristics of the 'social context' that matter most to the critic" (*Valuation* 196-97). Or rather, he argues, the most important kind of knowledge needed to approach a poem is to be acquired in "the intelligent, the literary-critical, frequentation of the poetry itself" of the same period and others as well (215 & 185). He goes on to argue that the literary-critical approach, unlike other specialist disciplines, is "the way to an essential knowledge an essential understanding of the past that cannot be got in any other way" (216), that is, the way "out of one's personal living (which inevitably is in the twentieth century)" (*Valuation* 198). It means that unlike what is presupposed in the historicist 'discipline of contextual reading', in Leavis's view, "literature must be different for every age" (*Literature* 8).³

³ Eliot seems to have been also conscious of this controversy between Bateson and Leavis when he says, in "The Frontiers of Criticism" (1956), of factual information "about a poet's period, the conditions of the society in which he lived, the ideas current in his time implicit in his writings, [and] the state of the language in his period": "the purpose of acquiring such knowledge," he contends, "is not primarily that we should be able to project ourselves into a remote period, ... to think and feel, when reading the poetry, as a contemporary of the poet might have thought and felt, though such experience has its own value; it is rather to divest ourselves of the limitations of our age, and the poet, whose work we are reading, of the limitations of *his* age, in order to get the direct experience, the immediate contact with his poetry" (*Poetry & Poets* 117). His view, however, turns out to be quite conventional and, for that reason, hardly compatible with either Bateson's or Leavis's when he goes on to

Leavis's response, likewise, is hardly so simple as to be reducible to a variation of the conventional conflict between organism and historicism under modernity (Ashcroft 3). The reason for Leavis's challenge to Bateson's project is that it may possibly mislead the living reader to pursue the dead contextual meaning and to ignore the living significance which a given literary text assumes at the present time. It is not in its historical context that Leavis, unlike Bateson, is intended to embody the Arnoldian spirit 'to see the object as in itself it really is', but instead here and now at the 'present' moment. Leavis is convinced that "only out of the living present is there any access to the past," because "the historical imagination makes the past contemporary" (*Valuation* 121; *Bearings* 78). Walter Benjamin also means almost the same thing when he addresses the status of literary history in the study of literature:

What is at stake is not to portray literary works in the context of their age, but to represent the age that perceives them our again the age during which they arose. It is this that makes literature into an organ on of history; and to achieve this, and not to reduce literature to the material of history, is the task of literary history.

("Literary History and the Study of Literature" 464)

To put it in Leavis's words, "it is only from the present, out of the present, in the present, that you can approach the literature of the past" (*Literature* 68). Leavis also thinks highly of the "new light thrown [at once] on the past and on the present" by the study of their relationship (69). Both Leavis and Benjamin see the relevance of past literature residing not in its potential for a historical document but in its 'appropriation' in the positive sense of the word. It is why Leavis argues that literary history is "a worthless acquisition' for those

argue that "what matters [say, in reading an ode of Sappho] is the experience which is the same for all human beings of different centuries and languages capable of enjoying poetry, the spark which can leap across those 2,500 years" (117).

who cannot make 'a personal approach' to, or a literary-critical judgment about, the literary works past or present (*Education* 68).

What Benjamin defines as the task of literary history or literary scholarship in general, for Leavis, is "a part of a strictly critical process a process of evaluating, and of bringing out the significance of what is judged to be valuable" at the present time ("Study" 98). The scholarship's virtue of accuracy, in Leavis's view, is "a matter of relevance" whose "due pointedness and precision' are achieved with nothing but the literary-critical intelligence 'about literature'" (*Valuation* 185). And that relevance is to our time or more precisely to "the contemporary sensibility," in which he argues literary criticism finds its function "in regard to the life in the present of the literature of the past" (205):

The *utile* of criticism is to see that the created work fulfils its *raison d'être* that is, that it is read, understood and duly valued, and has the influence it should have in the contemporary sensibility. The critic who relates his business to a full conception of criticism conceives of himself as helping, in a collaborative process, to define—that is, to form—the contemporary sensibility. ("The Responsible Critic: or The Function of Criticism at Any Time," *Valuation* 200-01)

Leavis holds that if a 'serious', 'engaged' or 'responsible' critic is concerned with the literature of the past it is in reality a concern with "its life in the present" or rather with "the significant new life in contemporary literature" (201). It is 'at any time' or always at the present time that Leavis finds the function of non-specialist special literary criticism "in the concrete, in action" but not "in generalities" (206). He is consistent in his contention that literary study, unlike any specialist discipline under modernity, does not so much seek in the literary texts for the universal meaning as for the significance living in the present.

Leavis's syncretical vision, embodied in his conception of literary criticism as a non-specialist special discipline, is inseparable from his present-centred project of modernity. His critical career focuses on this present-centred synthesis. Present-centredness is a necessary condition for his notion of criticism, for example, in the sense that if criticism is to be creative it cannot but be so in the present or nowhere. In these regards, Eliot is suggestive in that when he denies criticism creativity he rejects the present realities of 'eccentric' modernity in preference to the pre-modern centrality at the same time. Ironically enough, however, Leavis's commitment to the 'present' time is another product of modernity. As already implied in this discussion, his present-centredness is not wholly free from modernity's urge to glorify the present, not to say the victory of human reason over cultural tradition under modernity. It would be possible to say that just as modernity sought to realize itself on its way to specialization even in literary studies through such critics as Richards, Wellek, Frye and Bateson, so has it found another self-criticism of its own in Leavis's critical project of modernity.

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Abstract

F. R. Leavis, or the Function of Criticism under Specialist Modernity

Tae-Chul Kim

Leavis's criticism is characterized with its present-centred project of modernity, which this article proposes culminates in his essay "The Responsible Critic: or The Function of Criticism at Any Time." Through the Arnoldian essay title, just as Arnold himself and Eliot did respectively in their own ages, Leavis suggests other possibilities against the main stream of contemporary modernity, which he specifies as the triumphant modernity of cultural disintegration, mechanical organization and constant rapid change. Likewise, he grasps the age in terms of sweeping dissolution and drastic discontinuity: the contemporary stage of modernity for him is marked by a collapse of standards, which he sums up into one of his idiosyncratic phrases, "technologico-Benthamism." What Leavis the engaged critic is most concerned for in this situation is the dissolution of the reading public as a consequence of centrifugal modernity's overshadowing demand for compartmentalised knowledge. His critical project, in this age of fragmentising overspecialization, begins with his penetrating observation of the reality of overwhelming disintegration as it is. Now in the wake of Kant, that is, the consciousness of cultural plight awakens Leavis to the fact that the university is the only agent practicable for the establishment of effective educated public under specialized modernity. In the co-presence of the different self-stultifying specialist disciplines and fields of study at the university, he ultimately designates literary study or criticism as a centre of liaison: the literary-critical, concerned with

training at once sensibility and intelligence with its interdisciplinary approaches in nature, assumes the status of non-specialist special discipline in his critical project of modernity. Particularly in the essay of our primary concern, for this reason, Leavis runs counter to compartmentalising modernity which has never ceased its ferocious attempt to set up literary criticism as another self-contained specialist discipline scholarly industry and academic method.

Keywords: F.R. Leavis; technologico-Benthamite modernity; the function of criticism; a liaison centre; a non-specialist special discipline.