

Literary Criticism, Culture and the Subject of 'English': F.R.Leavis and T.S. Eliot by Dandan Zhang. Routledge, 2021. 188 pp. ISBN 9780367360870. £120.00 (hardback), £33.29 (ebook).

Several principles and practices of English teaching that remain influential today were instituted during the period after the First World War. As a young English lecturer at Cambridge in the years following the war, F.R.Leavis was one of a group including H.M.Chadwick, Mansfield Forbes and I.A.Richards intent on reforming the university English curriculum. Leavis had experienced the war as a nursing orderly and may have been affected by the poison gas in which combatants' clothing was soaked. He would not talk about his war experiences, but he believed that English should be engaged with 'life' (an important word in his writings) rather than follow a moribund nineteenth-century curriculum of belles-lettres and philology. For this reason he held a high regard in the 1920s for the poetry of T.S.Eliot, especially 'The Waste Land' (1922). Leavis claimed that Eliot was 'alive in his own age', unlike Tennyson and other Victorians such as Matthew Arnold who sought in poetry 'a sanctuary from the modern world' (Leavis 1932, 23). Leavis placed Eliot first in his discussion of contemporary poetry in his *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), which helped to establish Eliot as the foremost poet of the post-war age, despite the opposition of some of Leavis' contemporaries at Cambridge.

Dandan Zhang's study displays a subtle grasp of the two men's relationship, suggesting what Leavis gained from this engagement and the causes of his changing view of Eliot over nearly sixty years. For reasons of space, this review will focus on the significance of the relationship for the development of English education. During the 1920s and early 1930s, Eliot and Leavis shared a similar outlook about the conflict between Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture, the title of Leavis' pamphlet of 1930. In one of his 'Commentaries' in a 1930 issue of *The Criterion*, Eliot accused the popular press of 'destroying [the reader's] wits with murders and weddings ... to reduce him [sic] to a condition in which he is less capable of voting with any discrimination'. Leavis regarded 'The Waste Land' as a commentary on modern culture, uprooted from a traditional rural soil and increasingly dominated by machinery, advertising and mass production. Leavis was strongly influenced by Eliot's view of the importance of a literary tradition as argued in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' and other essays (Eliot 1932). Leavis concurred with Eliot that, at the time of Shakespeare, traditional culture had been a culture of the people. He was also persuaded by Eliot's view in his essay on 'The Metaphysical Poets' (Eliot 1932) that a 'dissociation of sensibility' had occurred after the seventeenth century whereby culture had bifurcated: 'wit' and intelligence had become detached from poetry.

Leavis concluded in *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932, 88) that at this point in history a work like 'The Waste Land' could not be 'universal' like the poetry of Dante or *King Lear*. In his view, the only answer to this problem was a university education in the 'Great Tradition' (Leavis 1948) of English literature that would raise the consciousness of undergraduates in order to resist the worst manifestations of modern culture. Leavis and his colleagues at *Scrutiny* outlined such an education in several articles from 1932, culminating in Leavis' book *Education and the University* (1944).

An early target of *Scrutiny* criticism was the teaching of Victorian poetry as an escape from engagement with the contemporary world. In the first volume of the journal, Denys Thompson's article 'World-losers' referred disparagingly to Arthur O'Shaughnessy's poem 'We are the music makers, we are the dreamers of dreams' (p.194), while Leavis argued that the English Association anthology *Poems of Today* contained 'hardly half a dozen good poems' (p.142). Eliot made a similar attack in a 1934 issue of *The Criterion* on another English Association anthology, *The Modern Muse*. In another *Scrutiny* article (Vol 1, 32), Leavis cited Eliot's emphasis on 'the living tradition', insisting that 'no study of literature ... should ignore the present'. Eliot's essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' provided *Scrutiny* with the cardinal principle that reading and criticism should be a 'living' response and not a 'dead' scholarship. The importance of personal engagement became a critical element in English education as described in *Growth through English* (Dixon 1967) and in such popular English Literature syllabuses as the AEB/AQA 'Alternative' A level that was introduced in the UK in 1973.

Despite this apparent consonance of views on the reading of literature, Eliot never supported Leavis' views on the importance of university English teaching. The difference of opinion here exposed a deep social and cultural split between the two men. In his essay 'Modern Education and the Classics', Eliot maintained that the Greek and Latin classics remained the cornerstone of education, and exclaimed with incredulity that 'nowadays they even teach *English* in England' (Eliot 1932, 509). Referring in *Scrutiny* (Vol. 5, 86-7) to the Newbolt Report of 1921 on *The Teaching of English in England*, Leavis replied that 'it is only in one's own language that one's own sensibility can... be educated'. These divergent views on popular education were accompanied by equally divergent views on religion. Eliot had argued in his essay that literary criticism should be 'completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint', a view which found no favour with Leavis and the *Scrutiny* circle, to whom not only poetry (as Matthew Arnold had prophesied) but also criticism had taken the place of religion. Leavis believed that Eliot failed to understand the nonconformist tradition from which

D.H.Lawrence (and perhaps Leavis' father) derived. He argued (*Scrutiny* 1, 278) that, although D.H.Lawrence lacked Eliot's classical education, the working-class writer was 'essentially religious' in a way that exposed the inadequacy of Eliot's own 'religious utterances'.

The differences of opinion between Leavis and Eliot may have been as productive as the similarities. Initially a supporter of Eliot's concept of the impersonality of the artist, Leavis moved to emphasise the identity of the creative writer, as personified especially by William Blake and D.H.Lawrence. Although Eliot never shared the *Scrutiny* belief in a pre-industrial "organic community" where humanity was in tune with the environment in its seasonal rhythms, his analysis of the 'dissociation of sensibility' and the cultural split between 'mass civilisation' and civilised values became axiomatic to the *Scrutiny* project. Eliot and Leavis both held to the importance of reading as a 'living' engagement with the text that went beyond scholarly elucidation, Leavis insisting also that English studies constantly move outside themselves into broader questions of culture and society. Eliot's constant presence in Leavis' consciousness inflected his views of literary tradition, critical reading, and modern poetry – views which indelibly affected Leavis' many students who became teachers both in the British Isles and abroad (Hilliard 2012). Dandan Zhang's book offers extraordinary insight into the relationship between the author of 'The Waste Land' and the author of D.H.Lawrence, *Novelist* and their influence on the development of English education.

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