

Research Papers



F. R. LEAVIS'S VIEWS ON T.S. ELIOT'S TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT AS REFLECTED IN HIS ESSAY "LITERATURE AND SOCIETY"

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ABSTRACT

F.R. Leavis in the introductory paragraphs of his essay attempts to define a 'Marxist' or 'social' writer as world who is involved and has identified himself with the life and conditions of the working class. In doing this, the writer ought to trace and focus attention on the historical changes through which society and consequently, the working class had passed. This will tend to highlight the conditions of working classes and decline in their life and wage potentials. This, Leavis considers as the duty of every writer or a writer devoted to be a 'social' writer. Similarly, the duty of 'Marxist' critic is to minutely study and bring out whether and to what extent a writer who is a socialist, has succeeded in reflecting in his work the changing patterns of society. In passing, Leavis refuses to recognize D.H. Lawrence (despite his occupation with the working-class life), as a 'socialist' writer for his misrepresentation of reality from bourgeoisie point of view.

Leavis, then, enters into a clarification of Eliot's essay Tradition and the Individual Talent in respect of the sense of tradition or historicity contemplated in it. He appreciates that Eliot's idea of 'tradition' or his 'historical sense' agree with his own view of a country's social history. Leavis also concurs with Eliot in saying that Tradition is not a mere bodily accumulation of literary books chronologically. He also appreciates Eliot's timely and bold rejection of the romantic approach of individualism and spontaneous recollection in respect of literary (aesthetic) experience in a fast changing contemporary society. Leavis also grants Eliot's contention that a writer ought to be a gifted genius to be a part of the historical literary tradition of his country. Leavis's disagreement with Eliot's historical approach is primarily related to Eliot's deliberate (or otherwise) avoidance of reference to the word 'social' in a broader, historical, human context. Secondly, Leavis feels strongly that Eliot does not refer to the generality or majority of people to 'the mind' but to the mind of individual writers. That is, Eliot's historical sense focuses on individual mind or genius. Thirdly, though he himself (Leavis) was not a Marxist (in the sense in which Raymond Williams was), yet he thinks that Eliot's tradition or historicity or historical sense disregards social, economic and material aspects but concentrates on intellectual and spiritual determinants (determining factors). To this extent, Eliot's historical sense is a social. Fourthly, Leavis points out that there is a kind of emphasis laid on the autonomy of the intellect and the spirit in Eliot's Tradition.

Eliot, says Leavis, omits or fails to recognize the magnification that modern society has achieved. His tradition does not include what socialists might ask for—namely, an intimate and special reference to the complexities, potentialities and conditions of human nature as a whole. In Eliot's theory it is only a particular human nature, a genius's which is never representative of the society and its tradition. One

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more issue in which Leavis differs from Eliot is the latter's insistence on 'impersonality'. Perhaps, Leavis wants to suggest that 'impersonality' which is synonymous with aloofness or distancing cannot be relished in relation to society which the writer should truthfully depict. Another difference that Leavis notes between Marxist's view of tradition (history) and Eliot's that while Eliot, for the first time has 'socialized' literature, yet his stress is more on the 'individual side' (talent) than the social. But, he is not like the romantics who were totally individualistic and did not recognize history. Next, Leavis, clarifies that he does not deny Eliot's contention that great creation is possible only through individual talents. It is also true that human life consists in individuals. It is more true that it is only in individuals that society lives. Leavis pinpoints the role that 'individuals' play in Eliot's society and that played by 'individuals' in Marxist's society. In comparison to the romantics, Leavis considers, the literature of the Augustans social. In the same way, from the point of view of Marxists Eliot cannot be called social as far as his historical sense or tradition is concerned.

WORK CITED :

Primary Source :

Leavis, F.R. Literature and Society