

F.R. Leavis

*English Literature
in our time
and the University*

ENGLISH LITERATURE
IN OUR TIME
& THE UNIVERSITY

THE CLARK LECTURES

1967

F. R. Leavis

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To the Memory of
H. MUNRO CHADWICK & MANSFIELD D. FORBES
to whom the world owes more than it knows

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INTRODUCTORY

I HAVE ceased trying to devise a better title for this book than that under which I delivered its contents as Clark lecturer at Cambridge in the Lent Term 1967: it has come to seem to me as good a title as any that could be found. The precise intended force is something that had to be defined by the book itself; but that must have been so with any title and I might properly, perhaps, at the cost of seeming grandiloquent, have said that it has to be created, so strong is my sense of the difficulty of getting the nature of my theme and preoccupation recognized. The paired terms—the associated ideas or significances, ‘English literature’ and ‘the University’, as I am concerned with them—ought not, I feel, to meet with the unreadiness for intelligent recognition and response that in fact they do. That way of putting it expresses my sense of the urgent gravity of what is at issue, a frightening face of the gravity being the blankness—the inability, or refusal, to perceive—that characterizes our civilization.

My title won't at worst give rise to expectations as wide of the mark as those incurred by Ruskin when he called one of his works *Notes on the Construction of Sheepfolds*. And I will immediately, anticipating the text that follows, disclaim two promises that might be read into the title. I am not, then, offering anything in the nature of a survey, critical and descriptive, of what has been written in our time, and I am not proposing a syllabus for an ideal English course at the University.

What I am concerned with is the way in which 'English literature' exists at any time as a living reality, and the need, which imposes convinced and resourceful effort of a kind I make it my aim to define, that it should exist as such for us—that it should be in civilization a real and potent force in our time. This last phrase is an insistence on the fact of change. Life is growth and change in response to changing conditions, and modern civilization advances in the spirit of its triumphant logic at such a rate that the fact of change is taken for granted. It is taken for granted in such a way that the profounder human consequences and significances of unceasing rapid and accelerating change escape notice. The deduction I draw is that our time faces us with a new necessity of conscious provision: we have to make provision for keeping alive, potent and developing that full human consciousness of ends and values and human nature that comes to us (or should) out of the long creative continuity of our culture. And this brings me to 'the University'.

I won't offer to summarize the evocation of 'university' I attempt in the following book; I will merely, for my prefatory purpose, recall some main emphases. The first must be that the 'university' is the inevitable, the inescapable, answer to the question: What would provision of the kind needed be like? There is no other that could be seriously proposed. It follows at once from this considered and wholly confident assertion of mine that neither the College of Technology exalted (to Mr Harold Wilson's satisfaction)¹ into a degree-conferring university, nor the Open University promised us, is a university in what it is my business to insist on as the important sense.

¹ As at once a blow to snobbery and a means of advancing the desired multiplication.

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The real university is a centre of consciousness and human responsibility for the civilized world; it is a creative centre of civilization—for the living heritage on which meaning and humane intelligence depend can't, in our time, be maintained without a concentrated creativity somewhere.

It should be plain that my concern for 'English literature' implies no slighting of the sciences, or the other specialist studies. On the contrary, I postulate the co-presence of the specialist studies in general, representing unequivocally high standards, with a strong humane centre, and this I give my reasons for seeing as an English School. The problem is to *have* an English School that truly deserves the respect of those who are acquainted with intellectual standards in their own fields—for only such can do anything to make a constituted university more than the mere collocation of specialist departments it tends to be. The difficulty of achieving and maintaining serious standards in the field of literary study is that that field, in the nature of its distinctive discipline of intelligence, is at the other extreme from mathematics—to say which is to point to the nature of its importance. The modes of thought distinctive of the field entail, as essential to—as essentially in and of—the thinking, kinds of judgment of quality and value that don't admit of demonstrative enforcement. About the relevant standards, how they are generated and what their authority is, I have tried to speak with clarity and the requisite fulness in my first lecture. Here I will only point to certain conditions that impose themselves where it is a question of realizing the idea of the university: the students in English too must be of university quality, capable of a high level of work and with a genuine and intelligent interest in

literature, and secondly, the permanent school must be staffed with seniors qualified to take pleasure in 'teaching' such pupils—that is, to find working with them a profitable kind of collaboration.

This last term has a pregnant centrality to my theme, as my lectures will bring out. Here, in these prefatory reflections, it leads me to certain emphases in relation to doubts and questions I am aware of. I have spoken of the 'monstrous unrealism' of the expectation commonly entertained of the undergraduates; but can they, it will be asked, reasonably be supposed capable of meeting the demand I myself make of them? My answer is that, provided the conditions I lay down are observed, most certainly they can: doubters are suspect of ignoring the conditions and misconceiving the nature of the demand—and my actual demand is in implication an account of what a university should be. I sometimes wonder what answer the comfortably institutional academic in English arrives at when he asks himself (if he does) what, in terms of any serious idea of a university education, he positively counts on the undergraduates' being able to do and acquire. My own answer to such a challenge I have, in my lectures, indicated in the way determined by the complex and difficult undertaking to which I was committed. With that careful presentation to point to, I will offer nothing more here than a few tactical emphases, or re-emphases, addressed to doubters or those who have to deal with them.

What, then, worth doing does one assume that undergraduates will be able to do? One assumes—from experience one knows—that, with the help they ought to be able to get from maturer students in the school (and surely some of their appointed guides should genuinely

and happily be describable as that), they will learn what reading is and what thinking is—those intimately associated capacities. By ‘reading’ and ‘thinking’ I mean the kinds characterizing the discipline of intelligence that belongs to the field of literary criticism (and that there is such a discipline, the importance of which to civilization needs with peculiar urgency to be vindicated in our time, is what I aim at making plain in my extended argument). A student may be said to have got his initiation into ‘reading’ and ‘thinking’ by the time he has come to intelligent critical terms with, and made himself, with personal conviction, intelligently articulate about, two or three of the great Shakespeare plays, two or three major novels, and some poems of diverse kind by great poets. By putting it in this way I mean to suggest how early in his course the student can and should, feel himself started—confident of help and stimulus, but self-reliant—on a development of powers and interests and understanding that *is* education as ‘university’ promises it.

Of course, to have done the things I have suggested he would have done a good deal more than just that—more, that is, than such a list of things ‘done’ seems to cover. If you do a critique of *Little Dorrit*, that book won’t be all of Dickens you’ve read, and the doing will inevitably lead to further reading and thinking. And if you know Dickens, you won’t be content with knowing Dickens alone. And Dickens leads you into the study of Victorian civilization, leading you on at the same time into extended, and still further extended, acquaintance with the novelists.

In the sense it is my business to insist on (it is the sense in which the words and the phrase need to be

used in relation to a university English School and the discipline of intelligence on which the claim of English to respect depends) to 'learn to read and to think' is to be launched on the acquiring of a distinctive grasp of history. I aimed in my Clark lectures at demonstrating what I meant by saying that. It was a difficult undertaking, exposed, I'm afraid, in spite of a precautionary preface and a reminder from time to time, to being wrongly taken. Here I will only repeat that what I offered I offered as suggestive illustration, chosen and developed so as to define the nature of my intention and convey in concrete terms the force of my argument and plea. I thought (and think) the judgments entailed in my historical draft-notes sound enough, but I did my best to ensure that no one should forget the 'this is so, isn't it?' of the spirit in which I advanced them. I needed to keep constantly present to my audience, for recognition and intelligent appreciation, the conditions of collaborative interplay in which (a basic assumption) I assume the students' reading and thinking to be carried on.

And this brings me to the head of 'incompleteness'. In relation to the problem, or complex of problems, I am considering, the idea of completeness (except as necessarily implicit in the recognition of inevitable incompleteness) has no useful function. I can refer forward here with immediate and obvious point to my comments on the once familiar case for making the Classics—Greek and Latin literature—the staple of humane education:¹ 'the literatures are complete; all the rules are known.' That states classically an attitude and a set of preconceptions that make any real recognition of the

¹ See page 68 below.

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problem facing—or engulfing—us impossible. English literature—it is that, not arbitrarily but with a quintessential relevance, we are concerned with as we consider the state and prospects of our civilization—has its reality and life (if at all) only in the present. The problem is to maintain the full vital continuity of our culture. I won't try to summarize here what I shall be found to say in my lectures about the necessity, in relation to that problem, of there being a strong informing presence of the 'reality and life'—of the life as a potent reality that transcends the present—in the rapidly changing civilization of our time.

Pressed as to the nature of such a presence, one can only reply that it has to be created; it is created by the kind of implicit collaboration that creates and maintains a language. But the collaborators are individuals who are interested in literature, convinced that it matters, and intelligent about it, and the collaboration is an interplay of personal judgments. Where the interest is widely enough spread, the outcome of the interplay will be something approaching a consensus as to what English Literature, the truly living reality, is—for us. I might have added 'or ought to be'; but the distinction in this matter between ideal felt with conviction to be valid and fact or reality is a tricky one. The 'for us' is of course a crucial emphasis. Here it leads immediately to the observation that 'we' shall not be naïve enough to suppose ourselves representative in any final way. As the inner sense of stress, tension and human need changes, English Literature changes—not merely (I mean) by accretion; the contour map, the chart of organic structure, changes. Without the genuine creative response there is no reality of art. But the collaborative creativity of the cultivated

public is not, for being creative, to be thought of as arbitrary: it is (so long as there is recognition) the only genuine mode of recognizing something that is 'there'—a mode that entails constant revision. There is no contradiction between saying these things and perceiving that English Literature must be different for every age.

To talk of 'completeness', then, would be to use a term that implied an irrelevant ethos and a misleading emphasis and inflexion. What matters for each age is coherence—significant relatedness in an organic whole, the centre of significance being (inevitably) the present. With these considerations in mind I come back to the situation of the undergraduate. At any point in his student career his 'English Literature' will be patchy and partial, but, properly guided, he will in acquiring his knowledge of his selected areas and themes be forming a sense of the whole to which they belong and which they implicitly postulate. And here comes another consideration, of a different order from the last but intimately associated with it: he will at the same time be developing a strong sense of himself 'belonging' as he reads and thinks and works at organizing his knowledge and thought; and this sense—one of belonging to a collaborative community, the essential nucleus of which is the permanent English School—will play a very important part in the force and effectiveness with which he realizes the fact, and the nature of the existence, of 'English Literature'.

Of course, I assume an English School of which the permanent or senior members are qualified in the ways I posited as obviously proper for those who hold such posts. And if the School were the liaison centre it might be and (I have contended) ought to be, the student in

belonging to it would belong—his work would make him actively aware he belonged—to a wider, a more comprehensive, community of intellectual collaboration in which the idea of the university was realized; the idea of it, I mean, as a creative centre, for the civilized world, of real human responsibility. I am not supposing that the idea would be there, consciously entertained and active, in any but a small proportion of the total academic personnel; but in relation to the kind of issue in question quantitative measures can say little to the point. What matters is to have a strong centre of life; its power to inform, animate and impart vital significance may be immensely disproportionate to its statistical magnitude.

In belonging to such a centre the undergraduate will have a direct quintessential acquaintance with the self-perpetuation (necessarily recreative) of a living culture. The 'direct' insists that this is not the plane of theory; acquaintance is participation, active and conscious, in the one culture of which this could be so—his own. In working out what can be done in his three years he is collaborating with his guides and advisers and fellow-students—with, in sum, the total continuous life of the centre—to determine what in our time English Literature, the living reality, is, or ought to be. The collaborative community gives him, he can tell himself, the focused presence of that potentially decisive educated public to foster which, strengthening it, giving it an informed awareness of its rôle in the face of the euphoric regardlessness of technological progress, and qualifying it for the influence desperate human need calls on it to exert, is the constitutive function of the university.

I know the comment that will come and with what dismissing inflection: 'you talk as if such a state of things

in a university were possible—and you denounce academic unrealism!’ But why, I ask, have we to judge it impossible, and in what sense? I should never suggest that the achieving would be easy, having strong reason for being realistic about what lies in the way. There is a familiar trait of human nature that, being in English Schools unchecked by the authority of clear, relevant and unquestionable criteria, can determine the recruitment of staff. Where the staff doesn’t comprise from the outset, if not a majority, at least a strong nucleus of members who are intelligent about literature and charged with disinterested concern for their function it will hardly tend by recruitment to make itself different, except for the worse. And, for anyone who, sharing my kind of solicitude, looks round at the academic scene, this is undeniably a discouraging consideration.

But it is not a consideration one stops at; it is a way of recognizing the necessity, in our civilization, of a strongly positive conception of the university and the English School. If anyone feels that ‘conception’ here sounds weak, he should remind himself that to conceive what is needed entails impulsion and purpose; the conception, embodying a realization of the human plight in our time, a matter of innermost human nature starved and thwarted, is the profoundest kind of creative response. It will certainly be active, initiating and pertinacious only in a small minority, but it may transform civilization—this more than merely intellectual conviction is of the essence of it.

I didn’t say ‘a *new* conception’; that would have been to slight the strength that resides in continuity. The newness is a matter of development, and of formulation in terms of the present world and the way it is now so

unmistakably going. But there *is* the strength; the conception has its past, awareness of which can only intensify one's sense of the validity, the historical significance and the realism.

Possibly most of those concerned about the issues know that the foundation at Cambridge towards the close of the first world war of the English Tripos was an important event in history. Nevertheless the contemptuous resistance offered to the idea of making, at an ancient English university, the critical study of English Literature the rival of Classics as 'humane education' is becoming difficult to recall. On the other hand, in referring to the 'idea' in this way I shall have conveyed a false impression unless I go on to say that my formulation would hardly have occurred to a majority of the main promoters of the new Tripos as describing what they planned to do. For one thing, what the 'critical study of English literature' might be—could or should be—had yet to be worked out; the working out was one of the consequences of starting the English Tripos.

Looking back, no one can seriously deny that the new Tripos was a creative response to change—change in society and civilization that had been made unignorable by the war. But to one looking back, inquiringly, in the nineteen-twenties it could seem to be very much the product of some happy accidents that had converged to this one end. To begin with, there was the fact that Oxford had got in first in the recognition of the native tongue, and, in making it possible to read for Honours in English, had (inevitably, before the revolutionary consequences of the Cambridge innovation) imposed on the student the academic ethos that expresses itself in compulsory Anglo-Saxon and the naïve associated notions