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Scrutiny's treatment of the Great Tradition and the Scottish Tradition

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Abstract

The Scrutiny criticism of the novel which was composed of the studies of Jane Austen, Henry James, Edith Wharton, Dorothy Richardson, George Gissing and E.M. Forster by Q.D. Leavis, of Dickens by R.C. Churchill of Emily Bronte by G.D. Klingopulos besides those of D.H. Lawrence and the great tradition of novelists by F.R. Leavis is in itself a substantive contribution. Though it is a subject beyond the scope of the present work, it is worthwhile to examine a particular area of Scrutiny's novel criticism which is related to its criticism of poetry. The two dominant ideas behind Scrutiny's novel criticism are the close connection between the novel and morality, and the great novels as an affirmation of life. This moral dimension of novel is especially complex and revolves around a number of closely related ideas----- a definite concept of form in fiction, the concepts of the novel as moral fable and dramatic poem, and a notion of moral enactment and moral exploration. An important aspect of Scrutiny's novel criticism was the concept of the novel as dramatic poem. Scrutiny published a series of studies deriving from the concept of the poetic as constituent of the novel, in the course of which Leavis developed some of his most effective and shaping criticism, including the works that appeared as *The Great Tradition* and *D.H.Lawrence: Novelist*. This new critical tactic employed by Scrutiny critics saw all Literature as poetry or read as if it were poetry, often at the expense of genre characteristics. This critical practice has often been challenged on several grounds but for Scrutiny critics it had immediate advantages. It allowed them to examine fiction with the same careful textual analysis and scrutiny which they brought to poetry-----two quote and analyse long passages, to demonstrate the operative function of ideas, and to develop symbolic and experimental patterns. Then, too, by insisting on the dramatic nature of such fiction, they could keep fidelity with rendered life and temporal progression, and avoid excessive symbol-hunting.¹

Keywords- *Progression, Examine, Scrutiny, Pattern, Symbolic*

The relationship between Scrutiny's poetry criticism and novel criticism, besides the chronological order in which they appeared, is of considerable interest. In his earliest statements on the criticism of novel, Leavis lent support to the view that the novel required a different approach from poetry. In "How to Teach Reading" he writes:

Prose demands the same approach (as poetry), but admits it far less readily..... With the novel it is so much harder to apply in a critical method the realisation that everything that the novelist does is done with words.....and that he is to be judged an artist for the same kind of reason as a poet is.²

It is true that the novelist does everything with words but his effects are less concentrated than those of the poet. He depends more on the accumulation that takes place inside the reader's mind and, though the techniques of practical criticism can usefully be applied. It is impossible to sample the quality of the whole by isolating a passage. In the passage quoted above Leavis concedes that there is a distinction between poetry and the novel, and that the same approach cannot be rigorously applied to both.

But in his other statement of the same period Leavis argued more insistently for the same approach to be applied to both poetry and the novel. This was perhaps under the influence of C.H. Rickword who hit hard against conventional notions of character and story in his notes on fiction published in *The Calendar*, and put forward the seminal idea that "the problem of language, the use of the medium in all its aspects, is the basic problem of any work of literature". Sharing Rickword's view, Leavis also commented that "all preoccupation with 'form', 'structure', 'method', 'technique', that is not controlled by this axiom must be more or less barren"³. According to Rickword the quality of a novel depends on a unity among the events, a progressive rhythm that includes and reconciles each separate rhythm. The form of a novel only exists as a balance of response on the part of the reader. Hence schematic plot is a construction of the reader's that corresponds to an aspects of that response and stands in in nearly diagrammatic relation to the source. Only as precipitate from the memory are plot or character tangible; yet only in solution have either any emotive valency. The composition of this fluid is a technical matter. "The technique of the novel is just as symphonic as the technique of the drama and as dependent, up to a point, on the dynamic devices of articulation and control of narrative tempo. More important, then, than what may be called the tricks of narrative is the status of plot and its relation to the other elements of a novel, particularly its relation to character, in solution"⁴.

It was this concept of the novel as 'symphonic', which was reinforced by Leavis in the phrase 'The Novel as Dramatic Poem', which he used as a title for a series of essays in *Scrutiny*. Like Rickword's, his approach was also based on the assumption that the business of the novelist is to 'create a world', and the mark of the master is that he gives us lots of 'life'. The test of life in his characters is that they go on living outside the book. Besides the novelist's response to life, Leavis also gave a close analytical attention to the working of language in novel which, more than anything else, characterizes modern criticism of poetry. His argument was that.

A novel, like a poem, is made of words: there is nothing else one can point to. We talk of a novelist as 'creating characters' but the process of 'creation' is one of putting words together. We discuss the quality of his 'vision', but the only critical judgements we can attach directly to observable parts of his work concern particular arrangement of words----- the quality of the response they evoke. Criticism, that is, must be in the first place (and never cease being) a matter of sensibility, of responding sensitively and with precise discrimination to the words on the page. But it must, of course, go on to deal with larger effects, with the organisation of the total response to the book.⁵

From the above statement it is clear that Leavis was aware of the 'larger effects' of the novel such as its moral pattern, evocation of life etc. But his theoretical focus was on language, the 'words on the page'.

It is on account of this seemingly linguistic preoccupation that the neo Aristotelian complain that in Leavis's novel criticism the 'larger effects' such as form, structure do not receive adequate consideration. Another objection is that it ignores the differences between genres and treats all works as a lyric poem and relies, for their effects, on the poetic properties of words. It is, in fact, difficult to support the view that the language of the novel is as important as the language of poetry, and that they deserve a similar attention.

It is true that Leavis tried to assimilate the novel to poetry and direct our attention to the language of the novel. Though he did not give the same attention to language in his novel criticism as he did in his poetry criticism, his focus was still directed to 'words on the page'. But the problem of language, the use of the medium, was not in fact his soul preoccupation or controlling interest in his novel criticism. Besides a close analysis of the words on the page, he was also concerned with the responsibility of literature to be on the side of life. He was concerned not only with the quality of the language but also with the quality of the novelist's moral imagination making discriminations and judgements about his characters. And the criteria by which he judged a novelist were what constituted a poet----- his response to life and to language. To Leavis, the form of a novel cannot be separated from its moral sense or moral interest: a great novelist's preoccupation with form is essentially a matter of his responsibility towards a rich human interest, or complexity of interests, profoundly realised----a responsibility involving imaginative sympathy, moral discrimination and judgement of relative human value. This new concept

of 'the novel as dramatic poem' was successfully used by the Scrutiny critics in their studies of the novels of Dickens, Henry James, Conrad, Emily Bronte and Lawrence among others.

Scrutiny's study of the Scottish poetic tradition which was composed of its analysis of the medieval Scots poetry, Scottish ballads, the poetry of Burns, and the contemporary situation in Scotland constitutes an important area related to the journal's criticism of English Poetry. Contributions in this field were made almost solely by John Speirs who attempted to rectify certain misconceptions in the criticism of medieval Scottish poetry. The direction the criticism of Middle Scots poetry seems to have taken is towards establishing Chaucer as its fountain-head. But, according to Speirs, as it is an oversimplification of the truth. If Chaucer and the medieval Scots poets have something in common, it is because they read and learned from the same poems and shared the medieval habit of mind. There is a tendency to style Dunbar and Henryson as 'Scottish Chaucerians', but Dunbar was at a still further remove from Chaucer than Henryson, and, being near the European centre in his time than the latter, he belonged to the very latest medieval phase. In his essays John Speirs is concerned to show that medieval Scots poetry was part of European movements. The primary concern of these studies is, however, to point out the distinction between the rooted language of medieval Scots poetry and the dissociated idioms of its posterity.

According to Speirs, it would be a misrepresentation to find the explanation of Dunbar's power in the influence of the Renaissance. In his essays there is always an emphasis on the point that Dunbar is Medieval and not Renaissance, that he comes at the end rather than at the beginning of a growth of poetical tradition. There is indeed a superficial resemblance between Dunbar and Renaissance poets in thematic matters, but that only serves to emphasize how singularly little there is in common between the textures of their verse. Dunbar's arrangements of words have behind them an obviously considerable traditional sanction. His forms and conventions modified as they were by his particular language were European and the expressions of a European consciousness. These commonplace, together with the fact that he wrote in Northern English or Scots, imply that his poetry was Medieval and European, and at the same time Scottish.

Like the major literary achievements of the pre-industrial industrial age, Dunbar's poetry derived its strength from the resources of vital popular speech rooted in a stable and homogeneous social life. The extraordinary power of his poetry, whereby he is considered perhaps the greatest Scottish poet, lies in his skilled command of the rich and varied resources of language open to him. Related to this was his command of very metres adapted from the medieval French and Latin verse united together with the use of native alliterative and assonantal element. This variety of language and of metres has its counterpart in a variety of modes in which Dunbar wrote. The core of his living achievement lies not in the Ceremonial poems but in the Comic and Satiric poems. John Speirs attributes the vitality of these poems to the 'living a speech' of his 'locality', which was not without its place in the Steel homogeneous medieval European community. The 'aureate diction' the Ceremonial poems, on the other hand, is at a distinct remove from living speech, and therefore from life. The tremendous 'principal of life' that animates the best of his poetry is, in Speirs's estimation, the gift of the peasantry of medieval Scotland.

Compared with Dunbar's, the total achievement of Henryson is, though considerable, fragmentary, and it has neither the range nor the intensity of the former. He is farther from the European centre in his time than other Scots poets of his century, and therefore perhaps in some ways nearer the centre of medieval poetry as a whole than they. He is correspondingly more 'local', and it may be partly because he is more local that he is also on the whole more popular. This does not mean that his work represents a 'popular' development away from the 'literary' or that he draws more upon the more 'popular' element in language than other Scots poets such as Dunbar, Douglas and Lyndsay, Henryson also draws upon the 'popular' element in language, and frequently in association with the native alliterative, assonantal tradition. The difference, then, lies in the motive behind and the manner of the use of this popular element. "Henryson uses it in general quite naturally because of his partial identity in his work with the peasant people from whose speech he derives. His use of it is to that extent less 'literary' than Dunbar's". This more 'popular' quality of Henryson is both his strength and his weakness. Through his identification with a locality the poet secures a fuller and firmer identification with the general life. But it also accounts for the absence of the complex balance and profound sophistication of verse, such as we find in Chaucer.

This Scottish Ballads of the eighteenth century were a 'popular' development from Medieval verse, but they possessed in themselves a life distinct both from the contemporary 'literary' verse and from the Medieval verse. They used a poetic diction whose strength lay in its being, to a considerable extent, a stylization of popular speech----- it was simple, sensuous, and it retained something of the vitality of popular speech. Speirs points out the fundamental difference between the Scottish Ballads and the nineteenth century Romantic poetry. Which uses the external machinery of the ballads, but its poetic diction is derived as much from the ballads as from Spenser and Milton. This poetic diction is out off from the vigour of the popular a speech, which the poetic diction of the ballads is to a considerable extent stylization of. "Correspondingly there is nothing in common between the vital, if very fragmentary, vision of the Scottish Ballads, and the in insubstantial dream of nineteenth century poetry." To Speirs, the Scottish Ballads are, in a profound sense, 'religious': they embody a vision of human life which sprang apparently from the imagination of the 'folk'.

The Scottish poetry of Burns represents the culmination of vernacular tradition in Scots literature. Speirs maintains that it has no connection with English verse at any point, so that to consider it as a reaction to the English eighteenth century manner or the beginning of the nineteenth is to breed confusion. Unlike the verse of Dunbar and Henryson, which was at the same time Scottish and European, the verse of Burns allowed the native elements to develop independently. Burns inherited the past of Scottish vernacular and 'incarnated' it to bring it to a climax. Spears traces the folk-dance origin of his poetry and demonstrates that its marvellous vitality derives, for the most part, from the folk speech tied down to the folk life "saturated with the concrete wisdom of folk experience connected with the soil". This explains why he was less successful when he crossed the bounds of the narrow vernacular verse tradition and choose to write in English, thus losing contact with the source of his strength.

There has of course been no Scottish literature since the eighteenth century, for there cannot be a Scottish literature in the fullest sense unless there is in the fullest sense a Scottish speech. There is no longer any such speech, and in current practice Scots has begun to suffer the disabilities of poetic diction. To write in a Scots a poetry that is based on living speech or even to write a Scots poetry that is based on a language of immediate literary practice is no longer possible. C.M. Grieve has made attempts to make a Scots again a vehicle for or major poetry, but the 'synthetic Scots' he has put together is based neither on the one nor the other. The Scottish dialects are in the last stage of decay, and when a language has decayed a whole tradition has inevitably decayed with it. If there can be no 'literary' Scots in the present times, it is because there is no longer a 'spoken Scots'. John Speirs's writings concerning the gap between Burns and the present day, and his analysis of the contemporary situation in Scotland area of necessity pretty gloomy in their general tone. But as far as actual literary achievements are concerned, they overstate the poverty of a Scottish letters.

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