

Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)
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FR Leavis's "The Great Tradition" (Session 1)

(Refer Slide Time: 00:14)



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THE GREAT TRADITION

'. . . not dogmatically but deliberately . . .'

JOHNSON: *Preface to Shakespeare*

THE great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad—to stop for the moment at that comparatively safe point in history. Since Jane Austen, for special reasons, needs to be studied at considerable length, I confine myself in this book to the last three. Critics have found me narrow, and I have no doubt that my opening proposition, whatever I may say to explain and justify it, will be adduced in reinforcement of their strictures. It passes as fact (in spite of the printed evidence) that I pronounce Milton negligible, dismiss 'the Romantics', and hold that, since Donne, there is no poet we need bother about except




Hello and welcome to this course on Literacy Criticism where we begin discussing the final text which is part of this course FR Leavis's *The Great Tradition*. As we all know, FR Leavis was a critic who wrote after TS Eliot and most of his critical notions also became canonical, they became literary yardsticks, they became frameworks of literary judgments which could not be questioned for the longest time in the critical tradition of English language and literature. And instantly, we also realize that this is one of the earliest processes of canon formation in the 20th century; and being a very influential critic, he also manages to make up a very white canon which becomes part of critical tradition for the longest time. Whatever Leavis did in terms of being foundational, also stayed for a long time to dictate what went into the university syllabi, domestic curricula. It also determined the ways in which other kinds of literatures began to be included into this canonical space.

And it is a very white way of looking at literature, as we would a soon realize as we are going through this work and also realize that there are certain very dogmatic things that he sticks on to. Though he begins with this protestation with the quote from Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* "not dogmatically but deliberately", there is an attempt being made to move away from dogma.

But at the same time there is a very concerted effort to make something which becomes very English, very canonical, something which becomes very white, also in that sense. So, the whiteness of this, the racial supremacy, the imperialist rhetoric that comes through this, is very evident; nevertheless, it continues to be seen as one of the seminal texts, one of the influential works of literary criticism produced in the 20th century.

It is also very deliberate as he says over here. There is a deliberateness through which FR Leavis tries to bring in particular kinds of works together, there is a tradition that he sets in place and the work is also titled, as you can see, *The Great Tradition*. There is a way in which he attempts to make particular kinds of writers sit together and they are being referred to as a great tradition. There are significant overlaps that one would find in the notions of tradition when we look at TS Eliot as well as later on FR Leavis. But what makes Leavis very distinctive compared to the other white critics is that he makes a deliberate effort to focus on particular kinds of writers, particular kinds of writings, which is what Johnson also did in his *Preface to Shakespeare* where he was reinstating William Shakespeare and his writings into the canon. That was a very deliberate move.


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And we find a similar deliberate move at work which also tells us, by and large, that making a canon is a very deliberate move. There is nothing organic, there is nothing incidental about it. There is a definite, deliberate move which goes into the making of a canon, making, the making

of tradition. Here we find that in spite of the organic quality which is allegedly invested with tradition, we find the tradition is something which could be made, which could be constructed, the historical inevitability of it was pointed out by in Eliot's work as well.

Here, we would largely be focusing on the first chapter where he is laying down the tenets of this great tradition and trying to engage with his audience about the kind of yardsticks that he had in mind while he was selecting particular kinds of writings and writers. This is how he begins, it is a very deliberate pointed statement that he begins with: “The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad— to stop for the moment at that comparatively safe point in history.” And look at the directness and the deliberateness of it; the great tradition has been summed up in four English novelists. This is how he begins—Austen, Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad—two women and two men, and all of them white, very English and who has written canonical successful works. “Since Jane Austen for special reasons needs to be studied at considerable length I confine myself in this book to the last three.”

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The only way to escape misrepresentation is never to commit oneself to any critical judgment that makes an impact—that is, never to say anything. I still, however, think that the best way to promote profitable discussion is to be as clear as possible with oneself about what one sees and judges, to try and establish the essential

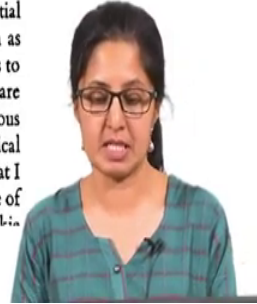


“Critics have found me narrow and I have no doubt that opening proposition, whatever I may say to explain and justify it, will be adduced in reinforcement of their strictures. It passes as fact (in spite of the printed evidence) that I pronounce Milton negligible, dismiss ‘the Romantics’, and that I hold that, since Donne, there is no poet we need bother about except Hopkins and Eliot.” There are many deliberate moves, there are many controversial statements that he makes over here. According to him, after Donne, the next important poets were Hopkins and Eliot. After Donne, any poetry that we need to deal with happens only in the 20th century—that is FR Leavis’s view. And he is able to ignore Milton, he dismisses the Romantics altogether, and does not engage with that time period at all, because, according to him, those are not the things which would fit within the tradition that he is trying to delineate over here.

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The only way to escape misrepresentation is never to commit oneself to any critical judgment that makes an impact—that is, never to *say* anything. I still, however, think that the best way to promote profitable discussion is to be as clear as possible with oneself about what one sees and judges, to try and establish the essential discriminations in the given field of interest, and to state them as clearly as one can (for disagreement, if necessary). And it seems to me that in the field of fiction some challenging discriminations are very much called for; the field is so large and offers such insidious temptations to complacent confusions of judgment and to critical indolence. It is of the field of fiction belonging to Literature that I am thinking, and I am thinking in particular of the present vogue of

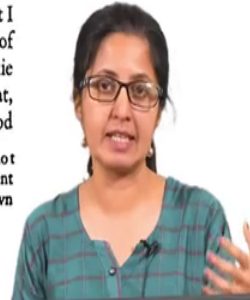


“The view, I suppose, will be as confidently attributed to me that, except Jane Austen, George Eliot, James and Conrad, there are no novelists in English worth reading.” And he is saying that this is not the way in which he is trying to interpret it; but at the same time, most of his writings, when we look at it together, we realize that there is a certain kind of tradition that he is trying to highlight. There is only certain kinds of writings and writers that he is trying to highlight, to the extent that he has been misrepresented; which is a gross misrepresentation perhaps. He is being interpreted continually as someone who is always dismissing traditions which he does not approve of.

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“The only way to escape misrepresentation is never to commit oneself to any critical judgment that makes an impact—that is never to say anything.” There is a certain cynical authority with which he seems to claim over here that if one dares to say something, something substantial, it is going to be misconstrued, it is also going to be misinterpreted. And he seems to be okay with that proposition as well. “The only way to escape misrepresentations is never to commit oneself to any critical judgment that makes an impact—that is never to say anything. I still, however, think that the best way to promote profitable discussion is to be as clear as possible with oneself about what one sees and judges, to try and establish the essential discriminations in the given field of interest, and to state them as clearly as one can (for disagreement, if necessary).” He is open to all kinds of critiques that this sort of a notion might invite.

“And it seems to me that in the field of fiction some challenging discriminations are very much called for; the field is so large and offers such insidious temptations to complacent confusions of judgment and to critical indolence.” This is another thing that I want you to notice: there is a lot of critical investment into the genre of fiction. For the longest time you also notice that any literary discussion, any critical discussion, was always already about poetry. Fiction makes a very late entry into this critical scene. And unlike the apologetic tone with which Henry James had to operate, we find that here, Leavis need not offer any defence, any apology, for having chosen to deal with fiction; that is a given over here. And canon becomes important in fiction as well, that is another important move; when Henry James was writing in his *Art of Fiction*, we

saw that. One was dealing with fiction as a genre which did not have the baggage of tradition, which did not have the baggage of canon. One was free to experiment, free to work in any which way one wanted to. But here we find an attempt to freeze a certain kind of a tradition into this otherwise free genre as well. “It is of the field of fiction belonging to Literature that I am thinking, and I am thinking in particular of the present vogue of the Victorian age. Trollope, Charlotte Yonge, Mrs. Gaskell, Wilkie Collins, Charles Reade, Charles and Henry Kingsley, Marryat, Shorthouse—one after another the minor novelists of that period are being commended to our attention.”

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THE GREAT TRADITION

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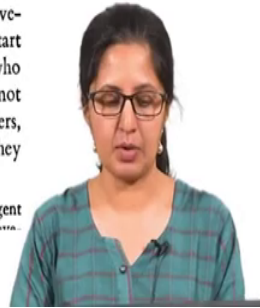
Distinctions are already being made; almost everyone is writing novels from the 19th century, we realize, and by the 20th century, someone like Leavis decides it is time to take stock and to decide who is a better novelist than the other. And if you recall the discussions that we had in Henry James' *Art of Fiction*, he says that there are only two kinds of novelists: good novelists and bad novelists; there is a good novel, there is a bad novel; a novel could be either interesting or uninteresting, there is no midway at all. And the critical judgment depends entirely on the way in which one is consuming this fiction. And here Leavis wants us to see some of them as minor novelists, because there are a lot of them writing; and it is important to have a traditional yardstick, it is important to have a critical yardstick which would separate the wheat from the chaff.

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It is necessary to insist, then, that there are important distinctions to be made, and that far from all of the names in the literary histories really belong to the realm of significant creative achievement. And as a recall to a due sense of differences it is well to start by distinguishing the few really great—the major novelists who count in the same way as the major poets, in the sense that they not only change the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, but that they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life.²

interests as expressed in these books—the interests of a supremely intelligent politician who has a sociologist's understanding of civilization and its mores.



“One after another, the minor novelists of that period are being commended to our attention, written up, and publicized by broadcast, and there is a market tendency to suggest that they not only have various kinds of interest to offer but that they are living classics. (Are not they all in the literary histories?) There are Jane Austen, Mrs. Gaskell, Scott, ‘the Brontes’—and he has a very interesting take on the Brontes. He does not consider that all three of them are equally good. He thinks there is only one Bronte, that is his observation which we shall take a look at when we look at that footnote—Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Trollope so on, all, one gathers, classical novelists.” There are minor novelists writing during that time—Victorian period is what he is focusing on—and there are classical novels.

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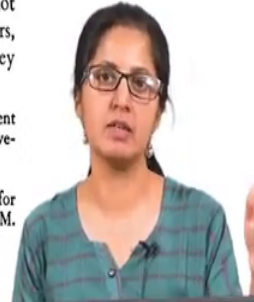
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interests as expressed in these books—the interests of a supremely intelligent politician who has a sociologist's understanding of civilization and its movement in his time—are so mature.

¹ See note "The Brontës", page 27 below.

² Characteristic of the confusion I am contending against is the fashion (for which the responsibility seems to go back to Virginia Woolf and Mr. E. M.



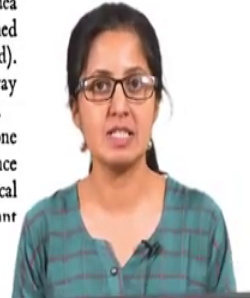
“It is necessary to insist, then, that there are important distinctions to be made, and that far from all of the names in the literary histories really belong to the realm of significant creative achievement. And as a recall to a due sense of differences it is well to start by distinguishing the few really great—the major novelists who count in the same way as the major poets in the sense that they not only change the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, but that they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life.” We find a continuation of the humanistic spirit over here, we find a continuation of the humanist tradition over here, where he is comparing the major and minor writers of fiction with the major poets, and those kinds of classifications and those traditions which made it possible. And also talking about those innate things which are part of good literature, about human awareness, the possibilities of life, and to notice the way in which the humanist rhetoric continues to ride on into 20th century literary criticism as well.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:19)

THE GREAT TRADITION

To insist on the pre-eminent few in this way is not to be indifferent to tradition; on the contrary, it is the way towards understanding what tradition is. 'Tradition', of course, is a term with many forces—and often very little at all. There is a habit nowadays of suggesting that there is a tradition of 'the English Novel', and that all that can be said of the tradition (that being its peculiarity) is that 'the English Novel' can be anything you like. To distinguish the major novelists in the spirit proposed is to form a more useful idea of tradition (and to recognize that the conventionally established view of the past of English fiction needs to be drastically revised). It is in terms of the major novelists, those significant in the way suggested, that tradition, in any serious sense, has its significance.

To be important historically is not, of course, to be necessarily one of the significant few. Fielding deserves the place of importance given him in the literary histories, but he hasn't the kind of classical distinction we are also invited to credit him with. He is important



“To insist on the pre-eminent few in this way is not to be indifferent to tradition; on the contrary, it is the way towards understanding what tradition is.” Leavis is very interesting in that sense. He is very aware of the kind of biases with which he is working. He never pretends that he does not have those biases—those biases are an extension of the racial attitude that he has, the imperialist attitude that he has, and also about an impossibility to recognize anything which could be produced from the other. And there is something very set, there is something very cemented about that notion, and he is now trying to justify that.

And look at the way in which he is trying to define tradition now. We remember that Eliot in his *Tradition and the Individual Talent* also had attempted to do this: to define tradition, to show that tradition is something which is not fixed, but something which continues to change depending on the other kinds of influences which is around him. There is a certain historicity about tradition, not a fixity, there is a historicity which also renders it in a continuous nature of flux. Here, Leavis also attempts to define what tradition is. “‘Tradition’, of course, is a term with many forces—and often very little at all. There is a habit nowadays of suggesting that there is a tradition of ‘the English novel’, and that all that can be said of the tradition (that being its peculiarity) is that the English novel can be anything you like.

The markers of departure are very clear over here. I want you to notice two things over here: one in comparison with Eliot, just like Eliot, he is also perhaps conscious of the carefulness with

which, caution with which the English people approach the term tradition. It is also a term associated with a lot of baggage. There is not a lot of good things about tradition, as you would know. And here, he is trying to pick up the best of the tradition, without necessarily that baggage. The other thing is, he is also trying to refute the more prevalent argument, the more prevalent notion, that fiction could be anything you like. And he is trying to establish standards for this new genre, which is a good thing, which is also more challenging in a certain way. And by trying to fix standards, by trying to attribute traditional and canonical qualities to this new genre, there are two things that he is trying to do.

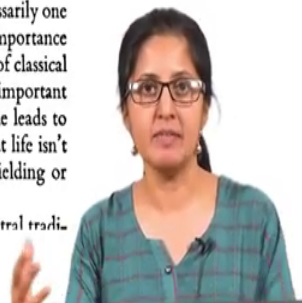
One, he is trying to rescue fiction from its fluidity—which is never seen as a good thing by people like Leavis, because, you know, it cannot be anything that you like—that is a prevalent notion against which he is trying to work. And the other thing is that he is trying to give a respectability and create a certain coterie, just like poetry, or any other genre used to work. And this also makes fiction a more desirable space, and again, it becomes easier to situate the canon and the other. There are multiple things that he manages to achieve with this single stroke of trying to locate only certain kinds of writers as part of the great tradition, and also pushing a few to the margin saying they are all minor novelists and not really the classical major ones, and that this distinction is important like we always used to have in poetry.

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To be important historically is not, of course, to be necessarily one of the significant few. Fielding deserves the place of importance given him in the literary histories, but he hasn't the kind of classical distinction we are also invited to credit him with. He is important not because he leads to Mr. J. B. Priestley but because he leads to Jane Austen, to appreciate whose distinction is to feel that life isn't long enough to permit of one's giving much time to Fielding or any to Mr. Priestley.

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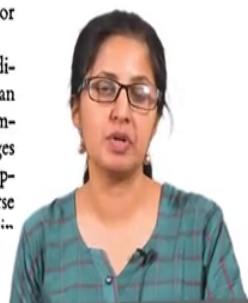
“To distinguish the major novelists in the spirit proposed is to form a more useful idea of tradition (and to recognize that the conventionally established view of the past of English fiction needs to be drastically revised). This is a novel attempt, as he himself says it multiple times. It is important to move away from the notion that fiction could be just about anything. It is important to move away from the notion that fiction does not have a tradition, does not have a past, and could exist in very fluid terms.

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Fielding made Jane Austen possible by opening the central tradition of English fiction. In fact, to say that the English novel began with him is as reasonable as such propositions ever are. He completed the work begun by *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, in the pages of which we see the drama turning into the novel—that this development should occur by way of journalism being in the natural course of things. To the art of presenting character and events learnt in



“It is in terms of the major novelists, those significant in the way suggested, that tradition, in any serious sense, has its significance.” Herein we find the deliberateness of this move. There is a deliberate attempt to make canon, to make tradition, when it is not present there in an organic sense, in an inevitable sense. The historicity also is being challenged in particular ways, the historicity is also being appropriated in particular ways to inject it with the notions of tradition that FR Leavis wants to find in a genre like fiction.

“To be important historically is not, of course, to be necessarily one of the significant few.” Again, this is a distinction that he is trying to make. If you had visibility historically that does not really mean that you are one of the significant few. “Fielding deserves the place of importance given him in the literary histories, but he hasn't the kind of classical distinction we are also invited to credit him with. He is important not because he leads to Mr. J.B Priestley but because

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Visibility in literary histories, visibility in the market, could not be reason enough to make it to the canon; there are other reasons. He is first doing this elimination, of telling us who cannot make it to this great tradition, and for what reasons. And just because you know you have read certain kinds of works, or certain kinds of works have gained visibility over a period of time, does not mean that he or she will make it to the canon, that is the larger point that he is trying to pursue over here.

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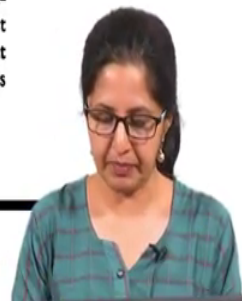
While in the business of doing literary history there are certain kinds of positionings, there are certain kinds of inclusions that you make; but that necessarily does not mean that in the critical tradition you should continue to elevate them to a higher pedestal. There are different yardsticks

at work, this is something that he is trying to argue over here, that literary criticism is an entirely different business altogether, and it operates on a different framework.

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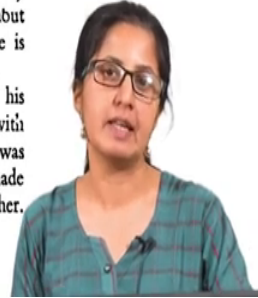


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common acceptance; and *Clarissa* is a really impressive work. But it's no use pretending that Richardson can ever be made a current classic again. The substance of interest that he too has to offer is in its own way extremely limited in range and variety, and the demand he makes on the reader's time is in proportion—and absolutely—so immense as to be found, in general, prohibitive (though I don't know that I wouldn't sooner read through again *Clarissa* than *A la recherche du temps perdu*). But we can understand well enough why his reputation and influence should have been so great throughout Europe; and his immediately relevant historical importance is plain: he too is a major fact in the background of Jane Austen.

The social gap between them was too wide, however, for his work to be usable by her directly: the more he tries to deal with ladies and gentlemen, the more immitigably vulgar he is. It was Fanny Burney who, by transposing him into educated life, made it possible for Jane Austen to absorb what he had to teach her.



And then he talks briefly about Richardson, about his *Clarissa*. “The substance of interest that he too has to offer is in its own way extremely limited in range and variety.” Notice the phrases that he is using over here. The variety is very limited. Also, during the time, they were produced, the interest was fascinating. The kind of visibility that it caught was quite epic as well. But those are not sufficient enough reasons to include them to this great tradition that he is trying to forge over here.

“But we can understand well enough why his reputation and influence should have been so great throughout Europe; and his immediately relevant historical importance is plain; he too is a major fact in the background of Jane Austen.” Hope you are getting the larger point that he is trying to make over here. There is a way in which he has already situated Jane Austen as the centre of this great tradition that he is proposing. And all the other characters who came before, all the other literary writers who came before her, their significance gets accentuated only because they facilitated Jane Austen, only because they facilitated Jane Austen to happen as a literary writer.

And apart from that, now looking back, in spite of the kind of historical visibility and significance that all of those writers and their works had at particular points of time, apart from that, they do not seem to have a larger role to play in this tradition that he is delineating over here. They facilitated Jane Austen to happen as a major fiction writer, and apart from that, they

lack range, they lack variety, and there is not anything much in terms of this genre that they can claim to be a part of this tradition that he is proposing.

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immense as to be found, in general, prohibitive (though I don't know that I wouldn't sooner read through again *Clarissa* than *A la recherche du temps perdu*). But we can understand well enough why his reputation and influence should have been so great throughout Europe; and his immediately relevant historical importance is plain: he too is a major fact in the background of Jane Austen.

The social gap between them was too wide, however, for his work to be usable by her directly: the more he tries to deal with ladies and gentlemen, the more immitigably vulgar he is. It was Fanny Burney who, by transposing him into educated life, made it possible for Jane Austen to absorb what he had to teach her. Here we have one of the important lines of English literary history —Richardson-Fanny Burney-Jane Austen. It is important because

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“The social gap between them was too wide, however, for his work to be usable by her directly.” He is trying to fine tune his argument, much to his own advantage, and we find that he is already invested in this idea of placing Jane Austen and the other three writers, whom he refers to at the beginning of this work, he is already invested in highlighting them, in making them at the centre. And all the other arguments work towards highlighting the centre, in justifying the centre, which is what he does pretty much in this entire work, where he goes on to argue in favour of the tradition that he has now constructed. There is also an inherent irony over here. This is tradition, but this was also very deliberately constructed. He has also got some historical critical legitimization for it by quoting from Samuel Johnson: “not dogmatically, but deliberately.”

And he is trying to get rid of dogma, apparently, but he is trying to construct a tradition, reinforce a tradition, which in certain ways was not there, but it was there as well. There is a very ambivalent way in which he tries to take forward these propositions and also cement a tradition in the early 20th century. And that also begins to last for the following many decades to come. “The social gap between them was too wide, however, for his work to be usable by her directly: the more he tries to deal with ladies and gentlemen, the more immitigably vulgar he is. It was Fanny Burney who, by transposing him into educated life, made it possible for Jane Austen to

absorb what he had to teach her.” Across histories, across time zones, a connection is being made over here.

All of the other writers, whether it is Fanny Burney or Richardson, they are all important figures in this exercise. But they cannot be part of the tradition. I hope you getting the point that he is trying to highlight here. Jane Austen is the first major writer that one needs to reckon with, the first one who sets the tradition in place. She has been facilitated by a range of other writers who went before her. They are all important historically, that trajectory is very important, and he acknowledges that trajectory, he acknowledges their historical positioning as well. But it is a different exercise altogether when one begins to very deliberately create a canon, construct a tradition. We will wrap up with this for today and I hope to be able to continue in the next session. I thank you for your time and your attention.