

**LITERATURE AND SOCIOCULTURAL CRITICISM: The value of  
Lawrence and Leavis to a sociologist**

**Paul Filmer**

**Honorary Research Fellow in Sociology  
Goldsmiths University of London**

**[pafilmer@btinternet.com](mailto:pafilmer@btinternet.com)**

Paper delivered at The Leavis/Lawrence Conference, Eastwood Hall  
Friday 9 September 2016

Leavis offers a succinct account of why a sociologist should want to look at literature as a resource for sociological inquiry:

Without the sensitizing familiarity with the subtleties of language, and the insight into the relations between abstract or generalizing thought and the concrete of human experience, that the trained frequentation of literature alone can bring, the thinking that attends social and political studies will not have the edge and force it should (Leavis, 1962:194)

This recommendation of literature as socially relevant is characteristic of Leavis's criticism, and is echoed in a later assertion that "it is the great novelists above all who give us our social history; compared with what is done in their work - their creative work - the histories of the professional social historian seem empty and unenlightening" (1972:81-2).

Both statements offer a clear justification for treating literary texts as an important source of sociological information but neither recommends the sociological analysis of literature. They seem to imply, rather, that the novelist or poet might be better equipped to do the work of social history than the historian, and that social and political studies require a training also in the study of literature and that that training should come from literary criticism - an implication not without foundation, given some of the problems of reductive, sociocultural determinism characteristic of normative approaches in the sociology of literature (Filmer, 1969, 1998a; Hall, 1979). These approaches characteristically treat the **context** of literary production as more significant than the literary **text**. One consequence of this is a lack of attention to the language of the text and the range of its possible meanings, in favour of referring to it, if at all, as a source of illustrative material about the society in which it is produced or to which it refers.

Leavis criticised these approaches in his essays on 'Literature and Society' and 'Sociology and Literature' as well as in his critiques of Marxist approaches to literature, notably the essay 'Under Which King Bezonian'. His criticisms there are well-formulated and for the most part valid, pointing as they did to characteristics of most established methodologies of social research and schools of sociological theory until almost the middle of the twentieth century, when socio-linguistic and neo-Marxian structuralist methods began to require attention to the

relations between language and social structure as constitutive features of all texts - not only literature (Culler, 1975; Eagleton, 1976, 1983, 1989; Filmer, 1978, 1998b; Macherey, 1978; Williams, 1973, 1977, 1980). This change of approach was grounded in the analysis of the reflexive character of the structures of relations within and between the linguistic contents of the text and the social conditions to which they refer. It is in undertaking this approach to critical literary study and analysis that a sociologist will benefit from attending to Leavis's criticism – a criticism which is itself couched in the quintessentially social terms of a collaborative creative relationship with the literature to which it attends (Filmer, 1977).

A contrast to dominant normative sociological approaches to literature occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more or less concurrently with Leavis's early work, in the German critical tradition of *Literaturwissenschaft*, concerned with knowledge that is available for study both **in** and **about** literature. One of its major scholars, Leo Loewenthal (1961:xv), defined the "essential task" of the sociology of literature as being

to find that core of meaning which, through artistic images, expresses the many facets of thought and feeling...permitting us to develop an image of a given society in terms of the individuals who composed it... what the individual felt about it, what he could hope from it, and how he thought he could change it or escape from it...The social meanings of this inner life of the individual are related to the central problems of social change.

He insists, further (1989:15-16), that it:

should interpret what seems most removed from society as the most valid key to the understanding of society and especially of its defects...Of particular importance...is the...analysis of the social ambience of the intimate and the private, the revealing of the sociological determination of such phenomena as love, friendship, the relationship to nature, self-image, and the like...Literature teaches us to understand the success or failure of the socialization of individuals in concrete historical moments and situations.

It is this focus on individuals as constitutive of society, on analysis through the study of literature, in the concrete particulars of specific historical situations, of their feelings, hopes, the adequacy of their socialisation, the social meanings of their inner lives and their relations to social change, that seem to me to come close

to Leavis's contention that literature can give to social and political studies the edge and force that they need. How these specific and apparently private features of human experience are to be interpreted and analyzed sociologically through literature is what I understand to have been asked to discuss in this paper: a concern, that is, with the reflexive character of the structures of relations within and between the linguistic contents of the text and the social conditions to which they refer.

The question 'How' predicates issues of method. From a sociological perspective, it is only in terms of their generalisability that the insights and explications, their implications and more explicit consequences of any specific analysis of a literary or sociocultural text can be evaluated for their significance. And this requires a replicable method that can be applied by others to cognate phenomena in order to demonstrate their comparability. Until the recent burgeoning of literary theory, with its roots in radical political philosophy, European linguistic and cultural theory and the eclecticism of what passes for much of postmodern literary aesthetics, literary critics seem to have been unsympathetic to attempts to engage them on issues of method. Leavis's (1962:212-22) response to Wellek's invitation to discuss his method for analysing poetry is exemplary of this tendency. But there is to be found in his work a sense of method nevertheless, which is implicit in the systematic character of the analyses that it offers of the texts which he addresses, though he went no further, in his reply to Wellek, than conceding that he sought to engage a critical response to his analyses (which, he was at pains to point out, were not attempts at what he had termed 'murdering to dissect' a text) in the form of qualified agreement that would contribute to developing interpretative debate.

One formulation of how his approach can be seen as differing from Loewenthal's recommendation of seeking in literature the social determination of intimate and private phenomena can be seen in his quotation of the passage from Chapter 9 of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*:

It is the way our sympathy flows and recoils that really determines our lives. And here lies the importance of the novel, properly handled. It can inform and lead into new places the flow of our sympathetic consciousness, and it can lead our sympathy away in recoil from things gone dead. Therefore the novel, properly handled, can reveal the most secret places of life –for it is in the *passional* secret places of life, above all, that the tide of sensitive awareness needs to ebb and flow, cleansing and refreshing.

The issue of method here is raised in the phrase ‘properly handled’ in relation to the novel, and it seems to imply a proper handling in which both the author and the critical analyst collaborate: the author through the adequacy of the representations of and reflections on society in their writings; the critic in undertaking the responsibility of recognising and evaluating those representations and reflections. This reflexive approach seeks to analyse the sociological knowledge to be found within literary texts. The normative approach, by contrast, tends to use methods which have been developed in terms of the view that, because literature is produced in a societal context, it is determined by society and so can be treated as a reflection of the social conditions of its production and communication - a mirror of social life which presents society with some image of itself. Literature can be analyzed and explained in these terms, as an institutional feature of social structure, through sociologies of authorship and readership, of literary production and distribution, and of normative institutional sociologies of literary and artistic occupations. A major problem with this approach is that it pays relatively little attention to the literary text, except as a resource for illustrating social conditions: the nineteenth century novel, for example, as a source of illustrations of urbanisation and industrialisation. As an approach it is criticised both by sociologists and by literary critics. Sociologists argue that literature offers an unrepresentative account of society because its authors are unrepresentative of typical social positions and experiences and from a sociological point of view are therefore an unreliable guide to the reality of the social life that they write about (Filmer, 1969). Literary critics argue that to treat the contents of literature as illustrations of social life is to misrepresent both literature and its relation to language. Literature is about the subjective consciousnesses of the individual characters imaginatively created by the writer - as Loewenthal notes. Moreover, a work of literature is open to a range of possible literary critical interpretations because the language that is used to construct the text is chosen by the writer to connote possible meanings for, rather than simply to illustrate the specific features of what it describes. From both the literary critical and a reflexive sociological perspective, the relations between literature and society are much more complex and subtle than can be conveyed by the idea of straightforward, mirror-like reflection.

A reflexive approach operates quite differently on the grounds that literature is a **reflexive** feature of the society in which it is produced, engaging with it through critical reflection on social practices. It argues from the structure of the literary text to parallel structures in the society in which the text is produced, or which it is written about, or in which it is being read. None of these three formulations of society are necessarily empirically the same, and each of them is seen as being constituted critically and reflexively by and in the literary work – a process with

which the critical reader collaborates. The texts may be in part **imaginary**, but they are constructed to bear a critically reflexive relation to the **realities** of these formulations of society. A reflexive methodological perspective, thus, is designed to prevent normative reduction of literary representations to illustration.

I described this creative collaboration between critical reader and writer, as Leavis formulates it, as quintessentially social because it is in being read that the literary text is realised, made actual as a meaningful, critical, imaginative reflection on experience. Lawrence endorses this in his rejection of any critical privileging of authorial intention with his admonition not to trust the writer but the tale itself. And it is by two of his tales that I want to topicalise the concept through which I propose beginning to explore the relevance for sociology and cognate disciplines of Lawrence's literature and Leavis's literary critical analysis – that of class.

In his posthumously published *Autobiographical Sketch* Lawrence prefaces a disquisition on the shallowness and passionlessness of the middle classes with the assertion: 'Class makes a gulf across which all the best human flow is lost'. One sense of 'proper handling' by the novel, or literature in general, is surely in realising such a general, rather abstract contention through the concrete particulars of a specific interactional situation, one example of which Lawrence offers at an important juncture in the narrative of *The Captain's Doll*. The two principal characters, Hepburn and Hannele are being driven into the mountains:

At a house on a knoll the driver sounded his horn, and out rushed children crying Papa! Papa!-then a woman with a basket. A few brief words from the weaselish man, who smiled with warm, manly blue eyes at his children, then the car leaped forward. The whole bearing of the man was so different, when he was looking at his own family. He could not even say thank-you when Hepburn opened the gates. He hated and even despised his human cargo of middle-class people. Deep, deep is class-hatred, and it begins to swallow all human feeling in its abyss. So, stiff, silent, thin, capable, and neuter towards his fares sat the little driver with the flaps over his ears, and his thin nose cold. (2006:128)

The concrete particulars of the gulf between classes across which human flow are lost are clearly delineated here. The contrast between the hate, even despisal of the 'weaselish' driver for the depersonalised 'human cargo of middle-class people' that comprise his passengers, and the (anything but weaselish) whole 'warm, manly smiling... bearing of the man...looking at his own family'. He says just 'a few brief words' to them, but to his passengers is silent and 'could

not even say thank-you when Hepburn opened the gates’.

Despite its obvious relevance, it is not in critical analysis of this tale, however, that Leavis chose to discuss at length Lawrence’s “consciousness of class-distinctions”, but rather in the chapter in *D.H.Lawrence: Novelist* which is focussed on *The Daughters of the Vicar*. The consciousness expressed there, Leavis says,

is precisely a consciousness that we have to define as wholly incompatible with snobbery or any related form of class-feeling. Lawrence registers them as facts that play an important part in human life. The part they play in the given tale is a sinister one, and the theme is their defeat – the triumph of them over life. (1964:75)

“Class”, he continues, is

the villain of the drama...The pride of class-superiority...appears as the enemy of life, starving and thwarting and denying, and breeding in consequence hate and ugliness...The superiority that exacts this terrible price is shown to us in all its nothingness. The ugliness bred in the clinging to it appear repellently for what they are. The unbeautiful pride places itself as hateful in its manifestations and as essentially destructive of all fineness and nobility. And yet it appears as having something heroic about it – something almost tragic. That is, the attitude implicit in the presentation of the drama is not one that goes with contemptuous exposure or satiric condemnation; it is more subtle and poised – it is one that is incompatible with complacency or cruelty in any form. (1964:76-7)

For Lawrence, Leavis insists,

class is an important human fact, and he is an incomparable master of it over the whole range of its manifestations. But – or therefore – no writer is more wholly without class-feeling in the ordinary sense of the term. When he presents working-class people or milieu, he doesn’t write up or down; the people are first and last just human beings; his interest in them is an interest in them purely as such. The fact they are working class doesn’t affect them or his attitude towards them.

Again, though class-feeling shows itself in the Lindley parents in most hateful ways, the hatefulness of which is exposed in all its

nakedness, there is no animus in the presentment. Class is a major factor in the case presented, but attention focusses on the essential humanity this fact conditions, and the interest informing the attention remains pure and undeflected. And always in Lawrence, whatever the circumstances of class or nationality or race that mark the drama in view, the interest he turns on it is incompatible with condescension, animus, or egotistic deflection of any kind; it has a quality that one has to call fundamental reverence, 'reverence' here being something that recommends itself no more to sentimentalists than to cynics...(1964:88-9)

An example of this last point, in relation to race rather than class, is cited by Leavis (1964:226) from *The Captain's Doll*. Hepburn and Hanele have taken shelter from a rainstorm in the uppermost hotel on their trip into the mountains, where they

sat in the restaurant drinking hot coffee and milk, and watching the maidens in cotton frocks and aprons and bare arms, and the fair youths with maidenly necks and huge voracious boots, and the many Jews of the wrong sort and the wrong shape. These Jews were all being very Austrian, in Tyrol costume that didn't sit on them, assuming the whole gesture and intonation of aristocratic Austria, so that you might think they *were* Austrian aristocrats, if you weren't properly listening, or if you didn't look twice. Certainly they were lords of the Alps, or at least lords of the Alpine hotels this summer, let prejudice be what it might. Jews of the wrong sort. And yet even they imparted a wholesome breath of sanity, disillusion, unsentimentality to the excited "Bergheil" atmosphere. Their dark-eyed, sardonic presence seemed to say to the maidenly-necked youths: "Don't sprout wings of the spirit too much, my dears." (2006:140)

In his biography of Lawrence, Worthen (2006:430) has noted that Lawrence "used the words 'Jew' and 'Jewess' perfectly unselfconsciously, according to the conventions of the time, and without bigotry or contempt". The potential to offend of the reiterated reference here to 'Jews of the wrong sort' is clearly subverted still further by Lawrence's conversational address to his readers that they (or anyone) 'might think they *were* Austrian aristocrats, if you weren't properly listening, or if you didn't look twice'. This conversational intimacy between writer and reader has already been set up in the preceding passage when, whilst walking through the storm, Hepburn and Hannele are engaged in an argument central to the narrative. At its conclusion, they continue in silence, Hannele reflecting on how best to act, Lawrence goes on (2006:138), "as they

walked in the rain. The rain, by the way, was abating.” That ‘by the way’, of course, does not refer to the way in the sense of the path the characters are taking! It is the confident interjection of a writer at the height of his powers, showing his readers with a most engaging attention that he is aware that part of the compelling character of his text is that their background attention may still be contemplating the severity of the weather. And Lawrence is attending to it, as a narrative pause, by saying, effectively, ‘in case you were wondering, because I know the tale I am telling is quite compelling in all its particulars, even the weather, and the weather is part of that compellingness as the dramatic background in a dramatic setting to a dramatic moment, the weather *is* improving’. This does anything but patronise the readers. Rather it shares with them a sense of humorous reflection both that the narrative is a fiction, but of the best, that is to say the most relevant and absorbing kind. It is, in every sense, being brought to life through the collaborative reading of a carefully and thoughtfully written work of literature, reflecting consummately on the real existential dilemmas of life as it is being experienced in and through all the detail of the present particularities of the text.

This intratextual device is sustained as Hepburn and Hanele await the motor car at the conclusion of their expedition,

watching the tourists and the trippers and the motor-car men. There were three Jews from Vienna: and the girl had a huge white woolly dog, as big as a calf, and white and woolly and silly and amiable as a toy. The men of course came patting it and admiring it, just as men always do, in life and in novels. And the girl, holding the leash, posed and leaned backwards in the attitudes of heroines on novel-covers. She said the white woolly monster was a Siberian steppe-dog. Alexander wondered what the steppes made of such a wuffer. And the three Jews pretended they were elegant Austrians out of popular romances. (2006:144-5)

The collusive/contrastive relation between writer and reader, fiction and reality is again invoked playfully here as a series of commonplace behavioural poses and pretences which are both resourced by and reflect fictional representations of them: the men’s patting and admiring of the dog; the girl’s backward leaning, emulatory poses; the Jews pretending to be ‘elegant Austrians’; even Hepburn’s reference to the dog as a ‘wuffer’.

I have deliberately sought to develop, through the selection of these passages from Lawrence and Leavis, not just the proper handling of literature in their collaborative/creative, critical reflections on the concrete particulars of the

experiences of social differentiation through class and race/ethnicity. I have suggested also that in Lawrence's reflective representations, in the example of *The Captain's Doll*, there is a collusive, reflexive engagement with readers, intended to sensitise them to the experience and responsibilities of their own creative roles as readers. This sensitising parallels the rather different, but comparable sensitising in the critic's discourse that evaluates the representational adequacies of the text to show why the text is worth reading. Both ways of sensitising are also proper handlings of the text in requiring critical reflection on it through, and as representation of, the concrete, particular experiences of class.

This critical reflection on and analysis of the representation of individual and collective experience is key to what social scientists can gain from Lawrence's work and its critical explication by Leavis. I want to demonstrate this by drawing on the work of Raymond Williams whose reflexive formulations of class seem to me clearly to resonate with the literary and literary critical instances I have given. He is concerned to represent the meaning of the **experience** of class as the basis for its sense and critical adequacy as an analytical **concept**, and in doing so to reject tendencies in normative social scientific analyses of class to subsume stratifying practices in social interaction within *a priori* concepts.

Williams (1968:313) writes of class as particular, historically changing language practices in such modes of speech as literature, criticism and politics. He formulates this sense of class as

A collective mode (of being, feeling, acting) of that part of a group of people, similarly circumstanced, which has become conscious of its own position *and of its own attitude to this position*. (my italics)

It is a group conscious not only of its specific, particular shared circumstances but conscious also of its sense of these circumstances. This shared consciousness is made possible by what he describes (1968:13) as

A general pattern of change (in) a number of words, which are now of capital importance (and which) came for the first time into common English use (in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century), or, where they had already been generally used...acquired new and important meanings. (The changes) bear witness to a general change in our characteristic ways of thinking about our common life: about our social, political and economic institutions; about the purposes which these institutions are designed to

embody; and about the relations to these institutions and purposes of our activities in learning, education, and the arts.

Williams's (1968:18) way of examining the meanings and changes in meanings of words is "not only to distinguish meanings but to relate them to their sources and effects". This stems from his commitment "to the study of actual language: that is to say, to the words and sequences which particular men and women have used in trying to give meaning to their experience". His method is to study "actual individual statements and contributions"; its purpose is to 'understand and value' these statements. These are the terms of literary critical practice and bear a strong resemblance to Leavis's own terminology – not surprisingly as Williams was one of Leavis's students. But the critical practice is committed here, not to literature but to the 'actual language' used in trying to give meaning to experience. Understanding is made possible through the commonness of language, a shared understanding of 'the words and sequences of words' – the sense in which Leavis insists that a language is a life. The uses to which the shared language(s) are put provide the grounds for understandability, for the communicable sense they make. Further, in seeking to value shared language and the changing meanings of its constitutive sequences of words, Williams invokes tradition as the location of the general patterns of change in the use and meaning of words like class. The valuations of these general patterns of change provide 'a special kind of map by which it is possible to look again at the wider changes in life and thought to which the changes in language evidently refer'. One word in particular encapsulates and organizes class and all other key words (amongst which it is itself included): the word culture. In its meaning are concentrated

questions directly raised by the great historical changes which the changes in industry, democracy, and class, in their own way, represent, and to which the changes in art are a closely related response. (It)...is a record of...important and continuing reactions to...changes in...social, economic, and political life...(I)n its structure of meanings, is a wide and general movement in thought and feeling (exemplified in the) complex and radical response...to the new problems of social class. (1968:16)

Whereas, for Williams, both the sense of structural cohesion and shared consciousness of each class is provided for by its culture, 'the body of intellectual and imaginative work which each generation receives as its traditional culture is always, and necessarily, something more than the product of a single class'. And this is so, not only on historical grounds, but also because

Even within a society in which a particular class is dominant, it is

evidently possible both for members of other classes to contribute to the common stock, and for such contributions to be unaffected by or be in opposition to the ideas and values of the dominant class. The area of a culture, it would seem, is usually proportionate to the area of a language rather than to the area of a class... (people) who share a common language share the inheritance of an intellectual and literary tradition which is necessarily and constantly revalued with every shift in experience. (1968:308)

The particularity of these experiential shifts are in a reflexive relation with tradition which is mediated through language, and eventually produces changes in the institutional structures of social order. Williams both formulates and makes possible detailed analysis of these generative processes of social change through his concept of structures of feeling (Filmer, 2003). But in the outline of his initial analysis of class that I have given here can be seen the possibility of recovering, from within critically reflexive linguistic and literary textual representations of historically particular experiences, viable discursive accounts of its sociological significance modelled clearly on a sense of literature and language that is, in Lawrence's sense, properly handled.

## REFERENCES

- Culler, J. (1975): *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, London, Routledge
- Eagleton, T. (1976): *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*. New Left Books, London
- Eagleton, T. (1983): *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell
- Eagleton, T. (1989): 'Two Approaches in the Sociology of Literature' in Desan, P. et al (eds): *Literature and Social Practice*, Chicago and London, U. of Chicago Press
- Filmer, P. (1969): 'The Literary Imagination and the Explanation of Socio-cultural Change in Modern Britain', *European Journal of Sociology*, X(2): 271-291
- Filmer, P. (1975): 'Sociology and Social Stratification: Issues of Reflexivity and Tradition' in Sandywell, Barry et al: *Problems of Reflexivity and Dialectics in Sociological Inquiry: Language Theorizing Difference*, London, Routledge
- Filmer, P. (1977): 'Literary Study as Liberal Education and as Sociology in the Work of F.R. Leavis', in Jenks, C. (ed): *Rationality, Education and the Social Organization of Knowledge: Papers for a Reflexive Sociology of Education*, London, Routledge
- Filmer, P. (1978): 'Dickens, Pickwick and Realism' in Laurenson, Diana (ed): *The Sociology of Literature: Applied Studies: Sociological Review Monograph 26*, Keele, Staffordshire, University of Keele
- Filmer, P. (1998a): 'Analysing Literary Texts' in Seale, C. (ed.): *Researching Society and Culture*, London, Sage
- Filmer, P. (1998b): 'Image/Text' in Jenks, C. (ed.): *Core Sociological Dichotomies*, London, Sage
- Filmer, P. (2003): 'Structures of feeling and socio-cultural formations: the significance of literature and experience to Raymond Williams's sociology of culture', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 54(2):199-219
- Hall, J. (1979): *The Sociology of Literature*, London, Longman
- Lawrence, D.H. (2006): *The Fox/The Captain's Doll/The Ladybird*, London, Penguin Books
- Leavis, F.R. (1962): *The Common Pursuit*, Harmondsworth, Peregrine Books
- Leavis, F.R. (1964): *D.H. Lawrence/Novelist*, Harmondsworth, Peregrine Books
- Leavis, F.R. (1972): *Nor Shall My Sword: Discourses on Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope*, London, Chatto & Windus
- Leavis, F.R. (1986): *Valuation in Criticism and other essays* (collected and edited by G. Singh), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Loewenthal, L. (1961): *Literature, Popular Culture and Society*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall
- Loewenthal, L. (1989): 'Sociology of Literature in Retrospect' in Desan, P. et al (eds): *Literature and Social Practice*, Chicago and London, U. of Chicago Press

Macherey, P. (1978): *A Theory of Literary Production* (translated by G. Wall), London, Routledge

Williams, R. (1968): *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books

Williams, R. (1973): *The Country and the City*, London, Chatto & Windus

Williams, R. (1977): *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press

Williams, R. (1980): *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays*, London, Verso Editions

Worthen, J. (2006): *D.H.Lawrence: The Life of an Outsider*, London, Penguin Books