

Irony in Revolt: F. R. Leavis Reads Johnson

There has been a surge of F. R. Leavis reappraisals in recent years and some excellent new books on Leavis's influence have received thoughtful reviews.¹ Yet the rehabilitation of Leavis, as far as it goes, has yet to account fully for his critical relations with Johnson. It remains to draw the line of critical history between them and to mark both the difference and the areas of common ground. Hovering over both the twentieth- and eighteenth-century critic is the somber observation of Pope's *Temple of Fame* (1715):

Criticks I saw, that other Names deface,
And fix their own with Labour in their place:
Their own like others soon their Place resign'd;
Or disappear'd, and left the first behind.
(lines 37–40)²

An earlier and more savage version of the rule of succession appears in the splenetic lines of William Wycherley of 1704 on the “currish Pack of Critics” who “Like other Snarlers” “will never spare | Each other, when they hungry grow for Fame; | But on each other fall, for want of Game.”³ In their different ways Johnson and Leavis embody the fiercer strains of British critical history. Combative by nature, they can be outspoken to the

¹ For documentation of Leavis's influence, personal, educational and critical, see Christopher Hilliard, *English as a Vocation: The “Scrutiny” Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). For a review of Hilliard, together with David Ellis's *Memoirs of a Leavisite: The Decline and Fall of Cambridge English* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), see John Mullan, “As If Life Depended on It,” *London Review of Books*, vol. 35, no. 17 (September 12, 2013), pp. 10–12. As recent recognition of Leavis's revolutionary standing (with other early and mid-twentieth-century critics) see Terry Eagleton, *Critical Revolutionaries: Five Critics Who Changed the Way We Read* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2022).

² *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, gen. ed. John Butt, 11 vols. (London: Methuen, 1939–69), vol. II, p. 256.

³ William Wycherley, Preface to *Miscellany Poems: As Satyrs, Epistles, Love-Verses, Songs, Sonnets, &c.* (London, 1704), n.p.

point of giving offense; both disdain the insincerities of literary flummery and the marks of intellectual pretension. For Leavis, the literary critic was an “anti-philosopher,” and in his influential 1952 collection *The Common Pursuit*, he writes that “‘Aesthetic’ is a term the literary critic would do well to deny himself.”⁴ Johnson, for his part, could not resist a satirical smile at the self-indulgence of contemporary aesthetic curiosity. In 1759 he observes of Dick Minim the critic that he was “the great investigator of hidden beauties” (Works II, p. 188).

Having It Both Ways

In his 1944 essay for *Scrutiny* entitled “Johnson as Critic,” Leavis paid an especially warm and eloquent tribute to Johnson’s critical writings: “Johnson’s criticism, most of it, belongs with the living classics: it can be read afresh every year with unaffected pleasure and new stimulus. It is alive and life-giving.” Yet having praised Johnson in the opening paragraph of the essay, Leavis can in the next breath seem to reverse his verdict and assert that Johnson’s criticism is, in fact, “Not for enlightenment about the authors with whom it deals (though it may impart some), and not for direct instruction in critical thinking.”⁵

How can both things be true? What adequate concept of criticism (and the history of criticism) allows that Johnson’s critical writings are “living literature” yet asserts that, as the literature of criticism, they are “not for direct instruction”? The working-out of this latter judgment constitutes much of the essay’s remainder. Leavis takes up Johnson’s verdict on the blank verse of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. His approach at this point is both contextual and personal in curious combination. Leavis first suggests how Johnson’s judgments come from a determining positive culture; but in other parts of the same essay he envisions this culture as equally predictive of Johnson’s critical trammels, and he returns to Johnson’s “Life of Milton” to discuss his criticisms of the pastoral elegy *Lycidas*. The nature of Johnson’s disablement, Leavis then writes, “deserves to be precisely noted” (p. 190). Here the tin ear, the poetic tone-deafness that Leavis accords to Johnson, is a real problem when one is trying to understand how Johnson’s standing as a literary critic might be respected: “Those

⁴ F. R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (London: Penguin Books, 1952), p. 89. Further references to this volume in the Appendix appear parenthetically.

⁵ F. R. Leavis, “Johnson as Critic,” *Scrutiny*, vol. 12, no. 3 (1944), pp. 187–200, at 187. Further page references to quoted remarks from this essay appear parenthetically.

surprising judgments, imputing 'harshness' and lack of 'music,' are to be explained by reference to the cultivated predilection, the positive 'ear,' with which they are correlated" (p. 190). The cause of such "surprising judgments" Leavis identifies as Johnson's Augustan "training" (his liking, perhaps, for such proto-Augustans as Denham and Waller, the one strong, the other sweet). Leavis avers that this antecedent doctrine of taste, existing on different principles from Leavis's own, however "positive" the poetical "ear" of Johnson may have been, makes the music of *Lycidas* an acoustic embellishment the older critic is deaf to.

Though Leavis does not share the lingering Victorian taste for the melliflence of Milton, he nevertheless comes down on the side of those who see *Lycidas* as a poem of a profoundly different kind from what Johnson suggests that it is: "It is difficult to see how, granted the approach," writes Leavis, "Johnson's essential criticism can be disposed of. The answer, of course, is that the approach is inappropriate and the poem a different kind of thing from any appreciable by Johnsonian criticism" (p. 192). But whatever is meant by this "Johnsonian criticism" (at once logically hard to disregard "granted the approach" yet "inappropriate"), Leavis's effort to qualify Johnson finds reasons that echo commonplace eighteenth-century enthusiasms for Milton's poem. The period represents a tradition from which Leavis otherwise takes pains to distance himself; but he shares, if unconsciously, its concerted irritation with Johnson's hostility.

Leavis's disapproval nowhere comes out more strongly than when he is critiquing Johnson on Shakespeare. On a number of occasions what Johnson says and what Leavis says that he says are markedly different. Firstly, Leavis asserts that Johnson "exalts the comedies above the tragedies" (p. 199). But Johnson writes of "comedy" and "tragedy" (singular nouns), and the passage from the *Preface to Shakespeare* containing these terms is the one that Leavis actually quotes (Works VII, p. 69). Johnson is not in fact comparing whole plays or groups of plays at this moment but the relative success in both genres of Shakespeare's "natural disposition" (which tended to comedy). Elsewhere, Leavis claims that Johnson is guilty of a "censure of Shakespeare's indifference to poetic justice" (p. 197). It is true that when in the *Preface* he reflects on Shakespeare's neglect of moral purpose, Johnson writes of "justice" as "a virtue independent on time and place" (Works VII, p. 71); but he nowhere uses the phrase so stated by Leavis. Nor does he invoke "poetical justice" except when assessing objections he pointedly disagrees with or wishes to place in perspective. The endnote on *Hamlet* is a case in point: "The poet is accused of having shewn

little regard to poetical justice, and may be charged with equal neglect of poetical probability" (Works VIII, p. 1011).

Another mark of Leavis's disapproval is the suggestion that Johnson did not appreciate Shakespeare's "exploratory creative" use of poetical language. Yet Leavis's own quotation of a passage from *Macbeth* having, in Johnson's words, "all the force of poetry, that force which calls new powers into being" (*Rambler* 168, Works v, p. 127), appears to undermine this belief. "[C]an we say," asks Leavis, "that the critic who finds [such words] when trying to express his sense of the peculiar exploratory creativeness and metaphorical concreteness of Shakespeare's poetry doesn't appreciate the Shakespearian use of language?" (p. 193). The obvious answer to this rhetorical question might reasonably be "no" – how does Johnson's formulation not recognize the creative?

Finally, among the tally of readings that do not withstand scrutiny, we see that Leavis thinks Johnson "cannot appreciate the ways in which not only Shakespearean drama but all works of art *act* their moral judgments," adding that "For Johnson a thing is stated, or it isn't there" (p. 197). Here only a fairly cursory inspection of Johnson's text is required. Johnson's sense of literature's moral operations, and the considerable – unstated – implications, are everywhere, as I illustrate in what follows.⁶

How could so much be so wrong? One clue is a biographical anecdote by Leavis's former pupil Ian MacKillop, who makes mention of an evening in Cambridge when an editor of the *Cambridge Quarterly*, John Newton, "was lecturing on the importance of eighteenth-century literary criticism" and who adds that "It should be remembered that while Leavis himself had great respect for Johnson, it was central to his literary aesthetic that Johnson did not grasp the 'creative-exploratory' (that is, the Shakespearean) use of language." MacKillop observed that "Newton," in defending Johnson against Leavis, "was playing with the heart of Leavis's convictions."⁷ But in making these points, and more, Leavis writes as if challenging Johnson's appreciation of Shakespeare for the first time. He does not say so or perhaps does not know, but he closely echoes the frustration with Johnson that comes through the earliest responses to Johnson's Shakespeare edition, as in more general reactions by Johnson's eighteenth-century detractors. In common with Johnson's contemporary

⁶ For additional documentation of these implications see Philip Smallwood, "Shakespeare: Johnson's Poet of Nature," in *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 143–60.

⁷ Ian MacKillop, *F. R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), p. 345.

critics, Leavis diagnoses the problem of critical judgment as the radically undramatic habit of mind manifest in his own (failed) tragic play of 1749, *Irene* (p. 196). Even Boswell judged that Johnson's criteria could be inferred from the literary works that he wrote.

Whatever one might think of *Irene* – and Johnson did not himself think it a success – there was, in fact, nothing at all “undramatic” about Johnson's appreciation of Shakespeare. There is this, on *King Lear*:

The tragedy of Lear is deservedly celebrated among the dramas of Shakespeare. There is perhaps no play which keeps the attention so strongly fixed: which so much agitates our passions and interests our curiosity. The artful involutions of distinct interests, the striking opposition of contrary characters, the sudden changes of fortune, and the quick succession of events, fill the mind with a perpetual tumult of indignation, pity and hope. (Works VIII, pp. 702–03)

Or this, on what it feels like to experience a Shakespeare tragedy:

every man finds his mind more strongly seized by the tragedies of Shakespeare than of any other writer; others please us by particular speeches, but he always makes us anxious for the event, and has perhaps excelled all but Homer in securing the first purpose of a writer, by exciting restless and unquenchable curiosity, and compelling him that reads his work to read it through. (Works VII, p. 83)

Leavis's desire to blame Augustan culture for Johnson's “failings” leads to some risky and fallacious generalizations of his own:

It is an age in which everyone of any cultivation knows so well what Reason, Truth and Nature, the presiding trinity, are that no one feels any pressing need of definitions . . . It is not an age in which the poet feels called on to explore further below the public surface than conventional expression takes cognizance of, or to push in any way beyond the frontiers of the charted. (p. 194)

So much for Johnson's verdict on Pope, who “had likewise genius; a mind active, ambitious, and adventurous, always investigating, always aspiring; in its widest searches still longing to go forward, in its highest flights still wishing to be higher; always imagining something greater than it knows, always endeavouring more than it can do” (*Lives*, vol. iv, p. 62).

The difficulty that Leavis experienced over Johnson's Shakespeare, as with his criticism of *Lycidas*, recalls an eighteenth-century sense of disappointment with Johnson and accords a quantity of critical nuisance value to his views. The complaint emerges in a range of eighteenth-century texts and includes Joseph Warton's despair with Johnson in the second volume

of his *Essay on Pope* (1782), its publication possibly provoked by the second series of Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1781). The spirit of revolt appears in Warton's inclination to contest verdicts within the *Lives* for their awkward refusal to fall into line. This strengthens in the notes printed in the first volume of Warton's edition of Pope of 1797. Again, it is Johnson's whole unpoetical cast of mind, evidenced by his own literary productions, which degrades the criteria of his literary judgments and leads to his deeply uncongenial conclusions:

Johnson's mind was formed for the Didactic, the Moral, and the Satyric; and he had no true relish for the higher and more genuine species of poetry. Strong couplets, modern manners, present life, moral sententious writings alone pleased him. Hence his tasteless and groundless objections to The Lycidas of Milton, and to the Bard of Gray. Hence his own Irene is so frigid and uninteresting a tragedy; while his imitations of Juvenal are so forcible and pointed. His Lives of the Poets are unhappily tinged with this narrow prejudice and confined notion of poetry, which has occasioned many false and spurious remarks, and many ill-grounded opinions, in a work that might have been, and was intended to have been, a manual of good taste and judgment.⁸

To the personal dismay that pained Warton, writing as an old friend whose later relation to Johnson appears in the comically imagined dialogue between the two celebrated Doctors of Robert Potter's "A Dream" of 1789,⁹ we can add James Gillray's outrageously vivid cartoons at Johnson's critical expense that I have mentioned above in Chapter 10 – these from an artistic genius for whom every celebrity in sight was a legitimate target. In one such image, Johnson's negative verdicts on Milton and on other poets such as Hammond and Gray are subjected to ridicule: Milton's name, with theirs, appears in a list on the dunce's cap worn by a half-naked Johnson in the stunning image of "Dr Pomposo" driven by the vengeful Muses around Mount Parnassus. Johnson sought to resist the cult of the minor Milton in the middle and later years of the eighteenth century and was duly admonished by contemporaries. A volume of *Deformities of Dr Johnson* by James Thomson Callender of 1782 brings many of the key criticisms together.¹⁰ Leavis is serious enough

⁸ Joseph Warton, *The Works of Alexander Pope, Esq. . . . with Notes and Illustrations*, 9 vols. (London, 1797), vol. 1, p. 173n.

⁹ Robert Potter, *The Art of Criticism: As Exemplified in Dr. Johnson's Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (London, 1789), pp. 195–250.

¹⁰ James Thomson Callender, *Deformities of Dr Samuel Johnson, Selected from His Works* (Edinburgh, 1782).

to appreciate Johnson's human objections to a poem shamelessly applying pastoral images to the death of a friend. Yet he recycles an eighteenth-century resistance to Johnson. It is pertinent to ask why.

Odd Man Out or Representative Mind?

The incoherence of this 1944 *Scrutiny* article is resolved two years later in a very different account of criticism's historical relations. This is outlined in a second essay which condemns Johnson more harshly. In a review of Joseph Wood Krutch's *Samuel Johnson* for the *Kenyon Review* reprinted unchanged six years later in *The Common Pursuit* as "Johnson and Augustanism" (pp. 97–115), Leavis begins with a tribute to the American scholar.¹¹ He regards Krutch as having done proper justice to Johnson's humanitarianism – the fact, for example, that his polemic against the Americans "is significantly correlated with his indignant hatred of slavery" (p. 99). But Leavis now denied that Johnson's criticism had anything like the lasting value that he had himself, two years earlier, occasion to praise. The question that Leavis tries to answer shifts from critical disagreement ("Is Johnson right or wrong in his critical judgments?") to cultural analysis ("Why is Johnson so wrong?") – so obviously and unquestionably and symptomatically wrong in his judgments that we don't any longer need to marshal evidence of their wrongness to dispose of them.

In answer to this question-which-begs-a-question Leavis deploys two arguments that do not sit well together. The first posits an ultimate cultural cause (that of "Augustanism") for the phenomenon of Johnson's "case"; the second asserts a proximate cause for Johnson's misjudgments (the eccentric nature that marks Johnson out). The paradox involves our seeing Johnson as a representative Augustan but at the same time an exception. He is one on his own, but simultaneously "trained" by his period's pervasive convictions to the point where he stands proxy for its poetical tastes. The diagnosis that Leavis delivered was the awkward one: that Johnson's sensibility was an "extravagant and disqualifying abnormality" yet prey to the conventional mindset of an entire cultural era embracing the poetry of Dryden and Pope (p. 100). (Such thinking incidentally ignores the fact that Johnson has much to say of a negatively critical nature about the poems of Dryden and Pope.) Leavis reconciles these two

¹¹ Joseph Wood Krutch, *Samuel Johnson* (1944; New York and Burlingame: Harcourt Brace, 1963). Reviewed by Leavis in "Doctor Johnson," *Kenyon Review*, vol. 8 (1946), pp. 637–57.

incompatible inferences by means of an opposition where the second element gets the rhetorical better of the first. Note the role of “nevertheless” in the following remarks on a Johnson who, while he is:

a genius of robust and racy individuality, notably direct and strong in his appeal to firsthand experience, . . . nevertheless finds himself very much at home in a cultural tradition that lays a peculiarly heavy stress on the conventional and social conditioning of individual achievement, and is peculiarly insistent in its belief that individual thought and expression must exemplify a social discipline, and enlist tradition as a collaborator, or be worthless. (p. 104)

Later, and warming to the same theme, Leavis writes that “Johnson was representative in his inability to appreciate the more profoundly creative uses of language – for that was his case” (p. 110).

But this verdict once more hangs on the thread of misreading. Again, Leavis reserves his most fundamental criticisms for Johnson’s Shakespeare. Quoting Johnson’s paragraphs from the *Preface* on the natural “disposition” that led Shakespeare to comedy (he found puns endearingly hard to resist), Leavis claims that “The critic who can in this way exalt the comedy above the tragedy exhibits a failure in the appreciation of Shakespeare that no one to-day, surely, would hold to be anything but major” (p. 108). There is much that Leavis ignores – for example the compelling passage on *Lear* quoted above from the notes to the plays; the fact that the major extended endnotes to the plays are concerned with the major tragedies (*Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*); that “Shakespeare’s plays are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies” (Works VII, p. 66), and that in the paragraphs that Leavis quotes, Johnson writes of Shakespeare’s “tragick scenes” (my emphasis).¹²

Perhaps Johnson esteemed Shakespearean comedy more highly than did Leavis. There is evidence to think so. But if Johnson is writing about scenes rather than whole plays, then Leavis’s distance from Johnson is not nearly as great as he thinks. The same can be said of Leavis’s pointed distortion of the moral value Johnson accords to dramatic works. He not only repeats the substance of the bogus charge laid against Johnson in the earlier *Scrutiny* article but is even more emphatic: “Johnson cannot understand that works of art *enact* their moral valuations. It is not enough that

¹² I owe this observation to sight of the typescript of some unpublished lectures on eighteenth-century criticism by the Cambridge critic and academic John Newton. I take these to be the same as those attended by MacKillop.

Shakespeare, on the evidence of his works, ‘thinks’ (and feels), morally; for Johnson a moral judgment that isn’t *stated* isn’t there” (pp. 110–11).¹³ Evidence to the contrary is not hard to find. “The moral to be drawn from this representation [of the character of Falstaff] is, that no man is more dangerous than he that with a will to corrupt, hath the power to please” (Works VII, p. 523). The portrayal of the character of Edmund in *King Lear* is such as to suggest that “crimes lead to crimes” and eventually “terminate in ruin” (Works VII, p. 704). The person stating these particular morals is not Shakespeare but Johnson.

There is a double irony here. The first is that Leavis’s sentiments reflect Johnson’s critical priorities. Both critics foreground the value of “life,” an esteem for “living literature,” as preeminent, and they are famously taken to do so. “I don’t believe in any ‘literary values,’” writes Leavis with characteristic bravura, “and you won’t find me talking about them; the judgments the literary critic is concerned with are judgments about life.”¹⁴ “Shakespeare has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men”; his dialogue is “level with life”; his language is “the language . . . of men,” writes Johnson, more impersonally (Works VII, pp. 64, 84).

The second irony is historical and concerns Johnson’s intrusion into the critical business of the twentieth century where he is not welcome. Leavis reveals again an imperfect consciousness of his own position vis-à-vis the critical past. William Kenrick, Joseph Warton, James Gillray and Robert Anderson, together with William Blake and ultimately the ranks of the great Romantics, foreshadow Leavis’s twentieth-century rebellion against Johnson’s critical presence within their world. Gillray’s early cartoon of Johnson’s head placed on the body of an owl as he stares at busts of the past poetical greats has given us the vivid image of “Old Wisdom Blinking at the Stars.” “Winking and Blinking like Dr. Johnson” is Blake’s line from *An Island in the Moon*.¹⁵ Anderson in his 1795 *Life of Samuel Johnson* laments that “A certain inelegance of taste, a frigid churlishness of temper, unsubdued and unqualified by that melting sensibility, that divine enthusiasm of soul, which are essential to a hearty relish of poetical composition,

¹³ Several remarks in John Wain’s Introduction to his Johnson selection illustrate the dissemination of this misdescription. Wain quotes this passage from Leavis with favor and claims that “it would be disingenuous not to admit that [Johnson’s] demand for direct moral instruction is one of the things that weigh against him as a critic of Shakespeare.” John Wain, *Johnson as Critic* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 48.

¹⁴ F. R. Leavis, *Nor Shall My Sword: Discourses on Pluralism, Compassion, and Social Hope* (1952; London: Chatto & Windus, 1972), p. 97.

¹⁵ *William Blake’s Writings*, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), vol. II, p. 888.

too often counteracted and corrupted the other poetical principles of his intellect.”¹⁶ On poetry as “melting sensibility” or “divine enthusiasm of soul” Leavis is closer to Johnson than to Anderson, but his method is nevertheless to place Johnson in a double bind, as abnormal yet somehow conventional. By this measure Leavis seals the ears of his critical present to the Johnsonian past and makes more space for his personal critical project. It is a process that Pope and Johnson would have easily foreseen. “[The] great part of the labour of every writer is only the destruction of those that went before him,” writes Johnson: “The first care of the builder of a new system, is to demolish the fabricks which are standing” (Works VII, p. 99).

¹⁶ Robert Anderson, *The Life of Samuel Johnson with Critical Observations on His Works* (London, 1795), p. 206.