

Research Article

# Cultural Memory in Contemporary Fiction: F. R. Leavis's and Matthew Arnold's Intellectual Presence in A. S. Byatt's Work

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## Abstract

The concept of “cultural memory” serves as the foundation for this article, which explains the complex relationships between two prominent figures in the history of English letters, Matthew Arnold and F. R. Leavis, as well as how A. S. Byatt's own work was influenced by their combined, though occasionally diametrically opposed, approaches to literature, culture, and criticism. As a result, this article begins with a discussion of the conflictual continuity and/or sustained ambivalence in Byatt's critique of Leavisite criticism. It does this by first looking into Leavis's position within the larger literary criticism context and then focusing on how Leavisite criticism fits into Byatt's critical thought. Thus, Byatt's assertion that Leavis made English literature the focal point of university education is examined by first looking into Leavis's Cambridge. Lastly, Byatt's criticism of Leavis's idea of English studies is looked into in the context of critical evaluations of English literature's place in higher education, at the same time that Byatt's work is used as a prism to analyse the Arnoldian matrix of the Leavisite concept of “moral seriousness”. Afterward, Byatt's critical work is critically examined in the framework of culture, society, and literature, continuing Arnold's legacy.

## Keywords

A. S. Byatt, Cultural Memory, F. R. Leavis, Leavisite Criticism, Matthew Arnold, Moral Seriousness

## 1. Introduction

This essay is informed by the concept of “cultural memory” to explain the intricate relationships between two important figures in the panorama of English letters, Matthew Arnold and F. R. Leavis, and the way their combined, yet at times antithetical approach to literature, culture, and criticism filtered into Byatt's own work. In this light, and since I agree with Astrid Erll's and Ansgar Nünning's observation that cultural memory, sometimes referred to as “collective” or “social” memory, is a wide-ranging concept that is frequently

employed imprecisely [24], I will first clarify my own understanding of the term in a necessarily brief way.

In a broad understanding of cultural memory, the interaction between the past and present in sociocultural situations is proposed by Erll and Nünning as a tentative concept, in which the umbrella quality of comparatively new usages of memory allows disciplines as diverse as psychology, history, sociology, and literary studies to participate in an engaging dialogue by acknowledging the (sometimes functional, sometimes

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analogous, sometimes metaphorical) relationships between phenomena like ancient myths and the individual recollection of recent experience [24]. Importantly, Erll and Nünning suggest dissolving the false dichotomy they see as existing between history and memory in favour of the idea that there are various cultural forms of remembering. This approach stems from the fundamental realization that the past is not fixed and must instead be continuously reconstructed and represented [24]. Hence, “memory” and “culture” converge in my representation of the critical bond between Arnold, Leavis, and Byatt.

Consequently, the first part of this essay starts by examining the conflictual continuity and/ or sustained ambivalence in Byatt’s critique of Leavisite criticism by first investigating the place of F. R. Leavis in the wider context of literary criticism, to then narrow its scope into the analysis of the place of Leavisite criticism in A. S. Byatt’s critical thought. Therefore, I scrutinise Byatt’s claim that Leavis placed English Literature at the centre of University studies by first investigating F. R. Leavis’s Cambridge. This is the starting point for my examination of fictional representations of Leavis in Byatt’s *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Possession* vis-à-vis the discussion of critical perceptions of Leavis by his and our contemporary literary critics. Finally, I investigate Byatt’s critique of Leavis’s conception of English Studies in the light of critical appraisals of the role of English Literature in university studies.

In the second part of this essay, I examine the Arnoldian matrix of the Leavisite concept of “moral seriousness” through the prism of Byatt’s work. I start by investigating what I term “a poetics of morality” by closely examining Matthew Arnold’s tradition, and then, following in Arnold’s footsteps, I scrutinise the place of culture, society and literature in Byatt’s critical work, which leads into an investigation into Arnold’s shaping of Leavis’s and Byatt’s distinctive views on moral seriousness.

## 2. “Conflictual Continuity” and/ or “Sustained Ambivalence” in Byatt’s Critique of Leavisite Criticism

In her introduction to *Passions of the Mind*, Antonia Byatt offers a thoughtful, articulate critique of her response to F. R. Leavis’s practice of criticism by judiciously remarking that “[i]n a way, my early novels were a questioning quarrel with Leavis’s vision and values, which nevertheless I inherit and share” [12]. In fact, I would argue, A. S. Byatt’s brief assessment is the one that best summarises her position regarding what Christien Franken reads as either Byatt’s “conflictual continuity between Leavisite criticism and Byatt’s critical work” or Byatt’s “sustained ambivalence in [her] relationship to Leavisite criticism” [25].

Franken correctly notes that Leavisite criticism has been challenged by virtually every succeeding school of thought on

different counts – namely, the exaltation of cultural nationalism by post-colonial critics; of intellectual elitism and class-ridden assumptions by Marxist scholars; of exclusionary practices due to its masculine values by feminist academics; of the untenability of the opposition between “high culture” and “low culture” by Cultural Studies scholars; and the critical defence of the authority of the author by post-structuralist critics [25]. Given this historical and theoretical frame of reference, I would also agree with Franken that it is evident from a deeper examination of Byatt’s critical work that Byatt is as conflicted about Leavisite criticism as she is about the theories that replaced it [25].

Since Byatt’s words enhance both her quarrel with, and her inheritance of, Leavis’s vision and values, I would reformulate Franken’s assessment to signify that both positions can be found to co-exist in Byatt’s critical response to Leavisite criticism. In other words, Byatt’s measured analysis typically evades dichotomous oppositions of “either/ or” to categorically insist on an assessment comprising “both/ and” with regards to Leavis in this particular instance – and, more importantly still, regarding her unique position within a literary and cultural arena in which such polarities are still held in high critical regard. Hence, these words illustrate what I read as the most striking quality of Byatt’s consistently even and dispassionate appraisals of Leavis, which is the fact that they soberly highlight Leavis’s importance within English Studies in general, and her own work in particular. At the same time, Byatt’s assessment likewise stresses her strong reservations with regards to, as well as her distance from, what she terms Leavis’s “extravagant and absurdly exclusive” claims [12], as a brief examination of Leavis’s critical tenets will consubstantiate.

In fact, Frank Raymond Leavis (1895-1978), the influential literary critic and prominent Cambridge university teacher who would remain an authoritative presence in English Literary Studies from the 1920s to the 1970s, has unquestionably remained a much-debated figure within academia. In her introduction to *Passions of the Mind*, Byatt defines “Dr Leavis’s Cambridge [as] an atmosphere of moral seriousness which placed English studies at the centre of university studies and also of social morality” [12]. Such was the pride of place of English Studies at Leavis’s Cambridge to promote what he deemed the highest concern of all morally serious literature, “an awareness of the possibilities of life” [30], that the academic expectations of the students with regards to the role of literature exponentially rose in consequence as well [23]. Yet, notwithstanding her later admission that she has inherited and shares Leavis’s vision and values, as a student Byatt was highly critical of Leavis’s placement of English literature at the centre of academic studies. She wrote in *Passions of the Mind* that she felt then that such claims “were extravagant and absurdly exclusive” since “all sorts of other things are good and beautiful, paint, philosophy, mathematics, biology” as “there are many ways of coming at inevitably partial visions of truth” [12]. As an established novelist, in a

2003 interview Byatt continues to be very vocal in her repudiation of Leavis's placement of English Studies in college life by stating that whereas "Leavis believed that the university English department was the cultural centre of the world", she "never wanted to believe that" as "biologists were doing something that English Literature students had no idea about, which was actually very important; so were the philosophers and so, even, were the lawyers" [19].

Despite her strong reservations with regards to such claims, Byatt's words suggest Leavis's contribution in operating a significant paradigm shift in the study of English Literature at Cambridge, which Terry Eagleton has fully explained in a chapter entitled "The Rise of English" in his critical study *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Eagleton traces the cultural antecedents of the academic shift in which English Literature became central in university studies by discussing what he sees as the link between the failure of religion by the mid-Victorian period and the growth of English studies in the late nineteenth century. Literature, Eagleton claims, replaced the role of religion as "social cement" in its ability to operate at, and encompass, every social level [23]. To this paradigm shift corresponded a similar change in the late Victorian gendered perception of English as a suitable subject for women, due to its "softening" and "humanizing" effects – which, as Eagleton correctly points out, "are within the existing ideological stereotypes of gender clearly feminine" – as perceived by the early proponents of English as an academic pursuit [23]. Hence, Leavis's reassessment of the importance of English studies was paramount in demolishing the gendered myth of English as a fit subject for women (no doubt due to what has been traditionally perceived as their "inferior" ability with regards to science). English became "an arena in which the most fundamental questions of human existence – what it meant to be a person to engage in significant relationships with others, to live from the vital centre of the most essential values – were thrown into vivid relief and made the object of the most intensive scrutiny" regardless of gender [23].

The study of English became a much more democratic affair after the Great War, something that could not fail to attract students of a different social standing and gender, such as Byatt's mother (a bright scholar of Browning who graduated at Cambridge University by overcoming both gender and class barriers) – and, to a lesser degree, Byatt herself. However, Byatt was less disadvantaged than her mother since, unlike Kathleen Bloor, Cambridge was not the brightest star in her intellectual universe. In addition to her middle-class social background, and even though as a woman she was outnumbered eleven to one by men at Cambridge, Leavis's Cambridge in particular was not Byatt's only expectation of a purposeful life. Likewise, it was not the memory of Cambridge which sustained Byatt after she was forced to relinquish her academic endeavours in order to become the proper housewife and mother that her particular time still demanded women to become, regardless of their academic training and

aspirations, as it had happened with her mother. This is arguably the reason why Byatt is rather more critical of F. R. Leavis than her mother ever was, since Byatt's intellectual life did not stop at Cambridge. In fact, it rather expanded after her unfinished doctoral dissertation on religious allegory in the seventeenth century, when she left Cambridge and began writing and teaching instead [13].

In this light, Byatt would certainly agree with Raymond Williams when he wrote apropos of Leavis's view on the importance of English that "to put upon literature, or more accurately, upon criticism, the responsibility of controlling the quality of the whole range of social and personal experience, is to expose a vital case of damaging misunderstanding" since "English is a properly central matter of all education, but it is not, clearly, a whole education" [41]. In fact, in a 2011 interview, Byatt implicitly concurs with Williams when she further questions at length Leavis's ferocious conviction that English Studies should be at the centre of university life by claiming this position was narrow-minded [20].

Literary scholar Brooke Allen argues that, although T. S. Eliot, with his relatively small body of literary essays having a disproportionately large impact on the intellectual world, is perhaps the most prominent literary critic of the twentieth century, Leavis had an immeasurable impact on academia [2]. Most critics tend to agree that Leavis introduced the critical seriousness with regards to the study of English Literature which was found mostly lacking in the previous generation of university professors at Cambridge and Oxford [2, 23, 32, 37, 39]. More consensual still is that Leavis was well known for insisting on valuation as the main concern of criticism, in order to ensure that studying literature was, or ought to be, a close examination of the intricacies, possibilities, and fundamental aspects of human nature [31]. In addition, Leavis firmly believed that literary criticism should actively engage in shaping contemporary sensibility since the critic's sensibility is a matter of his feeling, drawn from his literary experience, of what the live thing feels like – of the distinction between that which emerges from a deep centre of life and that which has been willed and placed there or symbolizes no real integration [31].

Frank Kermode, who was also Byatt's teacher, emphasises Leavis's complex, paradoxical personality by stressing his polemicist temperament vis-à-vis his role as a Cambridge teacher and his vision of *Scrutiny* [29]. In fact, as Richard Storer remarks, Leavis's teaching and lectures, as well as *Scrutiny* – a quarterly journal published at Cambridge from 1932 to 1953 (of which he served as main editor) – and more than twenty books he authored or edited, all contributed to his impact. Leavis was, Storer further argues, a controversial critic who influenced and split opinion in equal parts, inspiring almost as much animosity as admiration [37]. Critical accounts of Leavis tend to suggest that, for his contemporaries, admiration for or detestation of Leavis was often linked to personal perceptions of his personality as either inspiring or manipulative, almost as much as it was based on

a critical assessment of his role as a literary critic. Leavis's fierce upholding of his often-controversial views on English Literature, as well as the many polemics he found himself involved in, led in several cases to his being made the target of unflattering comments, and even ridicule in many quarters of the literary world, both in Britain and in the United States. Consequently, Leavis continues to be both enthusiastically hailed as "the third important writer of the time, in the sense that Eliot is the great poet, Lawrence the great prose-fiction writer, and Leavis the great critic" [8], and denigrated as "rancid and fanatic in manner" [36].

The fact that Leavis's lectures bore a distinctive performative quality, as well as his lack of interest in personal supervision of his students, is also emphasised by Patrick Harrison (another former student of Leavis's) in his memoir "Downing After the War", which bears no trace of fictional narrative devices [26]. In an equally balanced appraisal of Leavis's personality, Brooke Allen remarks that other students construed what Byatt saw as Leavis's manipulation of his students into admiring him as remarkably inspirational [2]. In the tellingly entitled article "The Messiah of Modernism: F. R. Leavis (1895-1978)", George Watson soberly examines Leavis's career as a university teacher and corroborates Allen's view by adding that some people publicly declared that Leavis was the sole reason they were studying literature, and when their fervour subsided as it eventually would, all they had left was the depressing conclusion that they had been more interested in Leavis than in literature [40]. In the same article, Watson also discusses Leavis's charismatic personality and his influence on several generations of students, by arguing that Leavis "was the messiah, by then, of literary Modernism, a leader and a prophet" [40]. Byatt would certainly agree with Watson's statement, since she has used a different term to express the same feeling: she replaced "messiah" by "guru" to indicate her dislike of Leavis's charismatic intensity [18].

Frank Kermode also discussed what would later become Byatt's perception of Leavis as a guru as early as 1968 by claiming that Leavis's followers were not independent thinkers, as they wholly accepted Leavis's pronouncements without a critical reflection of their own. Kermode's observation actually brings to mind an important fictional episode in *Possession* which clearly illustrates his argument. On realizing that Dr. Leavis had failed to distinguish "fake from authenticity, Victorian alienation from the voice of true feeling" [11] in his critical discussion of several examples of R. H. Ash's ventriloquism, young Blackadder still chose not to expose Leavis's inaccurate appreciation. Likewise, in his *New Guide to Modern World Literature* (1985), Martin Seymour-Smith describes Leavis's relationship with his students by emphasising the fanatic quality of the disciples' entire devotion to the master's creed, and the inherent critical risks of such a position [11].

As for Byatt, she accurately sketches her response to Leavis's teaching and critical persona in a 2001 interview by skilfully emphasising what she has retained of Leavis's

teachings in her own writing practice as opposed to the several ways she strongly disagreed with him, mainly due to clashing temperaments. Therefore, Byatt declares that while Leavis was "a very important figure" for her in the sense that she perceived him as an obstruction to would-be writers, he also "really did teach reading". She recalls having attended two of Leavis's seminars (a story she told in *Possession*) and, importantly, having decided not to go to any other seminars. Byatt worried she would either end up like the other people who idolized him and gained a great deal from him – but somehow failed to create anything – or, conversely, she would simply grow increasingly infuriated regarding her perception of Leavis's manipulation of his students into admiring him. Significantly – for Byatt's use of one of Leavis's well-known quirks regarding books he pronounced worthless in one of her own novels – Byatt rejects Leavis's "rather obscene ... tossing [of] other people's books in the trash can before starting his talk", which for her configures paranoid behaviour. Finally, Byatt emphasises that, as she had already written in *Passions of the Mind*, she has been a staunch non-believer and non-belonger to schools of thought [12] whereas Leavis "was a movement" all by himself, a "guru" who, while seemingly appearing to ask people to think independently, was indeed asking them to follow and believe in him [18].

Typically, Byatt's rounded appraisal of F. R. Leavis does not signify either outright rejection or complete acceptance of his critical practices. Likewise, Byatt's assessment of feminist scholarship – or, for that matter, her position in the academic debate on realism and postmodernism as writing and critical paradigms – tends to impartially weigh all the arguments from a literary and critical perspective which is itself not inscribed in any political agenda. In fact, since Byatt "grew up with the idea that fiction went in the places where political belief can't go and looked at both sides of the issues which straight political beliefs take sides upon" [16], she refuses to compromise her principle of not belonging to any school of thought.

### 3. Literary Assessments of F. R. Leavis: Fictional Representations in A. S. Byatt's Fiction

It is not surprising that the critical assessment of Leavis has found its way into literature as well, with his presence in contemporary works of fiction also quite significantly conveying present-day perceptions of Leavis in the same divided way. Therefore, Clive James's long poem *Peregrine Prykke's Pilgrimage Through the London Literary World: A Tragic Poem in Rhyming Couplets* (1976), and Tom Sharpe's novel *The Great Pursuit* (1977) relentlessly satirize Leavis's most recognisable mannerisms at the same time they parody his critical peculiarities by poking fun at his critical idiosyncrasies and domineering personality without ever mentioning his name. Conversely, Byatt's fictional treatment of Leavis does not eschew his name and is never mocking. In fact, Byatt

acknowledges in an interview that she was taught to believe that mockery and satire were “not a good thing” since they stand “next to cruelty”, which goes against her ingrained conviction that “to understand is more important than to criticize” [14]. Byatt’s dislike of satire was perhaps inherited from Leavis, who would surely agree with ancient scholars that the subject of parody in the Horatian meaning of ridicule was not considered a sufficiently “serious” – in the sense of either “grave” or “important” – literary endeavour, and was consequently undeserving of critical enquiry. Given Leavis’s emblematic championing of moral seriousness in literature and criticism alike, he would certainly flinch at literary works specifically designed “to make ‘ridiculous’ in the sense of ‘absurd’, and as a mocking ‘laughing at’ rather than ‘laughing with’” [34]. At best, judging from his appraisal of Dickens in *The Great Tradition*, Leavis would consider these works to be the idle productions of “great entertainer[s]” who had “no profounder responsibility as creative artist[s]”, since they posed no challenge to “an unusual and sustained seriousness” of “the adult’s mind” [30]. In addition to the inconsequential lack of “a total serious significance” [30] these works would exhibit for Leavis, in her influential study *A Theory of Parody* Linda Hutcheon also reminds us that “Leavis’s famous distaste, not to say contempt, for parody was based on his belief that it was the philistine enemy of creative genius and vital originality” [27]. In other words, Leavis found fault with parody both with regards to its content and form.

In this light, Byatt’s inheritance of Leavis’s values is perhaps best understood in her moral objection to satire as a form of trivializing criticism just for the sake of challenging the literary status quo. At the same time, Byatt’s questioning quarrel with Leavis’s values is expressed by her conviction that parody can fulfil a moral purpose as well if it is properly used – a thesis which Leavis never acknowledged. This is implied in Byatt’s treatment of the academic body in *Possession* when she argues that the mockery of the literary scholars in this novel “is comic and not savagely satirical”, since she “left all the appalling scholars also as intelligent beings who actually understood things” [14]. In the context of Byatt’s fictional representations of F. R. Leavis, I would argue, her literary portraits match her ambivalent critical appreciation of her former teacher, in the sense that they give praise where it is due, while they do not fail to represent Leavis’s shortcomings. Unlike contemporary parodies which choose to focus on the latter, Byatt’s assessment humanizes Leavis since it combines Leavis’s good and bad traits, and does not diminish his role in the establishment of high standards in literary criticism by ridiculing it. Therefore, Byatt provides – in both her fiction and in interviews and critical pieces in which Leavis is mentioned – a balanced, quite unbiased account of Leavis as a teacher and literary critic, neither denigrating him nor joining his following.

Hence, and although he is never explicitly named in Byatt’s 1978 novel *The Virgin in the Garden*, Leavis is the real-life person on whom Bill Potter, the father of Frederica and

Stephanie Potter and the Head of the Literature Department of Blesford Ride School, is modelled. In Bill Potter, Byatt deftly captures Leavis’s idiosyncratic temperamental traits, at the same time she enhances both his professional qualities and his faults in a way that quite matches her personal opinion of him. Hence, she both emphasises the fact that Bill Potter “was generally agreed to be a first-rate teacher, inspired, dogged and ferocious” who “proclaimed the weighty agnostic morals of Sidgwick, George Eliot and the first Matthew Crowe” alongside his ferocious work regarding “his own version of Ruskin’s and Morris’s popular culture, with a dour respect for real workers and their lives and interests more akin to Tawney’s work in the Potteries”. Bill Potter is also credited with a large part of “the vigour behind what local cultural life existed in 1953”, since he “gave University Extension lectures to which people travelled miles in all weathers, in vans and country buses, from moorland villages, seaside resorts, wool towns and steelworks” while he also “ran a settlement in Blesford Church Hall, and was a power behind the continuation of the Literary and Philosophical Society in Calverley”. His particular distinction, however, was “to stamp the work not as pupil-work but as Work worth doing, and to give the collection, and the community that collected it, a sense of identity”, since he was “a slave-driver, but also a listener” who “could give an inarticulate woman the right hints about the direction in which her clumsy sentences might be twisted to make a pleasantly idiosyncratic style” [10].

In this light, Bill Potter’s description singularly combines F. R. Leavis’s teaching methods with John Ruskin’s social engagement. Hence, Bill Potter’s standing as “a first-rate teacher, inspired, dogged and ferocious” meaningfully points to Leavis’s own reputation, while his “dour respect for real workers and their lives and interests”, as well as his “University Extension lectures”, are highly reminiscent of John Ruskin’s social and educational concerns. Therefore, Bill Potter’s efforts to educate people who could not afford a formal education seems to respond to two questions posed by Ruskin in the opening paragraphs of Letter IV of his longest and most socially engaged publication, the eight-volume collection of ninety-six letters addressed to the “Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain” *Fors Clavigera*: “first, what a good education is; and, secondly, who is likely to give it you” [35]. In addition, Byatt’s novel’s reference to Bill Potter’s belief that his students’ work was “Work worth doing” and his self-appointed role as a social reformer through education also emulates Ruskin’s vision of his own moral responsibility towards the lower classes, as he clearly stated in the very first letter of *Fors Clavigera* [35].

Likewise, a conversation between Bill Potter (who shares Leavis’s dogmatic and irascible temperament as well as his heated defence of Lawrence, and his dismissal of all but the morally serious books) and his spirited daughter Frederica at the beginning of *The Virgin in the Garden* clearly illustrates the minute portrayal of Bill Potter as a fictional reincarnation of Leavis in many ways. In this conversation, Frederica ac-

cuses her father of burning books, an indictment he refuses until he learns the books in question are Girls' Crystal and Georgette Heyers's novels, which he qualifies as "prurient fantasy," "vulgar" and "untruthful" – in fact, non-books that, "with sharp retrospective delight", he is happy to have burnt [10]. Burning books which, in Bill Potter's view, "weren't books" at all since they failed to fulfil his definition of literature may be construed as the fictional equivalent of throwing books in the bin during real-life seminars to express his contempt for their "vulgar", "untruthful" quality. Byatt recalls such a real-life event both in an interview [18] and in a small passage of *Still Life* in which Leavis is explicitly named in the context of a lecture that Frederica had attended, where "Dr Leavis, with two fastidious fingers depositing a copy of *Early Victorian Novelists* in the wastepaper basket", exhorted his audience "to do likewise" [15]. However, the narrators do not offer any comment on such goings-on, merely describing the situation in both novels. By showing Bill Potter's/ Leavis's faults rather than telling them to the reader, I would argue, the narrator allows the reader to form his/ her own impressions of the character in a less directed, more autonomous way, without in any way either exonerating or attacking Bill Potter/ Leavis.

In *Possession*, Leavis also makes a cameo appearance as himself, the Cambridge professor in whose shadow "pupils, would-be poets and novelists alike shrivelled into writing-blocks" [13] since "anything you wrote yourself would fall so woefully short of the highest standards that it was better not to try" [13]. Leavis's greatest quality – the ability to show his students "the terrible, the magnificent importance and urgency of English literature" – is succinctly yet systematically juxtaposed with his major flaw – "simultaneously deprived him [Blackadder] of any confidence in his own capacity to contribute to or change it [English Literature]" [11]. Moreover, Byatt further complicates the representation of the fictional student Blackadder's interaction with the real professor Leavis. Consequently, Leavis's second entrance is dramatically enhanced by his failure to realise that the texts he had put together in a handout for analysis during a seminar – "a troubadour lyric, a piece of dramatic Jacobean verse, some satirical couplets, a blank verse meditation on volcanic mud and a love-sonnet" – were, all of them, poems by Randolph Henry Ash, "examples of his ventriloquism, of his unwieldy range", as the then-student Blackadder was able to recognise. Blackadder chose not to call Leavis on that mistake, with the result that the professor kept "enticing unfortunate undergraduates into making wrong identifications, and then proceeding to demonstrate his own analytic brilliance in distinguishing fake from authenticity, Victorian alienation from the voice of true feeling". There would be much to criticise in this event, if not to downright "knock down and demolish [Leavis's] pretention" by mocking his blatant failure [11]. And yet, Byatt/ Blackadder chooses not to do so, prompting instead the reader to reach his/ her own conclusions by merely offering the scene for their critical appreciation. Therefore, these rep-

resentations are useful in that they provide a striking contrast between contemporary literary ridicule of Leavis and Byatt's judicious estimations.

#### 4. A Poetics of Morality and Its Ethical Figurations in A. S. Byatt's Work: Matthew Arnold's Tradition

The rise of English Literature as a valid academic subject under Leavis's fifty-plus-year-long influential tutelage was intimately linked with his own perception that "the study [of Literature] is, or should be, an intimate study of the complexities, potentialities and essential conditions of human nature" [31]. Leavis had extensively argued this point in his 1948 well-known study on the English novel *The Great Tradition* when he defended that the major novelists "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 also that "they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life" [30].

The moral seriousness which Leavis lauded in the work of the great English novelists he selected for his study – Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad – is an attribute he is widely credited as having possessed to a high extent as a literary critic, as indeed is Byatt as well. In fact, the *Guardian* reviewer Alex Clark opens his 2009 review of Byatt's *The Children's Book* by remarking that "[t]he moral seriousness of A. S. Byatt's fiction derives much from her concept of responsibility; and responsibility, for her, is most importantly the business of marshalling and applying one's intellect to every area of one's life" [21]. Hence, Clark joins Christien Franken in emphasising the (arguably unfashionable) defence of moral seriousness in both writer and critic as a Leavisite trait in Byatt's fictional and critical work [25]. Consequently, a significant part of Byatt's self-stated inheritance of Leavis's vision and values can be found in her allegiance to his views on the importance of reading, as well as to his standards regarding the stylistic composition of the literary text. Conversely, the questioning quarrel makes itself felt on Byatt's qualification of Leavis's creed of moral seriousness to judge the literary worthiness of any given text via the examination of art for its own sake vis-à-vis its moral quality.

Unlike Leavis, however, Byatt's moral seriousness has never been construed as the reverse flaw of moral righteousness. In addition, Clark's association of "moral seriousness" and "responsibility" with regards to Byatt's work decidedly conjures up Matthew Arnold's definition of "morality" as a "thoroughly definite and ascertained idea: – the idea of human conduct regulated in a certain matter" in order to reach "the best which [one's] powers and circumstances allow [one] to reach" [3], vis-à-vis Arnold's view of culture as "a study of perfection" [4] in the sense of knowing "the best that has been said and thought in the world" [3].

Likewise, Leavis's interest in English Literature, as well as its relation to modern culture, focused on the study of literature vis-à-vis the cultural and educational conditions within which literature was studied [37]. For Michael Bell, this turns Leavis into the most prominent twentieth-century heir of Matthew Arnold's tradition [6], an argument Byatt seemingly endorses when she points out to Leavis's inheritance of the Arnoldian views on literature by stating that Leavis "saw literature and art in Arnold's terms as a 'criticism of life'" [12]. Christien Franken also reads F. R. Leavis's ideas as "part of a tradition of social criticism which encompasses writers such as Carlyle, Dickens, Ruskin and Arnold, the last name being most often associated with Leavis's criticism of the values of modern capitalist society" [25]. For David Walton, "the importance of the Leavises and *Scrutiny* can be seen in the way they extended the 'Culture and Civilization Tradition' associated with Matthew Arnold". In fact, Walton further argues, "the important debates that grew out of this tradition were concerned with, on the one hand, high literary- intellectual culture and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and, on the other, anarchy, utilitarianism, materialism and the dehumanizing effects of industrialism" [39]. In the context of Leavis's moral reception of Arnold, so to say, these concerns would consistently be given pride of place.

Matthew Arnold's highly influential essay volume *Culture and Anarchy* was a political and social critique of British society, which he believed to be parochial and to over-emphasise the Protestant work ethic and the cult of money-making. Following in the footsteps of his renowned father – the distinguished headmaster of Rugby School, Thomas Arnold, who "had begun taking the Barbarians in hand" [39] – Arnold popularised the term "Philistinism" to signify ignorance with regards to culture and the arts. Of course, such outlook resonated with Leavis's own views of his contemporary society, starting with Arnold's definition of culture as "a study of perfection" motivated by moral reasons [4]. In Arnold's estimation, the great English critic of literature should dwell mainly on foreign literature to counteract what Arnold implied was the pervasively parochial belief that England might produce much of the best that was known and thought in the world. This was read against the grain by Leavis in his construction of English as *the* central discipline of thought, which precisely excluded the foreign literature – even in translation – which, Arnold pointed out, should be the food for thought of the English critic of literature.

Arnold provocatively dismissed one of the prevalent meanings of culture for educated Victorians – the one associated with a knowledge of the classics – as purely stemming from the intellectual curiosity which was far below the urge for doing good that was in his view the particular mark of culture. Hence, for Arnold "the culture which is supposed to plume itself on a smattering of Greek and Latin is a culture which is begotten by nothing so intellectual as curiosity" since "it is valued either out of sheer vanity and ignorance, or else as an engine of social and class distinction, separating its holder,

like a badge or title, from other people who have not got it". Therefore, Arnold concludes, "[n]o serious man would call this culture, or attach any value to it, as culture, at all" [4].

This might also have resonated with F. R. Leavis, given his marked disregard for translated literature, as well as the pre-Great War accepted view at Cambridge and Oxford that Philology and the Greats were the only academic subjects worth pursuing within the humanities for the English gentlemen who attended college. The fact that Matthew Arnold, himself an Oxford professor of poetry, favoured a definition of culture which encompassed "the scientific passion for pure knowledge" and, to a higher degree, "the moral and social passion for doing good", to the detriment of "a smattering of Greek and Latin", would of course reflect Leavis's own views regarding the importance of English Literature amidst the ever-growing Philistine society he vigorously sought to educate.

## 5. The Intellectual Presence of Matthew Arnold in *Possession*

Both Louise Yelin and Ann Marie Adams have illuminated the presence of a typically Arnoldian ethos and aesthetics in Byatt's work by investigating the recuperation of the Arnoldian cultural milieu in Byatt's *Possession*. Hence, they have discussed Byatt's project "to recuperate an Arnoldian notion of culture" [42] in *Possession* by agreeing that "[a]lthough never explicitly mentioned in A. S. Byatt's fictive catalogue of 'Eminent Victorians', Matthew Arnold's intellectual presence is clearly felt in *Possession*'s privileging of aesthetics and devaluation of politicized criticism [1]. In fact, Yelin's 1992 article "Cultural Cartography: A. S. Byatt's *Possession* and The Politics of Victorian Studies" "was the first and remains the only sustained treatment of 'the return of the Arnoldian repressed' in Byatt's magnum opus" [1] until Ann Marie Adams's theoretical contribution to this particular topic.

In this light, Yelin compellingly suggests that Byatt's *mistress* work is shaped by, and responds to, ongoing present-day cultural politics and critical theories over ethics, aesthetics, and gender constructs. These are explored through cultural, theoretical, and sexual discourses and ideas inherited from the cultural and literary milieu of Victorian England, of which Matthew Arnold was of course an eminent exponent. The implication is that by interrogating the past Byatt exposes its cultural overtones on the present, namely by examining the Victorian period as "an instance of cultural cartography, a simultaneous mapping of Victorian culture and contemporary Victorian studies" [42]. This double examination is accomplished, Yelin further argues, via the novel's suggestion that "the best that has been thought and said by women as well as men [has emerged] in a material ensemble in which knowledge and power are always in contention" [42]. At the same time, Yelin fittingly signals Byatt's major departure from Arnold's cultural framework via a gender-based ap-

proach in which she emphasises Byatt's un-Arnoldian privileging of female agency in her construction of women as artists and literary critics in their own right, rather than the subjects of poetry or criticism. In fact, Yelin argues that "*Possession* reworks one of the commonplaces of Victorian literature, the critique of Romantic excesses, rewriting it as a critique of Romantic androcentrism" in which "Byatt's Ash departs from such romantic precursors as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron in not regarding female exotics simply or even mainly as the matter of poetry" [42].

Consequently, Yelin argues, Byatt rewrites two sexual constructions of Coleridge's eponym "Christabel" in her own novel, namely Christabel LaMotte and Leonora Stern. For the present discussion, I would like to emphasise that Yelin pertinently emphasises the way in which Byatt's first revision, Christabel LaMotte, erodes Coleridge's connection of aggressive lesbian sexuality with demonic possession of a helpless victim under a "dizzy trance" [22]. In fact, Byatt's antithetically re-constructs Coleridge's female victim Christabel as a woman who has explored both same-sex eroticism and opposite-sex sexual passion. The second revision is Byatt's transference of the aggressive sexuality of Coleridge's Geraldine into her own aggressively lesbian American scholar, Leonora Stern.

In addition to discussing Arnold's "cultural map" [42] in *Possession*, Ann Marie Adams's 2008 article "Defending 'Identity and the Writer': A. S. Byatt's Delineation of the Proper 'Function of Criticism at the Present Time'" complicates Yelin's pioneering study of *Possession* as "a return of the Arnoldian repressed" [42] by extending Byatt's use of a "refigured Arnoldian humanism" [1] throughout her fictional oeuvre and critical work. In the context of my discussion of Byatt's reworking of Arnoldian mores through the lens of Leavisite criticism, Adam's premise that "[t]hroughout her various critical works, neorealist novels, and celebrated historical romances, Byatt consciously employs a refigured Arnoldian humanism to critique the 'intentional' fallacies she sees within all post-war criticism, including the work of the critic who has most shaped her own thoughts on literature, Leavis" [1] is particularly significant.

Adams convincingly argues the point that Byatt has dramatized Matthew Arnold's influential 1864 essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" in *Possession* via the novel's Arnoldian insistence to restore "the critical power" to its rightful hierarchical position as occupying a "lower rank than the creative [power]" [5], while Byatt writes within a critical milieu which has inverted their importance. Adams also succinctly refers to another Arnoldian critical thread in *Possession* when she articulates Roland Michell's and Maud Bailey's understanding of literary scholarship in its Arnoldian definition of "a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world" [5]. Such perception informs their combined work on "what they firmly believe to be some of the best 'thoughts' in the world – the highly intellectual and formally complex verse of their chosen

Victorian poets" [1]. More specifically, Adams duly qualifies the nineteenth-century fictional poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte's work as "some of the best 'thought' in the world" in the estimation of their twentieth-century highly engaged scholars.

In addition, Adams claims that "Byatt feels compelled to limit the 'function' of even good and disinterested criticism so that she can draw attention to that which is undervalued in her present time – the 'creative power in the production of great literature'" [1]. Adams qualifies this point by compellingly discussing this Arnoldian subtext in all of Byatt's other work in addition to *Possession*, since it is her contention that the latter "may contain Byatt's clearest articulation of the ills of contemporary criticism, but even her earliest fiction registers this refigured Arnoldian (and anti-Leavisite) valuation" [1], a statement I will somewhat qualify. Not surprisingly, Adams argues, Byatt's magnum opus dramatizes her distrust of critical agendas such as "the 'fallacies' of New Critical reasoning (embodied in James Blackadder's approach), the ghoulish appropriations of excessive biographical inquiry (Mortimer Cropper), the myopic essentialisms of 'gynocriticism' (Leonora Stern), and the facile manipulations of poststructuralist theories (Fergus Wolff)" [1].

However, I am inclined to think that Adam's reading of Leavis in Byatt's work is quite incompatible with Byatt's reiterated perception of Leavis as a literary critic whose appreciation of, and respect for those he considered the great English novelists and poets superseded the "distorting interpretative fervour" [12] which tempers some modern criticism. In the light of these premises, Adams's otherwise convincing reasoning fails to acknowledge Byatt's explicit refusal to believe in, or belong to schools of thought, by arguing that Byatt refuses to inherit "a specifically authorial aporia in Leavis's critical legacy" [1].

## 6. Conclusion

In the course of several interviews [18-20] and in her introductions to *The Shadow of the Sun* (1991), *Passions of the Mind* (1991) and *On Histories and Stories* (2000), A. S. Byatt has been very vocal on F. R. Leavis's decisive contribution to her formative years and as a practising fiction writer and a critic. In the light of the on-going, present-day mixed critical response to F. R. Leavis, Byatt's consistently even appraisal soberly highlights Leavis's importance within academia while it stresses Byatt's strong reservations with regards to, as well as her distance from, such "extravagant and absurdly exclusive" claims. Byatt's words further suggest Leavis's contribution to a significant paradigm shift in the study of English Literature at Cambridge.

Hence, Byatt's sustained critique of Leavis's "extravagant and absurdly exclusive" claims focuses on his fierce insistence on the centrality of English Studies in academic life, which Byatt regards as excessive since "all sorts of other things are good and beautiful, paint, philosophy, mathematics,

biology – there are many ways of coming at inevitably partial visions of truth” [12]. Likewise, Byatt is highly critical of Leavis’s domineering personality, which she goes so far as labelling as a literary guru. Yet, Byatt acknowledges Leavis’s influence in her own writing practice with regards to both form (the practice of close reading) and content (the moral seriousness which is the distinctive mark of good literature). In fact, she has mentioned shared affinities such as the importance attributed to the writer’s moral seriousness, the method of close reading and the practice of extended quotation at the core of Leavisite criticism, at the same time she has highlighted important differences, namely the exclusive placement of English Literature at the centre of academic life by disregarding everything else, the performative quality of teaching and the gendered critical appreciation of George Eliot’s work [12, 17].

Yet, with the marked exception of Christien Franken’s discussion of Byatt’s ambivalent relationship with Leavis’s criticism [25], there has been no sustained analysis of Leavis’s influence on Byatt, despite the fact that several scholars and critics have pointed it out [7, 9, 28, 33, 38]. Therefore, I have traced Byatt’s theoretical ties to F. R. Leavis in detail in order to illuminate both affinities and points of discordance. To do that, I examined the many contradictions and complexities of Leavis’s polarised position within English Studies from the perspective of reappraising his critical contribution to Byatt’s work.

The fact that some critics [6, 25, 39] have traced Leavis’s critical criteria back to the Arnoldian tradition of criticism, hereby placing Leavis as one of its major twentieth-century heirs, has also informed my analysis by complicating Arnold’s reception in Byatt’s work. In fact, Arnold’s masterly appearance in both her fiction and criticism is part of Byatt’s “questioning quarrel with Leavis’s vision and values”, as Byatt does not “inherit and share” [12] her former teacher’s whole vision of Matthew Arnold. In this sense, I have investigated the Arnoldian matrix of Leavis’s concept of “moral seriousness” through the prism of Byatt’s work. At the same time, I have examined the way Byatt “selects and confects” a metamorphosed Arnoldian ethos vis-à-vis her “conflictual continuity” and/ or “sustained ambivalence” regarding Leavisite criticism.

Byatt’s contention that Leavis was a very ambiguous figure because he appeared to ask students to think independently while in fact he was asking them to follow him fits in a group of Leavis’s former students or teaching colleagues who have remarked on this apparent paradox. At the same time, it suggests yet again *both* Byatt’s conflictual continuity *and* sustained ambivalence with regards to Leavis’s criticism. In this light, it is not surprising that Byatt would react so strongly against what she saw as the imposition to conform to a practice of criticism which, notwithstanding its critical merits, heavily relied on the personal charisma of its proponent (as Byatt’s perception of Leavis as a guru suggests), while retaining some of its basic tenets.

On the other hand, Leavis’s critics tend to agree that his

understanding of criticism is informed by an explicit Arnoldian framework of critical work as “sincere, simple, flexible, ardent, ever widening its knowledge” which may have, “in no contemptible measure, a joyful sense of creative activity; a sense which a man of insight and conscience will prefer to what he might derive from a poor, starved, fragmentary, inadequate creation” [5]. As Michael Bell puts it, Leavis promoted the concept that English, or a training for maturity in literary studies, might bring about renewal and growth in an otherwise irredeemable “mass civilization,” in place of any Marxist or other type of socio-political critique. This was a concept he picked up from intellectuals such as Coleridge and Matthew Arnold, who championed a form of cultural critique that would preserve the creative energies and ideals that went beyond utilitarian reason in order to protect humanity from the destructive forces of contemporary secular society [6].

In fact, both Arnold and Leavis shared the conviction that, as “men of culture” [4], it behoved them to open and widen their contemporary intellectual horizons [4]. In this light, Arnold’s view regarding the role of “the great men of culture” would undoubtedly resonate with Leavis’s conception of the paramount contribution of the great works of literature in shaping modern sensibilities. In this sense, I would argue, Arnold’s “great men of culture” who make prevail “the best ideas of their time” become Leavis’s “great novelists” whose intense moral preoccupation – equally shared by Byatt – characterises “the novelist’s peculiar interest in life” [30].

## Author Contributions

Alexandra Cheira is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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