INTRODUCTION

Francis Mulhern suggests that the importance of ‘Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture’ is that it contained, in embryonic form, Scrutiny’s governing theme: “industrialism” and its destructive effects on society and culture. While it cannot be denied that Leavis’s essay, which originally appeared in pamphlet form in 1930, has some relation to the concerns of Scrutiny, such an observation hardly does justice to either its rhetoric or the complexity of its arguments. Accordingly, my purpose is to address these in some detail in order to show that there is far more to ‘Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture’ than is evident in Mulhern’s account of it.

If the essay is read transparently its argument is clear: the relation between culture and civilisation is being severed by industrialisation, which is leading to the increasing standardisation of language and therefore experience since, in Leavis’s thought, the two cannot be dissociated. Culture, in the form of creative literature, is being confined more and more to a minority by the emergence of new discourses of mass culture, such as those associated with the Book Society and the Book Guild, which have manufactured the word ‘High-Brow’ – ‘an ominous addition to the English Language’ (MC & MC, p. 38) in order to exclude further the already marginalised cultured minority.

Even this brief summary should be sufficient to raise at least two questions regarding the Leavis myth. First, Leavis’s elitism appears to be as much the construct of mass culture as it is of his own pronouncements on art and literature. His argument is that culture is prevented from contributing to the life of society, not that it is the exclusive property of an elite. Second, re-reading Leavis on ‘mass civilisation’ it is hard not to wonder whether he has a point. His
Re-reading Leavis

comments on the work of John B. Watson (MC & MC, p. 40) who advocated, among other things, the development of techniques for the control of emotions, show an alertness to the ways in which the modern subject was being mapped, defined and organised that resembles Foucault. Of course, the latter's analysis of the disciplines of modernity, particularly the prison, the army and the school is a great deal more sophisticated than anything offered by Leavis. Nevertheless, both thinkers are aware, to different degrees, of the various mechanisms by which the subject is dominated and his or her experiences 'normalised'.

Foucault claims that there is always resistance to this process but the emphasis in his works falls on how the modern subject has come to be dominated, not on how it resists domination. Leavis's work on the other hand, while lacking the historically detailed analysis which characterises Foucault's studies, is resolutely oppositional and interventionist. This is evident in the way his writings refuse the reductions and conformities of mass culture, promoting instead the virtues of multiplicity, complexity and difference.

DEFINITIONS AND STANDARDS

To read ‘Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture’ in a transparent manner, as Mulhern and others have done, is to take the process of reading for granted, which is profoundly ironic given that it is an essay which raises the whole question of what it means to read. The problem appears in the very first paragraph where Leavis, commenting on certain phrases from Matthew Arnold’s Culture and Anarchy, writes, ‘Today one must face problems of definition and formulation where Arnold could pass lightly on’ (MC & MC, p. 13). Hence Leavis cannot simply refer an enquirer about the meaning of culture to Culture and Anarchy for ‘I know that something more is required’ (p. 13). This points to a lack in the very cultural heritage that is supposed to be a corrective of modern life. What ‘is needed [now] as never before’ is ‘a strong current of criticism’ (p. 31). This would consist of identifying major writers and their successors and, by so doing, allow people to ‘profit ... by the finest human experience of the past’ (p. 15). This strategy is unrealistic, however, because the conditions of modern culture severely curtail the relevance of these past experiences.