

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-61735-3 - F. R. Leavis: Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow

With Introduction by Stefan Collini

Excerpt

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Introduction



‘There can be no two opinions about the tone in which Dr Leavis deals with Sir Charles. It is a bad tone, an impermissible tone.’ Lionel Trilling’s magisterial judgement expressed a very widely held view. Both at the time and since, F. R. Leavis’s critique of C. P. Snow’s ‘The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution’ was and has remained a byword for excess – too personal, too dismissive, too rude, too Leavis. Whatever view they have taken of the limitations and confusions of Snow’s original contentions – and Trilling, among others, itemized a good many – commentators on this celebrated or notorious ‘exchange’ (if it can be called that: there was little real give and even less take) have largely concurred in finding the style and address of Leavis’s scathing criticism to be self-defeating. Aldous Huxley denounced it as ‘violent and ill-mannered’, disfigured by its ‘one-track moralistic literarism’. Even reviewers sympathetic to some of Leavis’s criticisms recoiled: ‘Here is pure hysteria’.¹

‘It will be a classic’ was Leavis’s own, surprisingly confident, judgement on his lecture.² Though few of its

¹ Lionel Trilling, ‘Science, literature, and culture: a comment on the Leavis–Snow controversy’, *Commentary* (June 1962), 462–3; Aldous Huxley, *Literature and Science* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 1; Hilary Corke, ‘The dog that didn’t bark’, *New Republic* (13 April 1963), 28.

² When Cambridge University Press proposed that the lecture would need to be toned down before they could publish it, Leavis refused,

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early readers concurred – the lecture was more commonly seen as a classic example of intemperate abuse – with the passage of time the merits of its criticisms of Snow and what Snow represented have started to become better appreciated. In particular, the character of Leavis’s performance and the genre to which it belongs have come into focus more clearly as the contingent elements of personality and newsworthiness have fallen away. Now, half a century after its initial delivery (as the Richmond lecture at Downing College Cambridge in 1962), it is appropriate to consider whether Leavis’s lecture should indeed be seen as a minor classic of cultural criticism – a still pertinent illustration both of the obstacles faced by the critic who understands himself to be challenging a set of attitudes that are so widely shared and so deeply rooted as to seem to most members of that society to be self-evident truths, and of the discursive tactics and rhetorical resources appropriate to this difficult task. It is surely telling that both the pieces reprinted here have question marks in their titles, calling some piece of received wisdom or usage into doubt.

Although much of the immediate response to the Richmond lecture saw it as an unpardonably personal attack, Leavis always insisted that he was concerned with something much larger than the merits or failings of one individual. And although the episode is usually referred to as ‘the two cultures controversy’, Leavis also insisted that he was not primarily offering a commentary on the

adding: ‘I’ve looked through the lecture again and am bound to say that I’ve done better than I should have thought possible. I can’t help saying, modestly, that it will be a classic.’ Letter of 1 May 1962, quoted in Ian MacKillop, *F. R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism* (London: Allen Lane, 1995), p. 323.

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disciplinary character and claims of the humanities as opposed to the sciences, still less asserting the educational or institutional priority of one over the other, and most certainly not denying the huge importance of science in the modern world. His real target was neither a particular individual nor a set of educational arrangements. It was, in the first instance, the dynamics of reputation and public debate – the ways in which certain figures are consecrated as bearers of cultural authority. But beyond that, it was, centrally, the axiomatic status accorded to economic prosperity as the exclusive or overriding goal of all social action and policy. Fifty years later, the relevance or urgency of analysing this dynamic and contesting this status can hardly be said to have diminished.

Although the idea of ‘the two cultures’, or perhaps just the phrase itself, may seem to have entered the bloodstream of modern culture, the circumstances under which it was launched on its global career may now, for most readers, require historical recovery and reconstruction.³ ‘The two cultures and the scientific revolution’ was delivered as the Rede lecture at Cambridge University in May 1959. The two cultures of the title were those of the natural scientists and of what the lecture sometimes referred to as ‘the literary intellectuals’, sometimes as ‘the traditional culture’. C. P. Snow⁴ was taken to speak with authority

³ I attempted to supply this in more detail in the introduction to the Canto edition of Snow’s lecture (*The Two Cultures* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), to which the present edition supplies the companion volume).

⁴ Leavis’s subtitle referred to ‘C. P. Snow’, which is how he was widely known, especially as a novelist. But in 1957 Snow had been knighted, and so in the text Leavis frequently refers to him as ‘Sir Charles Snow’, which is how he is also styled in the title of Michael Yudkin’s piece

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on both cultures, having begun his career as a research scientist in the Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge (and subsequently played an important role in recruiting scientists into the Civil Service), but having latterly become best known as a novelist. The core of his argument was that the application of science and technology, and the prosperity that was presumed to follow, offered the best hope for meeting mankind's fundamental needs, but that this goal was being frustrated by the gulf of ignorance between the two cultures and the educational arrangements that, especially in Great Britain, perpetuated this divide. Snow made it clear that he believed the literary intellectuals, representatives of the traditional culture, were largely to blame for this deplorable situation: while the scientists had 'the future in their bones', the literary intellectuals were 'natural Luddites'.

In its published form, the Rede lecture provoked a great deal of discussion, both in Britain and elsewhere, and its success confirmed Snow in his role as a sage or pundit who was licensed to pronounce on the great issues of the day. (Such was his standing in the early 1960s that he was invited by Harold Wilson to become a minister in the newly created Ministry of Technology following the 1964 election, despite never having held any elected office or other political position.) It was these matters of reputation – Snow's standing as a cultural authority as

reprinted with the Richmond lecture in the Chatto edition. Snow accepted a peerage in 1964, and in reprinting his lecture in 1972, Leavis modified its subtitle accordingly, though without changing the form of the references to Snow in the text. Since his death he has nearly always been referred to as 'C. P. Snow', and so Leavis's title is here given in its original form.

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much as the content of his claims – that Leavis was to address in the first of the lectures republished here.

Leavis's life and career

Frank Raymond Leavis was born in Cambridge in 1895, of relatively humble social origins, and, aside from service as a medical orderly with a Quaker ambulance unit in the First World War, he was to spend his entire life there. As an undergraduate, he switched from History to the newly established course in English, graduating with first-class honours in 1921. He then undertook a PhD, at the time a novel and unusual route in British academic life: as a result, he was always referred to as 'Dr Leavis', a title which could, in the delicately layered nuances of social interchange in mid twentieth-century Britain, be made to carry connotations of abstruse academicism or even the lack of a desirable kind of effortless *sprezzatura*. He made his way slowly in Cambridge, for several years supporting himself as a freelance college teacher; only in 1936 did he obtain a full fellowship, at Downing College, and only in 1945, when he was already fifty, was he finally confirmed in a fully-salaried university appointment (he was never made a professor). In 1932 he and a group of younger associates founded the journal *Scrutiny*, of which he (supported by his wife and fellow critic Q. D. Leavis) remained the effective editor until its closure in 1953. The journal's rigorous, unyielding critical judgements and stinging cultural critiques drew a devoted following in the middle decades of the century, Leavis taking particular pride in the fact that it had no official status or support. Temperamentally inclined to see himself as an outsider, he even referred,

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with memorable excess, to those who had collaborated on the journal as ‘outlaws’.⁵

Leavis cultivated a particularly strenuous form of criticism in which close attention to the verbal texture of works of literature was underwritten by an intense pre-occupation with the human quality of the life expressed in that writing. Such criticism, Leavis insisted, was the core of any worthwhile study of English literature – its place could not be taken by the accumulation of biographical or historical knowledge *about* literature – and such criticism rested, at bottom, on unflinchingly personal judgements of quality. Extending these concerns, he also developed a wide-ranging critique of the form of society that had resulted from the Industrial Revolution and the growth of ‘mass civilization’. The experience of humanly satisfying work and membership of settled communities had largely been lost, replaced by machine-governed labour, empty consumerism and anomic individualism. In Leavis’s view, one particular casualty of these social changes was the loss of an effective educated public capable of sustaining genuine standards of criticism; he despaired of the superficiality and mutual back-scratching of contemporary literary culture, and thought that the only hope for the future lay in the formation in the university of a minority public capable of true critical discrimination. In all kinds of ways, therefore, Snow and Snow’s success brought together several of the themes that most deeply exercised Leavis.

Despite the volume of attention Snow’s lecture received, Leavis initially made no public comment about

⁵ F. R. Leavis, ‘A retrospect’, in *Scrutiny: A Quarterly Review*, 20 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1963), vol. XX, p. 218.

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it. According to his own later report, he had glanced at it – and concluded that he need do no more. But he may have been irked by others associating his favoured form of realism in fiction with that (actually rather different kind) practised by Snow in his own novels, and he was certainly irked by the way in which the Rede lecture started to crop up in essays written for Cambridge entrance scholarships.⁶ He finally read it in the summer of 1961, just before his last year of teaching in Cambridge (he was to retire from his university post at the end of the summer of 1962), and early in that academic year he was invited by the undergraduates of his own college, Downing, to deliver the annual Richmond lecture. Leavis decided to take Snow, and the Rede lecture in particular, as his topic, and in January 1962 he reported that he was investing as much thought and energy into his preparations as into anything he had previously written.⁷ The lecture was announced for 28 February.

By this point in his career, Leavis's reputation as a fierce and formidable critic extended beyond academia, so the occasion was regarded by the press as newsworthy and the BBC requested permission to broadcast the lecture. Leavis resisted all such approaches: 'There can be no question of recording my lecture, or using it for any BBC purpose.'⁸ It was to be a purely internal college occasion. But, inevitably, the packed hall contained

⁶ On the former, see Guy Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature, and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 93–4; on the latter, see Leavis's comment below (page 56).

⁷ G. Singh, *F. R. Leavis, A Literary Biography* (London: Duckworth, 1995), p. 288.

⁸ Leavis to the BBC, 27 February 1962; quoted in MacKillop, *Leavis*, p. 317.

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people from other colleges, including the *Times*' 'Cambridge Correspondent' (probably the classicist L. P. Wilkinson of King's) and the historian J. H. Plumb from Christ's, one of Snow's closest friends. A report of the occasion appeared in the *Times* on 1 March and in the *Sunday Times* two days later. It is still not entirely clear what happened next, but the *Spectator*, a weekly periodical of right-leaning if sometimes maverick political and cultural analysis, announced in its issue of Saturday, 2 March that the full text of Leavis's lecture would appear the following week. It would seem that Iain Hamilton, the journal's literary editor, was instrumental in securing permission to publish it. Hamilton took legal advice on whether publication might involve the risk of a suit for libel, so defamatory of Snow's professional reputation were passages in the lecture. Counsel's opinion was that there would indeed be *prima facie* grounds for such a case, and that publication should only go ahead if Snow's written consent were obtained in advance. Snow was sent the lecture; he was, apparently (and quite understandably), 'nettled' by some of it, but did not try to prevent publication.⁹

The full text appeared in the *Spectator* on 9 March, illustrated with some rather unflattering drawings of Snow (and one, less unflattering, of Leavis). It was prefaced by a short note by Leavis which explained: 'The appearance in the newspapers of garbled reports has made it desirable that the lecture should appear in full.' Its publication provoked a storm of comment; for some weeks the

⁹ For details, see MacKillop. *Leavis*, pp. 321–2; Ortolano, *Two Cultures Controversy*, pp. 96–9. For Snow's own later version of events, see his *Public Affairs* (New York: Scribner's, 1971), pp. 84–6.

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Spectator carried pages of letters most (but not all) of which expressed outrage at both the tone and content of Leavis's attack, and this was only the beginning of the widespread condemnation referred to earlier. In revisiting the episode now, we need not only to ask what it was about Leavis's performance that provoked this storm, but also to consider whether some of those who rushed to judgement of the lecture may have misconstrued its larger purpose.

'Two cultures?'

'If confidence in oneself as a master-mind, qualified by capacity, insight and knowledge to pronounce authoritatively on the frightening problems of our civilization, is genius, then there can be no doubt about Sir Charles Snow's' (53).¹⁰ It is, by any measure, an arresting opening sentence. It immediately announces that Snow's claim to speak with authority is the question at issue. And at the same time it begins the process of undermining that claim by implying that it rests on little more than self-ascribed status born out of a soaring belief in his own capacities. Moreover, it manages to suggest that the belief is misplaced: no competent reader could doubt that the character and validity of Snow's claim are being ironized, though it might be difficult at first to point to the specifics of vocabulary and syntax by which this effect is achieved. The choice of 'genius' as the pivotal word of the sentence is deadly, as is the related use of 'master-mind': the high register of these terms is likely to raise eyebrows, an

¹⁰ The page numbers embedded in the text refer to Leavis's lecture as printed in the present edition.

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impression reinforced by the circular structure of the sentence. The irresistible implication is that Snow thinks of himself in these grandiose terms, and indeed that it is only because he holds this exalted view of his own talents that he has been accorded such deferential attention.

The rest of the first paragraph powerfully reinforces this implied judgement: 'Of course, anyone who offers to speak with inwardness and authority on both science and literature will be conscious of more than ordinary powers'. Already the suspicion is raised that the powers, as opposed to the self-belief, may in reality be no more than ordinary. But Snow writes as though he has no doubts on these matters, and it is to the *tone* of Snow's pronouncements that Leavis addresses one of the most withering sentences in a relentlessly withering performance: 'The peculiar quality of Snow's assurance expresses itself in a pervasive tone; a tone of which one can say that, while only genius could justify it, one cannot readily think of genius adopting it.' And there, we cannot help but feel, we have Snow. That 'assurance' is the defining quality of his public persona, but it is devastatingly misplaced. The very fact of his deliberately cultivating the tone of a 'master-mind' decisively indicates that he is not one.

Although at this point we are only four sentences into the Richmond lecture, a tone quite unlike Snow's is already in evidence – sardonic yet also angry, sceptical yet unyielding. Nothing has been said of the content of Snow's claims: his standing as an authority is the focus, and, above all, the tone through which his sense of that standing is expressed. Tone is, of course, the home turf of the literary critic, and Leavis's analysis is laced with acute and apt brief characterizations of Snow's style, 'with