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Two Cultures, One University: The Institutional Origins of the "Two Cultures" Controversy¹

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[T]he life of a country is determined by its educational ideals

—*Scrutiny*, 1932

[I]t is obligatory for us...to look at our education with fresh eyes.

—C. P. Snow, 1959

In 1959 C. P. Snow turned a phrase that continues to shape our perceptions of intellectual life in the twentieth century. Intellectuals, he observed, were divided into "two cultures," the arts and the sciences, and between them stood "a gulf of mutual incomprehension."² That gulf constituted a crisis, because while literary intellectuals were said to control the heights of power, only the scientists possessed the knowledge and vision necessary to confront the problems of the modern world. Snow's argument attracted widespread comment on both sides of the Atlantic, and its continuing purchase is attested to by the Cambridge University Press's reprint of the lecture in 1993 with an introduction by Stefan Collini.³

Snow's address did not meet with total approval, however, and in 1962 the literary critic F. R. Leavis delivered an explosive demolition of *The Two Cultures* and its author. "Snow's argument proceeds with so extreme a naïveté...of unconsciousness and irresponsibility," Leavis averred, "that to call it a movement of thought is to flatter it."⁴ Leavis emphasized a different crisis in modern culture, that of the assault of mass civilization upon intellectual standards—a crisis that, in Leavis's eyes, was attested to by the apotheosis of Snow himself as a

¹An earlier version of this paper was delivered at Northwestern University in May 1999, where it benefited from the comments of many friends and colleagues. I am also grateful to Ken Alder, T. H. Breen, David Hoyt, Michael J. Moore, Kirk Willis, the anonymous readers of *Albion*, and, in particular, T. W. Heyck for their comments and criticisms.

²C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge, 1959), p. 4.

³Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, introduction by Stefan Collini (Cambridge, 1993); on the reception of Snow's thesis, see Paul Boytinck, *C. P. Snow: A Reference Guide* (Boston, 1980).

⁴F. R. Leavis, "The Significance of C. P. Snow," *Spectator*, 9 March 1962, p. 299. Chatto and Windus published Leavis's Richmond Lecture along with a critique of Snow by the biochemist Michael Yudkin in *Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow* (London, 1962). Citations in this article refer to the *Spectator*.

novelist and sage. Leavis's response transformed the discussion of the "two cultures" into the eponymous "Snow-Leavis Controversy," and in the ensuing effort to discern why Leavis directed his venom against Snow some commentators surmised that he was motivated by personal animus.⁵ Yet this explanation for Leavis's response neglects both the substance of his argument and the historical context that so charged the controversy.

This article situates the controversy attending the "two cultures" within the broader context of the post-war expansion of the British university system. In the two decades following the Second World War, university enrollments, funding, and facilities increased on an unprecedented scale, and these changes reflected and fueled the reconsideration of the role of the university. Whatever else they may have differed on—and there was certainly no shortage of differences between them—Snow and Leavis stood on opposite sides of this central development in post-war social and intellectual history, with Snow urging them forward and Leavis raising his voice in opposition. The debate over the "two cultures," then, was more than a personal tiff: at issue was the mission of the university in modern society.

I

C. P. Snow was at the peak of his public stature in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The son of a clerk in a Leicester shoe factory, by 1930 he had followed his interest in science to a fellowship at Christ's College, Cambridge. After suffering a setback in his research, Snow pursued dual careers as a scientific administrator and popular novelist. He was knighted in 1957 for his work during the Second World War as the Director of Technical Personnel in the Ministry of Labour, and in 1964 he accepted a peerage and a position in Harold Wilson's new Labour government. In 1960 he published *The Affair*, the eighth novel in his *Strangers and Brothers* sequence and the first of three of his books to be turned into a play. Snow was thus a prominent public figure with a reputation as a polymath, and in 1959 he gave up his position with the civil service to concentrate upon his lecturing and writing.⁶

The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution, the Rede Lecture in Cambridge in 1959, was the third articulation of a theme that Snow had developed as early as 1956.⁷ He argued that specialization had opened a rift in modern

⁵Considerations of the personal dimensions of the conflict include John de la Mothe, *C. P. Snow and the Struggle of Modernity* (Austin, 1992); Philip Snow, *Stranger and Brother: A Portrait of C. P. Snow* (New York, 1982); Hilary Corke, "Dog That Didn't Bark," *New Republic* 148 (13 April 1963): 27–30; and the responses to Leavis in the *Spectator* in the three weeks following the publication of his lecture.

⁶Boyntinck, *C. P. Snow: A Reference Guide*, pp. vii–viii; Philip Snow, *Stranger and Brother*, pp. 120–21.

⁷Snow, "The Two Cultures," *New Statesman and Nation*, 6 October 1956, pp. 413–14; "Britain's Two Cultures: A Study of Education in a Scientific Age," *Sunday Times*, 10 March 1957, p. 12; "Britain's Two Cultures: A Revolution in Education," *Sunday Times*, 17 March 1957, p. 5.

society between scientists and literary intellectuals. Snow posited himself as uniquely qualified to observe this division, because as a writer and a scientist he moved among both groups. He warned that the lack of communication between these "two cultures" impeded economic progress: while the scientists alone were able to foster technological advance, the literary culture—or, alternatively, the traditional culture—dominated the centers of power in Britain and throughout the West. The literary culture had never appreciated the progress afforded by the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century, and they were similarly failing to realize the promise of the Scientific Revolution in the twentieth century. Looking ahead, Snow depicted a coming race between East and West to reduce the gap between the rich and poor nations of the world, and to meet that challenge Britain's universities would have to produce more scientists and engineers.

Snow's argument has been subjected to analysis from a range of perspectives, but in this context three aspects warrant particular attention.⁸ First, although he positioned himself as a member of both cultures, Snow clearly sided with the scientists. They were useful and progressive, while the literary culture only looked backward: "The scientists have the future in their bones," he declared, whereas "the traditional culture responds by wishing the future did not exist."⁹ Second, Snow regarded industrialization as an unrivaled source of human progress: "Health, food, education; nothing but the industrial revolution could have spread them right down to the very poor."¹⁰ He asserted that the traditional culture, in contrast to the scientists, had responded to industrialization with "screams of horror," and that "intellectuals, in particular literary intellectuals, are natural Luddites."¹¹ Third, Snow specifically characterized Modernist writers such as W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and Wyndham Lewis as anti-social reactionaries who refused to acknowledge the benefits of material progress. In a stag-

⁸The best place to get a handle on the first two decades of the treatment of Snow's thesis is in Boytinch, *C. P. Snow: A Reference Guide*. Recent commentaries include Collini's introduction (note 3 above); Roy Porter, "The Two Cultures Revisited," *The Cambridge Review* (November 1994): 74–80; Ian MacKillop, *F. R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism* (New York, 1995); D. Graham Burnett, "A View from the Bridge: The Two Cultures Debate, Its Legacy, and the History of Science," *Daedalus* 128 (Spring 1999): 193–218; and David Edgerton, "C. P. Snow as Anti-Historian of British Science," lecture at the 1997 BAAS meeting in Leeds and the subject of chapter 9 of *The Warfare State: Militarism, Technology, Expertise and Twentieth-Century Britain* (forthcoming).

⁹Snow, *The Two Cultures*, p. 12. Snow sharpened his attack in a broadcast recorded for the BBC on 3 June 1959 (broadcast 8 September), dispensing with the lament about the lack of communication and moving his charge that literary intellectuals were "natural Luddites" to the fifth sentence. BBC—Written Archives Center, Microfilm T491, 8 September 1959: Snow, "The Imperatives of Educational Strategy."

¹⁰Snow, *The Two Cultures*, p. 29.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 26, 23.

gering conflation of literary stances and Nazi atrocities, he recalled a question that a scientific colleague had posed to him: "Didn't the influence of all they represent bring Auschwitz that much nearer?"¹² Snow claimed to have turned away from this tradition in the realism of his own novels.

Behind Snow's lamenting of the gap between the sciences and the humanities lay a clear message: the implications of the literary culture in the worst atrocities of the twentieth century had rendered it morally bankrupt, while scientists held the keys to progress in the technical know-how of industrial advance. The first step in Snow's program involved the reform of the universities to train increasing numbers of scientists: "For the sake of the intellectual life, for the sake of this country's special danger, for the sake of the western society living precariously rich among the poor, for the sake of the poor who needn't be poor if there is intelligence in the world, it is obligatory for us and the Americans and the whole West to look at our education with fresh eyes."¹³ *The Two Cultures* called for the restructuring of the priorities of higher education in Britain.

Leavis recognized and abhorred that proposition. Throughout a career that established him as the leading literary critic in Britain (and arguably in the English-speaking world), he had taken a special interest in the university. He maintained that English would ideally stand at the center of an interdisciplinary course in an elite university. Yet despite this fundamental opposition to the thrust of Snow's argument, Leavis was not moved to reply to the Rede Lecture for almost three years. In his recent biography of Leavis, Ian MacKillop points out that in the early 1960s Leavis had increasing reason to take note of Snow. First, Leavis began to notice references to *The Two Cultures* in the essays of bright sixth-form students, indicating that the text had entered the curriculum of English secondary schools. Even worse, other critics began to link his style of criticism with the unadorned prose of Snow's novels. In an address to the English Association in February 1960, reprinted in *Essays and Studies* the following year, S. Gorley Putt asserted: "The scientist in Snow, the critic in Leavis, the worldly wisdom of 'Q,' all have for us the same lesson."¹⁴ In the *New York Times Book Review* in July 1961 Angus Wilson linked Snow and Leavis as advocates of realism in fiction.¹⁵ *Moderna Språk* reprinted the piece later that year, and Wilson repeated his contention in *Encounter* in January 1962.¹⁶ Leavis

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 53–54.

¹⁴S. Gorley Putt, "Technique and Culture: Three Cambridge Portraits," *Essays and Studies* 14 (1961): 34.

¹⁵Angus Wilson, "If It's New and It's Modish, Is It Good?" *New York Times Book Review*, 2 July 1961, p. 1.

¹⁶Angus Wilson, "A Plea Against Fashion in Writing," *Moderna Språk* 55 (1961): 345–50; "Fourteen Points," *Encounter* 18 (January 1962): 10–12.

would have resented the association of his criticism with the bland realism that characterized Snow's novels. When the undergraduates of his college invited Leavis to deliver the Richmond Lecture of February 1962, he seized on the opportunity to make clear just how unlike Snow's his ideas actually were.¹⁷

Since Snow's appeal rested on his contention that he moved in both the literary and the scientific worlds, Leavis first aimed to destroy his authority to speak on behalf of any "literary culture." In this part of his lecture Leavis overplayed his hand by deploying devastating *ad hominem* attacks against Snow and his novels, enabling his critics to dismiss it as a mere personal attack. He declared of Snow, "He is intellectually as undistinguished as it is possible to be." He asserted that Snow "doesn't know what he means, and he doesn't know he doesn't know." He turned to Snow's literary efforts, referring to his most recent novel, *The Affair*, as "that feeble exercise" and attacking his novels for their canned dialogue and inability to realize emotion. In the end he summarily dismissed Snow's literary pretensions: "As a novelist he doesn't exist; he doesn't begin to exist. He can't be said to know what a novel is."¹⁸

After demolishing Snow's literary credentials, Leavis turned his attention to the substance of the Rede Lecture. He identified Snow as the product of what he considered the true problem in modern culture: mass society and the decline of standards, symbolized by "the culture of the Sunday papers."¹⁹ In Leavis's view Snow confused those degraded intellectual standards and the coteries that upheld them with the cultural tradition represented by the great writers. On the contrary, Leavis insisted, "Snow's 'literary intellectual' is the *enemy* of art and life."²⁰ He went on to challenge Snow's complacent reading of the march of material progress: "[I]f you insist on the need for any other kind of concern...about the human future...than that which talks in terms of productivity, material standards of living, hygienic and technological progress, then you are a Luddite."²¹ While refusing to be so branded, Leavis insisted upon a critical reading of the human consequences of industrialization—and hence upon an appreciative reading of those writers who questioned those consequences at the time. In contrast to Snow's materialist presumptions, Leavis asserted that the needs of individuals were satisfied not through economic advance but in their

¹⁷For the background to Leavis's lecture, see MacKillop, *F. R. Leavis*, pp. 311–18. For the innovative discussion of the "danger of Leavis and Snow being merged into a single 'complex,'" see pages 311–14.

¹⁸Leavis, "The Significance of C. P. Snow," pp. 297–99.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 303.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 299. Emphasis mine.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 300.

capacities for creative response to literature and life. That response could only be realized through language—the language developed and transmitted by the great writers and preserved in the university.

Since the time of Leavis's assault upon *The Two Cultures*, part of the discussion about the controversy has consisted of the effort to understand why Leavis, in the words of John Wain, "threw Sir Charles Snow over his shoulder several times and then jumped on him."²² After all, there was nothing new in Snow's conception: as other scholars have pointed out, T. H. Huxley and Matthew Arnold engaged in a similar exchange nearly a century before.²³ In 1928 the Cambridge Union debated the proposition, "The sciences are destroying the arts."²⁴ In 1946 the BBC aired a series on the most pressing problem of the day: "the wide gulf between the scientific and the humanistic approach to life."²⁵ Whatever inspired the hubbub attending *The Two Cultures*, it was not that Snow had put his finger on a heretofore latent truth about the modern condition.

Some commentators suspected that Leavis acted out of sheer malice, while others assumed that he bore a personal grudge against Snow. Yet Leo Salinger recently wrote that, in the mid-1930s, "When I mentioned Snow to Leavis...he replied that he liked Snow and got on well with him, subject to the precaution of avoiding any reference to his novels."²⁶ In later interviews both Snow and Leavis testified that no prior enmity existed between them—indeed, at least twice during the 1950s the two had exchanged amicable letters.²⁷ While there is no question that Leavis was prone to personalizing his disagreements with others, his argument in the Richmond Lecture amounted to more than personal bile: amid the attacks lay profound differences with Snow's views of literature, progress, and history.

In this light, the debate over the "two cultures" can be understood as a dispute over modern social history. Snow viewed the industrial revolution as an indisputable source of progress, and he saw the greatest hope for humanity in the spread of industrialization to the developing world. Leavis, on the contrary, believed the industrial revolution a disaster that had finished off the destruction

²²John Wain, "A Certain Judo Demonstration," in David K. Cornelius and Edwin St. Vincent, eds., *Cultures in Conflict: Perspectives on the Snow-Leavis Controversy* (Chicago, 1964), pp. 16–17.

²³Stanley Jaki, "A Hundred Years of the Two Cultures," *University of Windsor Review* 11 (Fall–Winter 1975): 55–79; Lionel Trilling, "Science, Literature and Culture: A Comment on the Snow-Leavis Controversy," *Commentary* 33 (June 1962): 461–77; and Collini (cited in note 3 above).

²⁴Mothe, *C. P. Snow and the Struggle of Modernity*, p. 65.

²⁵Grace Wyndam-Goldie, "The Story Behind the Challenge of Our Time," in Arthur Koestler, *E. L. Woodward, J. D. Bernal, et al., The Challenge of Our Time* (London, 1948), p. 12.

²⁶Leo Salinger, in *The Cambridge Quarterly* 25 (1996): 401.

²⁷John Halperin, *C. P. Snow: An Oral Biography* (Brighton, 1983), pp. 185–86; Ivar Alastair Watson, "'The Distance Runner's Perfect Heart': Dr. Leavis in Spain," *The Cambridge Review*, November 1995; MacKillop, *F. R. Leavis*, pp. 270, 281, 301.

of a previously unified society and culture. This interpretation rightly identifies a crucial difference between Snow and Leavis, yet the two had peaceably co-existed in and around Cambridge for the previous thirty years. It was the rapidly shifting institutional landscape of the early 1960s that threw this difference into conflict.

The institutional context raises the question of the role of class in the debate.²⁸ Leavis was animated by a deep loathing of the English cultural and educational establishment. In the 1920s his home in Cambridge became a center for research students in the English School against the old guard defending the classics; in the 1930s and 1940s he ran *Scrutiny* as a quarterly alternative to the intellectual weeklies and Sunday newspapers; and in the 1950s he fought to shape Cambridge English and secure its position in Downing before his retirement. Leavis would have been surprised to learn from Snow that the literary culture managed the Western world—especially since, as long ago as 1930, he had written just the opposite: “The minority is being cut off as never before from the powers that rule the world.”²⁹ From Leavis’s perspective, the socially astute Snow personified the literary establishment that he despised.

A further difference lay in their contradictory notions of the meaning of “culture.” When Snow referred to two “cultures,” he spoke in what he termed an anthropological sense: “common attitudes, common standards and patterns of behaviour, common approaches and assumptions.” He explained, “Without thinking about it, they respond alike. That is what a culture means.”³⁰ To Snow, culture referred to the invisible bonds and unspoken assumptions that characterized a social group. But when he referred to the “traditional culture” and the “literary culture” as if they were synonymous, Leavis could not tolerate this mingling of categories: Snow’s “literary culture,” as Leavis saw it, consisted of pseudo-intellectuals who peddled their vacuous claptrap in the Sunday papers. On the contrary, the traditional culture—or, more accurately, the cultural tradition—referred to the inheritance that derived from pre-industrial society. That inheritance constituted a single culture, so when Snow spoke of “two cultures” he exemplified the crisis of a society that no longer recognized its own embattled inheritance. Yet these divisions over education, history, and culture long predated the Rede Lecture of 1959. The roots of the conflict lay in the social, intellectual, and institutional developments of the nineteenth century.

²⁸For consideration of the influence of social position in the development of Snow’s thesis, see Roy Porter, “The Two Cultures Revisited,” *The Cambridge Review*, November 1994, pp. 74–80.

²⁹Leavis, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (Cambridge, 1930), p. 25.

³⁰Snow, *The Two Cultures*, pp. 10, 11. Snow acknowledged (yet stood by) the imprecision of his use of the concept of “culture” in “The Two Cultures: A Second Look,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 October 1963, pp. 839–44.

II

In the nineteenth century the advocates of science and literature squared off in a contest over cultural authority in the wake of the crises in religion.³¹ As the sciences increasingly professionalized from the 1840s, scientists began to position themselves as members of the nation’s intellectual elite. The established rivals to the upstart pretensions of these scientists responded to these claims by insisting upon the centrality of the classics in liberal education, and in the second half of the century effective opposition to the scientists came less from religion and more from the proponents of literature.³²

The exchange between Huxley and Arnold in the early 1880s, often cited as a precursor to the Snow-Leavis episode, epitomized the emerging conflict.³³ Huxley had established himself as “Darwin’s Bulldog,” a biologist, lecturer, and popularizer of science who famously bested Bishop Wilberforce in their debate over natural selection in 1860. In an address in Birmingham in 1880, Huxley argued that a complete education must include the study of the natural sciences. He cited the industrial progress afforded by practical and scientific education, and concluded that such an education was at least as good as, and for some students better than, traditional learning.³⁴

Arnold responded to Huxley in the Rede Lecture of 1882. He opened his lecture by establishing the terms of the debate: “The question is raised whether, to meet the needs of our modern life, the predominance ought not now to pass from letters to science.”³⁵ Arnold rejected Huxley’s characterization of literature as mere *belles lettres*, and insisted that his definition of culture (“the best that has been thought and said in the world”) included the works of Galileo, Newton, and Darwin.³⁶ But he rejected the suggestion that students who did not intend to pursue a career in science would necessarily benefit from learning to master scientific procedures in addition to scientific achievements. Science, Arnold argued, provided the raw material of knowledge, but only an education in literature taught people how to relate that knowledge to the world. Science, therefore, could not stand at the core of education and, if the choice must be made, an education in the humane letters remained superior to one in science.

³¹This story has been told by Frank Miller Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life* (Cambridge, 1993).

³²*Ibid.*, chapter 10.

³³See the accounts by Trilling and Collini.

³⁴T. H. Huxley, “Science and Culture,” *Science and Education* (New York, 1896).

³⁵Matthew Arnold, “Literature and Science,” *Discourses in America* (London, 1885), pp. 79–80. This lecture, initially delivered in Cambridge, was revised for delivery in the United States—it is that revised version referred to here.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 82.

In other essays Arnold positioned literary criticism as the guardian of culture. He defined criticism as "a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world."³⁷ Two aspects of the critical function as Arnold defined it are especially relevant here: the critic must be disinterested, and the critic is responsible for the dissemination of culture. "The mass of mankind," he wrote, "will never have any ardent zeal for seeing things as they are; very inadequate ideas will always satisfy them."³⁸ Arnold remained pessimistic about his own times, as the prevailing philistine and commercial culture was not conducive to literary creation. The role of the critic was to filter ideas with an eye toward the future, so the critic had to remain above the concerns of politics and materialism and focus his energies on the higher plane of ideas. Yet Arnold remained confident that a creative era would ensue, declaring that "[good literature] never will lose currency with the world, in spite of momentary appearances; it never will lose supremacy." These themes—criticism, literature, education, the minority, a distaste for materialism—would emerge as the concerns of a circle around Leavis in the inter-war years, but in that altered context they adopted the urgency of crisis.

Ironically given Leavis's later program, English literature entered the higher education curriculum in the late-nineteenth century because of its utility in educating the broader public. English afforded a less-rigorous and less-exclusive option than the classics in the education of increasing numbers of adults, women, and civil servants.³⁹ The Germanophobia of the First World War further spurred the development of the formal study of England's literary heritage, and from 1917 Cambridge offered its first degrees in English.⁴⁰ After the war the government appointed the patriot and poet Henry Newbolt to chair a committee to report on the state of English teaching in Britain, and the Newbolt Report of 1921 declared, "The intrinsic value of our literature is increasingly recognized."⁴¹ The report was especially warmly received in Cambridge.

The key figure in the development of Cambridge English in its first decade was I. A. Richards. Richards connected Arnold's concern with the diffusion of ideas to the modern forces of mass communication. In *Practical Criticism* (1929) he wrote, "It is arguable that mechanical inventions, with their social effects, and a too sudden diffusion of indigestible ideas, are disturbing throughout the

³⁷Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," *Essays in Criticism* (New York, 1865), p. 29.

³⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

³⁹Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848–1932* (New York, 1983).

⁴⁰Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'* (London, 1979), p. 13; Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism*, pp. 86, 80.

⁴¹Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism*, p. 90.

world the whole order of human mentality."⁴² Richards argued that it was the literary critic who must maintain standards. He positioned the new English School at the center of this mission, and he took the lead in establishing the study of English in Cambridge as a serious and rigorous field of study.⁴³

As the 1920s wore on, however, Richards became increasingly uncomfortable in the role of champion of English. He was frequently absent from Cambridge, and eventually left altogether for Harvard in 1939. Having established the credentials of Cambridge English, Richards left its guardianship to a circle of enthusiasts centered around Leavis, and it was in Leavis that the fusion of the campaign against mass society and the mission of the English School reached its fullest expression.

III

Leavis forged his ideas on language, literature, and criticism during that first decade of Cambridge English. He returned from the war to Emmanuel College in 1919 and changed his field of study from History to the new course in English. In 1924 he completed his Ph.D. thesis, *The Relationship of Journalism to Literature: Studied in the Rise and Earlier Development of the Press in England*, in which he traced the growth of the reading market and the consequent tailoring of writing to satisfy the expanded reading public.⁴⁴ He was awarded a probationary lectureship in 1927 and established himself as a popular lecturer, and his home became a center for research students in English.

While Leavis was establishing himself at Cambridge, modern means of mass communication were revolutionizing British culture. The BBC was established in 1922, and by 1938 the number of wireless sets had increased from thirty-six thousand to almost nine million. The publication of newspapers increased 162.6% from 1907 to 1935; the number of authors, editors, and journalists more than tripled between 1891 and 1931; and it was in this period that advertising became the financial base of the newspaper industry.⁴⁵

Amid these developments Leavis formulated the argument that would inform his criticism for the next five decades.⁴⁶ He identified a crisis in modern civilization that dated from the seventeenth century and had triumphed with indus-

⁴²I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement* (London 1929, 1964), p. 320.

⁴³Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism*, p. 197. On Richards see Stefan Collini, "On Highest Authority: The Literary Critic and Other Aviators in Early Twentieth-Century Britain," in Dorothy Ross, ed., *The Modernist Impulse in the Human Sciences, 1870–1930* (Baltimore, 1994).

⁴⁴Leavis, *The Relationship of Journalism to Literature: Studied in the Rise and Earlier Development of the Press in England*, Cambridge University Library, Ph.D. 66.

⁴⁵Mulhern, *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'*, pp. 7–9.

⁴⁶The key texts are *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*, D.H. Lawrence (Cambridge, 1930), reprinted in *For Continuity* (Cambridge, 1933); Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London, 1932); and Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment* (Cambridge, 1933).

trialization. Leavis believed that before this era all members of English society had shared a common culture: in *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* in 1930 he wrote that “[i]t was possible for Shakespeare to write plays that were at once popular drama and poetry that could be appreciated only by an educated minority.”⁴⁷ With the emergence of a market in newspapers, serials, and cheap novels, however, that unified culture became segmented. This development facilitated the debased language of contemporary literature, and since Leavis believed that its language was a society’s greatest achievement and a measure of its vitality, these developments constituted a crisis.⁴⁸ The critic, therefore, must sustain the inheritance and standards of that earlier period from their further corruption by mass civilization, and for two decades Leavis pursued this mission in the pages of *Scrutiny*.

The Leavises ran *Scrutiny* from 1932 to 1953, when it was the most influential literary journal in the English-speaking world. From the outset *Scrutiny* was concerned with the direction of education. In the first issue L. C. Knights and Donald Culver wrote, “*Scrutiny*, then, will be seriously preoccupied with the movement of modern civilization. And if we add that it will direct itself especially upon educational matters the reader will realize that there may, after all, be a fairly close approach to practice.”⁴⁹ Leavis proceeded to sketch out his ideas on English and the university in five articles, three of which comprised *Education and the University* (1943).⁵⁰ The university, argued Leavis, must provide a center for the maintenance of the cultural tradition and its attendant standards of criticism, thereby sustaining the capacity for creative response that Leavis insisted was *life*. The ideal course would be centered around the study of the seventeenth century, the key phase in the development from the traditional to the modern society. In light of the crisis that faced modern society, literature took pride of place: “It is literature that gives access to the inherited wisdom of the race, cultural continuity depending, for the most part, on literature and

⁴⁷Leavis, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*, p. 25.

⁴⁸Terry Eagleton writes that, to Leavis, “the quality of a society’s language was the most telling index of the quality of its personal and social life: a society which had ceased to value literature was one lethally closed to the impulses which had created and sustained the best of human civilization” (*Literary Theory: An Introduction* [Minneapolis, 1983], p. 32).

⁴⁹L. C. Knights and Donald Culver, “Scrutiny: A Manifesto,” *Scrutiny* 1 (May 1932): 3–4.

⁵⁰Leavis, “Why Universities?” *Scrutiny* 3 (May 1934): 117–32; “Education and the University: Sketch for an English School,” *Scrutiny* 9 (September 1940): 98–120; “Education and the University: Criticism and Comment,” *Scrutiny* 9 (December 1940): 259–70; “Education and the University: (iii) Literary Studies,” *Scrutiny* 9 (March 1941): 306–22; “Education and the University: Considerations at a Critical Time,” *Scrutiny* 11 (Spring 1943): 162–67; *Education and the University: A Sketch for an “English School”* (London, 1943). The book consisted of revised versions of the second, fourth, and fifth of these articles. For a close reading of *Education and the University*, see Richard Storer, “Education and the University: Structure and Sources,” in MacKillop and Storer, eds., *F. R. Leavis: Essays and Documents* (Sheffield, 1995), pp. 129–46.

the literary tradition.”⁵¹ Although literature was to be at its center, the course was to be interdisciplinary; the work would be largely independent and assessments would shun examinations in favor of extended essays. It would be directed toward an elite, but that elite was to include schoolmasters, civil servants, and journalists in addition to scholars and critics. The goal of the English School was to develop students’ capacities in reading and criticism so as to cultivate and preserve the response that civilization threatened with extinction. He summarized the mission in “A Sketch for an English School”: “To produce a mind that will approach the problems of modern civilization with an understanding of their origins, a maturity of outlook, and, not a nostalgic addiction to the past, but a sense of human possibilities...that traditional cultures bear witness to and that it would be disastrous...to lose sight of for good.”⁵²

In Leavis’s final major statement on the English School during the Second World War, he looked ahead to the development of the universities: “A time when it is agreed on all hands that education is to be a major head in ‘post-war reconstruction’ is a time when everyone will readily agree that we ought to be keeping fundamentals well in view.”⁵³ What schools needed in the great task of reconstruction, declared Leavis, was a corp of teachers “fresh and keen from the centre...of light and vigour.”⁵⁴ Leavis’s message was consistent, urgent, and deadly serious: the coming era required that elite universities center their curricula around the English School. What transpired instead was the exact opposite of these hopes.

IV

The British university system expanded slowly before the Second World War. Five provincial redbrick institutions became universities between 1900 and 1910, doubling the number of universities in England; yet by the outbreak of the First World War they still taught only 20,000 students among them.⁵⁵ Oxford and Cambridge grew slightly during the Edwardian period, increasing from 6,000 students in 1900 to 7,000 by 1914. Nevertheless, the overall proportion of students of eligible age in the British universities was a mere 0.83% in 1910 and still only 1.1% in 1921.⁵⁶ The 1920s saw more substantial growth. The number of students in the civic universities more than doubled from 10,000 in 1910 to

⁵¹Leavis, “Why Universities?” p. 126.

⁵²Leavis, “A Sketch for an English School,” p. 113.

⁵³Leavis, “Education and the University: Considerations at a Critical Time,” p. 162.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵T. J. W. Heyck, “The Idea of a University in Britain, 1870–1970,” *History of European Ideas* 8 (1987): 210.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 207.

22,000 in 1939, and the number of teachers in the redbricks tripled from 800 to 2,400 over the same period.⁵⁷

During this inter-war expansion the arts fared well in comparison with the sciences. In the decade following the First World War arts faculties actually grew, whereas the percentages of students in medicine and the pure and applied sciences declined.⁵⁸ The long expansion of university enrollments that had begun in the Victorian period and continued through the 1920s ended with the international depression, however, and the percentage of students electing to study either arts or sciences declined from 1929 to 1939.⁵⁹ These changes generally corresponded with what was happening in Cambridge, although there the trends slightly favored the sciences: the number of science students increased 6% from 1928 to 1938 while the enrollment in the arts held steady.⁶⁰

Leavis correctly anticipated that the universities would play a central role in post-war reconstruction, but the direction of those changes disappointed him. *Education and the University* was reprinted in 1948, but ten years after its initial publication he believed it had not generated a proper response. Leavis began to despair of the state of the English School at Cambridge that he had worked for so long to establish. "When I am retired," he worried in 1953, "all that I have worked for at Cambridge peters out."⁶¹ He thus focused his attentions upon the place of English in Downing, and in the late 1950s his concerns for English dominated much of the time of the Governing Body.⁶² Downing's orientation, however, increasingly favored not English but the sciences, and, while he respected their commitment to intellectual standards, Leavis increasingly viewed his scientific colleagues as rivals. Regarding the election of a new master, he wrote in 1956, "I discovered diplomatic and persuasive powers—in the face of our great majority of scientists—I'd hardly supposed I had."⁶³ The next year he wrote to his publisher Ian Parsons that as a senior Fellow, it fell to him to educate the large number of young scientists in the college, and he remained vigilant that the new Master not be a scientist.⁶⁴ While Leavis had looked ahead

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 210.

⁵⁸A. H. Halsey and M. A. Trow, *The British Academics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 156.

⁵⁹A. H. Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion: The British Academic Professions in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 63–64; David Edgerton, *Science, Technology, and the British Industrial 'Decline,' 1870–1970* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 22.

⁶⁰"Report of the Syndicate on the Relationship Between the University and the Colleges," *Cambridge University Reporter* 92 (13 March 1962): 1146. Enrollment in the arts declined from 2,978 to 2,957, a decrease of .04%.

⁶¹MacKillop, *F. R. Leavis*, p. 282.

⁶²Ibid., p. 311.

⁶³Ibid., pp. 317, 293.

⁶⁴Leavis to Parsons, 6 April 1957, Chatto and Windus archive, University of Reading.

to the prominent role of English literature and the Cambridge English School in post-war reconstruction, the story in the broader culture was of the advance of science.⁶⁵ After the war newspapers added scientific correspondents to their staffs, such as Ritchie Calder of the *News Chronicle*, John Langdon-Davies of the *Daily Mail*, and Chapman Pincher of the *Daily Express*. These journalists kept the public informed of scientific advances such as penicillin and atomic power. The post-war enthusiasm for science was most prominent in these hopes for atomic energy: the *Illustrated London News* offered its readers a "glimpse into the possibly not-too-distant future of atomic power harnessed to the uses of peace." Sketches depicted atomic-powered locomotives, power houses, and luxury liners.⁶⁶ Even when this unbridled enthusiasm for atomic energy faded by the end of 1946, the press continued to trumpet scientific advances such as medical potentials for the use of radioactive isotopes.⁶⁷ More ominously for Leavis, however, changes were afoot in the domain where he sought to preserve the critical minority: the university.

Nothing represents the driving force behind the post-war expansion of the universities better than the Barlow Report of 1946. In 1945 Herbert Morrison appointed the Barlow Commission to recommend policies on the development of the nation's scientific manpower. The resulting report opened declaring that "[n]ever before has the importance of science been more widely recognized or so many hopes of future progress and welfare founded upon the scientist."⁶⁸ While paying lip service to the importance of the arts, Barlow envisioned the extension and democratization of the university system, funded by the state and driven by the sciences. The central recommendation was printed in boldface: "We are satisfied that the immediate aim should be to double the present output, giving us roughly 5,000 newly qualified scientists per annum at the earliest possible moment."⁶⁹ A program more different from Leavis's can hardly be imagined: expansion, democratization, with science in the driver's seat—and it was this program that guided university development in the post-war decades.

Massive funding increases fueled university expansion in the decade following the war, and the sciences were the main beneficiaries of these spending increases. Government grants to the universities increased tenfold between 1945 and

⁶⁵See Edgerton, *Science, Technology and the British Industrial 'Decline,' 1870–1970*.

⁶⁶"The Atom's Power for Peace: The Shape of Things to Come," *Illustrated London News*, 13 October 1945, p. 399.

⁶⁷*Endeavor*, April 1947, pp. 51–57.

⁶⁸*Scientific Manpower: Report of a Committee Appointed by the Lord President of the Council* (London: HMSO, 1946; cmd. 6824), p. 631.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 636.

1952/53.⁷⁰ This increase in government support of the universities meant a prominent role for the state in the direction of expansion, and the University Grants Committee encouraged the support of two students in science and technology for each student from every other field combined.⁷¹ Spending on research and development skyrocketed from pre-war levels: in 1939 0.1% of national GNP was directed toward research and development, while by the early 1960s it had multiplied twenty to thirty times over.⁷²

Contrary to Leavis's vision of elite universities, this spending fueled growth both in facilities and student numbers. After the war five provincial colleges were granted university status: Nottingham, Southampton, Hull, Exeter, and Leicester. The establishment of completely new universities followed, beginning with Sussex in 1961 and followed by East Anglia, York, Essex, Kent, Warwick, and Lancaster. Four new universities were established in Scotland, and London, Oxford, and Cambridge expanded as well. Student numbers increased 36% between 1951 and 1961, from 83,000 to 113,000, and the emphasis of all of this expansion went toward the training of undergraduates in science and technology.⁷³ This growth resulted in a dramatic shift in the center of gravity in the universities. In 1934/35 arts students outnumbered their peers in the sciences by more than ten thousand; by the time of Leavis's Richmond Lecture there were over eight thousand more science than arts students; and the trend was such that five years later the lead of the scientists had extended to almost thirty thousand (see table).⁷⁴ These figures reflect the fact that the increase in the number of entering science students was twice that of those in the arts in the period 1953–1961.⁷⁵ These bulges in student numbers required proportional increases in university faculties, so that while teachers in the arts were outnumbered by 2,259 when Leavis composed his lecture, that number had more than doubled to 5,015 just five years later. The total percentage of university faculties in the arts decreased over the same period from 25.5% to 23.5%, while that of

⁷⁰Harold Perkin, *Key Profession: The History of the Association of University Teachers* (New York, 1969), p. 132.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 218.

⁷²Gary Werskey, *The Visible College: The Collective Biography of British Scientific Socialists of the 1930s* (New York, 1978), p. 191.

⁷³Heyck, "The Idea of a University in Britain," p. 213; Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 81.

⁷⁴University Grants Committee, *Report, 1929/1930–1934/1935* (London: HMSO, 1936), p. 54; University Grants Committee, *University Development, 1962–1967* (London: HMSO, 1968; cmd. 3820), p. 19. My thanks to T. W. Heyck for sharing his notes with the UGC figures.

⁷⁵British Information Services, *Universities in Britain* (Swindon, 1963), p. 13.

the sciences increased from 41.3% to 44.6%.⁷⁶ An examination of spending reveals similar trends: the UGC increased the funding of arts students from 1961/62 to 1966/67 by 13%, while it boosted the funding of pure science by 15% and applied science by 34%.⁷⁷

Table. Undergraduates by Field of Study in British Universities, 1934/35–1966/67

| | 1934/35 | 1961/62 | 1966/67 |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Arts | 23,787 | 28,962 | 36,639 |
| Science | 13,061 | 37,281 | 66,594* |

*includes former Colleges of Advanced Technology

Source: University Grants Committee, *Report, 1929/30–1934/35* (London: HMSO, 1936), p. 54; *University Development, 1962–1967* (London: HMSO, 1968; cmd. 3820), p. 19.

Perhaps more dramatic than these quantitative shifts from the arts to the sciences was the corresponding change in the *idea* of the university. In 1946 the Barlow Report estimated that only one in five of qualified students pursued education beyond secondary school, while far fewer than half of those went to universities.⁷⁸ In the 1950s, opinion came to view an increasing percentage of the population as capable of benefiting from higher education.⁷⁹ In 1963, when the Robbins Report called for doubling the percentage of eighteen-year-olds in higher education by 1980, half of British academics did not believe the committee had been aggressive enough, and middle-class opinion mirrored that of the academics.⁸⁰ This support for mass higher education derived from the public's faith in the *utility* of university education—and utility referred to preparation for careers in a technological economy, not the cultivation of discernment in the analysis of Restoration verse.⁸¹

The Robbins Report both expressed this new idea of the university and spurred its enactment. Macmillan's government appointed the Robbins Committee in 1961 to review the patterns and advise on the development of higher education.

⁷⁶The second figure includes the teachers in the former Colleges of Advanced Technology that were awarded university status in 1965—not an insignificant development given Leavis's insistence that he did not oppose the expansion of higher education in general, but rather that of the university in particular (UGC, *University Development, 1962–1967*, p. 26).

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁷⁸*Scientific Manpower*, p. 637.

⁷⁹Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p. 13.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 97, 65.

⁸¹Halsey argues that from the 1950s "It became received opinion that society needed scholars and scientists to be productively and efficiently modern" (*Decline of Donnish Dominion*, p.103).

Robbins endorsed the same balance between science and the arts that Huxley had advocated eighty years before: "A science course, whether pure or applied, can make as valid a contribution to general education as any other."⁸² Robbins called for an increase in the number of students in higher education from 216,000 in 1962/63 to 560,000 by 1980/81; six new universities; the extension of university status to Regional Colleges, Central Institutions, Colleges of Education, and Colleges of Advanced Technology; special institutions for research and teaching in science and technology; and an increase in the number of postgraduate students.⁸³

As to be expected, denizens of Cambridge followed these developments closely. Already by 1961 natural science students outnumbered their counterparts in English by 937 to 369.⁸⁴ In 1961/62 *The Cambridge Review* was filled with comment on every conceivable aspect of the future of the university: the forthcoming Bridges Report on the relationship between the colleges and the university, the need for UGC oversight of funding, a proposed future graduate school of the arts, the future of arts teaching, and so on. And it was amid this discussion of the future of Cambridge, waiting for Robbins, the democratization of education, and the push toward the sciences that the undergraduates of Downing College invited F. R. Leavis to give the Richmond Lecture of 1962.

V

Snow and Leavis could not have been more opposed over these issues. In 1946 Snow served as the scientific advisor to the Barlow Report that recommended doubling the number of science graduates. He declined an invitation to serve on the Robbins Committee, but endorsed both the expansion of the universities in the early 1960s and the recommendations of Robbins in 1963.⁸⁵ He entered Harold Wilson's Labour government in 1964 as the spokesman for the new Ministry of Technology in the House of Lords, and the expansion of higher education in science and technology in the 1960s was in part the realization of the call to arms of his Rede Lecture.

Leavis, by contrast, vociferously opposed the expansion of the universities. He declared in an address at Bristol in 1970, "It's disastrous because the more you extend higher education...the more insidious becomes the menace to stand-

⁸² *Higher Education: Report of the Committee Appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins, 1961-1963* (London: HMSO, 1963; cmd. 2154), p. 165.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 268, 155, 271, 280. The figure of 216,000 students in 1962/63 refers to students in higher education as a whole, which is why it is greater than the number of students in universities cited above.

⁸⁴ Robert Dean, "The Tripos of 1961," *The Cambridge Review*, 28 October 1961, p. 57.

⁸⁵ Philip Snow, *Stranger and Brother*, p. 127; Collini, *The Two Cultures*, p. xl.

ards and the more potent and unashamed the animus *against* them."⁸⁶ With the Richmond Lecture he launched a decade of attacks against the "technologico-Benthamite" world of Snow and Robbins, a world that worshipped material advance and the democratization of education while sacrificing standards and compromising the university's mission.

Snow and Leavis clashed in their contradictory notions of that mission. To Snow, the university served as an engine of economic and social change. The rise in student enrollments meant the extension of the social mobility that had propelled him into the upper echelons of the establishment, and the shift in the emphasis of the universities from the arts to the sciences fostered the continued economic advance that science and technology promised. Leavis, on the contrary, believed that the university must serve as a refuge from such "progress." He had long maintained that the industrial advance Snow trumpeted subordinated literary standards to the whims of the market, resulting in the absence of the capacity for critical thought. Leavis insisted that the English School stand at the center of the elite university, secure from—and in defiance of—the debasement of mass society.

Although Leavis advocated a role of preservation for the university, this story should not be read as a confrontation between advocates of progress and their reactionary critics. Leavis himself insisted upon the inadequacy of this interpretation when he rejected Snow's charge that literary intellectuals were Luddites. Rather than trying to halt or reverse progress, Leavis was advocating the reform of the university to prepare students for what he identified as the challenges of the post-war world. His program entailed the study of a discipline that had only emerged since the First World War, one that had challenged the entrenched position of the classics. In the context of the post-war reformation of the British university system, then, the debate was a contest over the meaning and direction of progress itself. To Snow, progress meant the onward march of science, technology, and industry; to Leavis, progress meant the critical analysis of precisely those developments. These two conflicting visions shared one thing in common: each required control of the university.

In this context the impetus behind Leavis's attack on Snow and *The Two Cultures* becomes clear. In the Richmond Lecture Leavis labeled Snow a "portent." He explained that Snow's status reflected the degeneracy of the modern literary public: Snow unwittingly attested to the displacement of literary standards. But the label was significant in two other ways. Snow's Rede Lecture portended the expansion of the universities that threatened their function as centers of criticism and thought, and it encouraged the further growth of the scientific establishment that was challenging English at the center of intellectual life. Not only was Snow the product and advocate of the modernization that

⁸⁶ F. R. Leavis, *Nor Shall My Sword* (London, 1972), pp. 150-51.

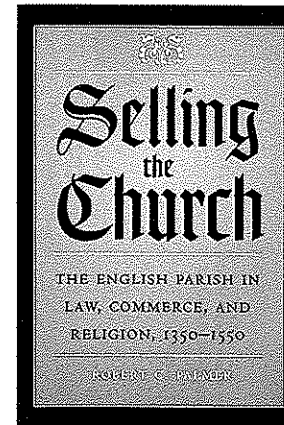
Leavis had long identified as the threat to an embattled culture, but his Rede Lecture assaulted the position of the English School as the defense of that culture. It was in response to both the intellectual and the institutional challenges that *The Two Cultures* posed to Leavis's program that he reached for his revolver in the Richmond Lecture.

Over the course of the next decade Leavis continued to wage his war against the educational establishment and the expansion of the universities, but he did so from the most unlikely of settings. From 1965 he was affiliated with York, a university founded two years earlier. He continued to lash out at the official organs of the literary world, in part through the publication of his lectures in the *Times Literary Supplement*.⁸⁷ His legacy in literary studies is such that Terry Eagleton can declare that all students of English in England are "Leavisites" whether they know it or not, but the spread of Leavis's influence is in part a product of the establishment of English departments in new universities that he had opposed.⁸⁸ The ideas of Leavis, arch-critic of the establishment, themselves became established, and they did so through that process of university expansion that Leavis himself so resolutely opposed. Mass civilization thus continued its inexorable advance, incongruously incorporating F. R. Leavis and his crusade on behalf of the English School.

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⁸⁷Leavis, "English, Unrest and Continuity," *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 May 1969, pp. 569-72; "'Literarism' versus 'Scientism,'" *ibid.*, 23 April 1970, pp. 441-44.

⁸⁸Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p. 31.



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