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F. R. Leavis the Cambridge Don

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I have never as far as I remember declined to address the English Society when invited, even when they have specified a subject, as in this case; what I was asked for was some recollections of F. R. Leavis. By Leavis's own doctrine, which I shall mention later, there is *no* distance between the man who suffers and the mind that creates: he thought the Eliot attempt at separation a kind of cowardice. So I have no objection to talking about Leavis the man, though I don't want to lose sight of the critic either—in fact I can't if I am talking about Leavis the man.

If I have any significant bit of literary history to contribute on F. R. Leavis it will mainly concern the four years 1971–4, when I was lecturing in this college and, in his later seventies, Leavis was very productive of some of his most important work. It may be that during those years I was as intellectually close as anybody to him. For various reasons I don't want to attempt that here: I would need, firstly, to do some research amongst not very well organised papers, which I can't just now. If ever I do give an account of my own collaboration with Leavis I shall have to agonise over it extensively in much the manner, I believe, in which Leavis used often to work himself—as against his style in letters, which was always spontaneous, racy and fluent, giving an aspect of the man which in the essays is only discernible, I think, in the one for whose genesis (not to say editing) I do claim some credit, the "Memories of Wittgenstein". I would have to think seriously about what to

say and what not to say. I have nothing to hide and nothing of Leavis's I would want hidden: though he made one or two severe remarks about me in public, amongst several flattering ones, I was personally always on the best of terms with him and he did refer to me in public more than once, on occasions when he thought it might do me a bit of good, as a friend. But I am not ready to publish anything about those years and I don't know whether I ever shall be.

So I thought the most appropriate thing would be to centre on my experience of Leavis at Downing College. I wondered whether to use the title "Leavis as Teacher", but decided against it because in fact Leavis disliked the word "teaching" as applied to what goes on in a University English department. I never heard him use the modern barbarisms such as "teaching Yeats" or "teaching *The Rainbow*"; for him, books and authors were not in the same category as maths or French, and the university activity was collaborative, not the transference of information (as he called it "authoritative telling") from lecturer as teacher to student as pupil. So I fall back on the word DON.

What I do say will be as truthful as I can now make it, and for this reason I shall read my paper—which goes against the grain, for I would far rather *ad lib*. But when it is a case of making a narrative out of old memories I prefer the safety of previous formulation. I guarantee to be more truthful than some of the contributors to the Denys-Thompson-edited memoir,[1] but at a distance of more than three decades, then revision twenty years later, I cannot make any claim to perfect accuracy.

1 Denys Thompson (ed.) *The Leavises: Recollections and Impressions*, Cambridge, 1984 . If anybody wants me to, I will demonstrate that this production includes essays that vary from the carelessly inaccurate to the downright mendacious.

Well then, Leavis the man, Leavis the don.

I will begin just with his appearance when I knew him. I went up to Downing when Leavis was already sixty, and had put an end to the famous magazine *Scrutiny* a couple of years previously. He was a small man, very thin and wiry (I have heard him boast that he never weighed eight stone in his life), usually dressed in nondescript light gray flannel trousers and floppy chocolate-coloured corduroy jacket, in winter under a snuff-coloured overcoat, but all year round with a shirt very wide open at the neck. I think he did wear a tie to give university lectures, and I have certainly seen him with a tie on formal occasions, but in Downing supervisions never. He got about Cambridge on a big-framed old bicycle, on which he would bank round the corners by the hall in Downing in a manner that sometimes made me wonder whether he would have to be picked up if the bike skidded on the loose gravel, but I never saw him fall off.

The first glimpse I ever had of him was on a wet day: he was in a cycling cape and sou'-wester I remember, rightly or not, as being bright yellow, in which with his bony limbs sticking out and his beautiful thin face peering from under the peak he looked a little like a Spanish bandit in a stage farce. He mentioned one morning in a supervision that a policeman had stopped him on the way in to College (he did sometimes walk in, and had a rather swinging-slouching walk, heavy-footed for a man of his build) on suspicion of vagrancy, as it was then called, and that he was a little late because he had thought it his duty to give the constable some useful advice about how to distinguish dons from beggars.

Leavis's face, like the rest of him, was bony, with well-shaped prominent nose. He had wispy brownish hair untidily round the back of a bald head that David Holbrook in a once well-known poem compared to an old corm, and which put me in mind of a character called Lismehago in Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker*. From his complexion you might well think that Leavis's home, like Old Meg's in the Keats poem, was out o' doors. His accent, which I will not attempt to imitate, was native Cambridge of the town not the gown (his father had been a piano dealer in premises just opposite Downing), English as it might have been spoken in the more cultivated middle-class town circles of Cambridge at the turn of the twentieth century. He sometimes remarked, sadly, that in his own lifetime Cambridge had been engulfed by the general cockney of what in British Rail is now Network South-East. His idiolect had a number of rather long vowels and a nasal quality; as I said, I can't imitate it, but I and you have to bear in mind in any anecdotes that may follow that on the surface Leavis didn't look or sound at all like a Cambridge gent—it would have been quite hard to imagine him at the high table in King's or Magdalene—and that one had to get to know him quite well to realise how deeply attached to Cambridge he was, and how much in his way he did fit in to Cambridge college life. One of his own phrases, of course, was "the true Cambridge in despite of Cambridge".

I have never been able to understand why that ancient and honourable title, *disciple*, applied among others to thinkers as original as Plato, Aristotle, St John the Evangelist and Rush Rhees, should be thought an insult, but it is certainly a fact of literary history that the phrase "disciple of Leavis" (or

the earlier "Levite"[1]) has been routinely used with hostile intention for about sixty years. So I shall not be taken to be boasting if I offer myself as a disciple of Leavis.

As Leavis was a university lecturer I will give next a few memories of his lectures, though they weren't anything like the most important part of his university work. He used to lecture on practical criticism, a paradox that had not escaped him. In my time he was not doing much new in the area, and sometimes used examples that had already appeared in print. (Certain other lecturers in the English Faculty had been using the same notes for more than twenty years. Leavis told us that one of "Q" 's oddities[2] was that he never repeated a lecture—though to do so he used to come up about a fortnight after the start of the [eight-week] term and go down a fortnight before the end.) But even if some of us knew the material, the lecture form, the living presence, did make a difference. His lectures in the Mill Lane Lecture Rooms always began with Leavis making a very good, though not overacted, entrance, striding down the steps of the raked aisle, with his well-worn gown streaming behind him—for those were the days when lecturers and undergraduates alike wore academic dress. On the rostrum, he moved about a good deal, rather slowly, and was always intent on establishing a *rapport* with the audience. The most memorable thing about his lectures was the convincingness

1 My friend and exact contemporary at Downing, M. B. Mencher, whose mother was descended from Levites, confirms from his own experience what I had guessed, that *Levite* could be used with an anti-Semitic edge. Leavis was in fact of French Huguenot extraction, not Jewish, though often rumoured to be, but Mrs Leavis was *née* Queenie Dorothy Roth, of a London Jewish family who disowned her when she "married out".

I am grateful to Mr Mencher for correcting some errors in a draft of this lecture, and for sharpening my memories here and there.

2 Q = Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, English professor in the days before Leavis had any kind of tenure, and about whom Leavis had a number of stories, in which amusement at Q's pre-Cambridge-English notion of criticism was blended with affection.

of his readings, especially of verse. Leavis was a splendid reader, but surprisingly close to the style of T. S. Eliot, who was a rotten reader. Leavis bitterly hated the Poetry Voice, elocution, or the notion that poetry has to be brought to life by an artificial forcefulness of delivery. One might say of his reading something Eliot observed of verse—that it must have at least the qualities of good prose. It took some acquaintance with Leavis's style to realise that his reading was certainly not prosaic. It was almost always quiet, and with a levelness of tone that made slight variations significant. He was extraordinarily good at conveying nuances of irony. To this day I can't read Hardy's "After a Journey" without hearing it in Leavis's voice (bear in mind the native-Cambridge accent); which I think means that he showed me what the poem really is. Like any good Shakespeare actor's his performance was itself a criticism. These lectures were not flamboyant in any way but they were very convincing; they went towards showing me what convincingness in literary criticism might be, and how much it depends on, to use Leavis's central word, *life*: for he was above all showing what was alive in some poems, really showing that, and going on to make some discriminations within the various life of the poetry—in the case I was remembering, Hardy's depth compared with a certain shallowness of hysteria in a poem of Emily Brontë's. [At this point a recording of part of Leavis's address at the Cheltenham Festival was played.] Note that he is reading a bit of the *Four Quartets* he disapproved of. I think his reading in this case refutes his adverse criticism.

Leavis could be a dominating presence in surprising companies, but it was not by way of anything emphatic in his manner, though he could certainly speak with emphasis.

I remember his demolition of Arnold Bennett's novel *The Old Wives' Tale*: after recounting the plot he rose to a crescendo with "And it is all *entirely* NON-SIGNIFICANT!" But he was rarely loud. The way he could say something as simple after a quotation as "Well, I mean . . .!" stays with me. But it was emphasis not loudness.

Most of Leavis's work, however, went on not in lectures but in Downing College, in what we would call seminars. I seem to remember that at Cambridge the word for our "tutorial", namely "supervision", also applied to these.

To a non-Oxbridge audience a word is probably called for about the Cambridge system. Why, for instance, as a Cambridge man, am I not outraged at the news of the latest appointment of some inane celebrity to a chair at Oxford or Cambridge? Answer, because at Oxford and Cambridge the power of professors is much less all-embracing than it is in the provinces. As far as the Arts subjects are concerned, the real work gets done (if at all) in the Colleges, not by the University, though the University can get its own back when it conducts the degree exams. You have to make some effort of the imagination to realise how feudal Oxford and Cambridge still are. If you know Cambridge, think of that bit of St John's Street where the main gates of John's and Trinity are next door to each other. They are quite straightforward gatehouse keeps, the entry to a system of courts much like those of the medieval castle. Christ's is another. The bars on street-facing college windows are not, by the way, defensive or to deter robbers, nor yet to keep prisoners in, they were to keep their own members out. They date from the still-quite-recent times when the gates were shut

before midnight, after which any undergraduate without permission to be late had to pay a fine to get in, and would naturally have climbed, were it not for the bars. I once or twice myself climbed into Downing, a college harder to bar.

In my first year there was still a ceremony of matriculation, which taught me more about the feudal system than all the books I ever read. All the freshmen of the college had to march through the streets, led by the Praelector, to the Senate House; there, a toad-like man on the platform, perhaps the pro-Vice-Chancellor, addressed the Colleges one at a time, asking them in Latin whether in return for protection they would turn out and fight for him when called. When the Praelector replied that he would, we were then admitted in fours. Four at a time of us held each a finger of the Praelector's right hand, as he led us up to the feudal lord on the dais. We then one at a time knelt and folded hands in the attitude of prayer, the magnate enfolded our hands in his, a pure feudal posture, and said, to each of us, having used a much longer Latin formula at the beginning, "Te quoque admitto."[1] In the Middle Ages the clerkes had indeed been called out from time to time, college by college, to fight for the vice chancellor, usually against the Town: the drawback was that the colleges, like other tenants-in-chief or inferior vassals, might sometimes get out of hand and fight each other instead of the enemies of the lord to whom they had sworn fealty. But the architecture is more defensive than offensive. What is still possible is for a determined don to get hold of a subject in a college and defy the world. Leavis did it.

1 Later note: having been more recently to the graduation of both my children I wonder whether in memory I am conflating matriculation and graduation, but the semi-military march and feudal allegiance-to-a-lord ceremony certainly used to take place.

The university arranged lectures (largely ignored: we usually gave them a trial but then decided we had better things to do), set and marked the examinations, and awarded degrees, but it was in the colleges that the undergraduates wrote essays, were supervised and generally speaking made friends and centred their lives. The difference between a Downing man and a Jesus man was much more important than the difference between, say, Oxford and Cambridge, though as regards English the two ancient universities certainly had very different traditions. (Leavis made sure we knew what he regarded as the very important history of the setting up of the modern English Tripos, and the role of Hector Munro Chadwick in ensuring that Anglo-Saxon was not a compulsory element.)

After the second War, Leavis seems to have had so large an ambition as to realise his idea of the English department, published in *Education and the University*, in one semi-independent Cambridge college. For some years he had H. A. Mason as second-in-command. The fullest account of why he didn't quite bring it off is in Ian MacKillop's biography: that was before my time. But when I went up, entrance was still by examination, in December, officially set by a group of colleges but in the group including Downing in fact closely controlled by Leavis. These were not the half-hour tests still found in some university admission procedures, but went on for several days. Offers of places were made on the results: there were no interviews by Leavis or the other examiners. The marking, just at the end of the Michaelmas term, must have been a huge and exhausting task. MacKillop told me that Leavis succeeded in getting an external examiner to help him (in my year, I think, R. G. Cox)

because he persuaded the colleges that nobody in Cambridge was competent to mark! To this day I count it the main academic honour of my life that one year I came out number one in the Downing entrance exam. Beside that, getting a first (which in my time was not the done thing: we thought an upper second the more respectable degree because less likely to have been obtained by pandering to the examiners) didn't count much. But of course it was in the Tripos results that Leavis was vulnerable. He had no control over those examinations, and Downing men rarely did as well as Jesus men who, much better dressed and taking notes industriously, were to be seen, when we bothered to turn up, at all the university lectures except Leavis's.[1] To the best of my knowledge only one disciple of Leavis has ever been appointed to a university post in Cambridge, and outside Downing only three ever held any kind of fellowship, of whom one is myself.

Leavis's idea of the English School [*school* in the university sense] thoroughly Arnoldian, but incorporating the recent thought of T. S. Eliot and *Scrutiny*, is a startling conception, much more challenging and thoughtful, I believe, than the theorisings of recent years, and of course I can't even begin to talk about that now. Of the three essentials that just have to be mentioned, the best known is the intent consideration of particular works of literature, often quite small ones, as in the famous practical criticism already mentioned. The assumption was that it is a reasonable test of anybody's ability in the subject English to be confronted with a pair of short poems in isolation and asked to compare, contrast and judge them: which, without going just now into the issues

1 The Master of Jesus, and power-broker in the English Faculty, was E. M. W. Tillyard, Leavis's *bête noir*. Leavis was a notorious and sometimes malicious teller of tales about his enemies but it was not till later that I discovered what the EMW stood for: Eustace Mandeville Wetmore.

of principle and theory involved, seems to me true, as near as we get to the defining core of the discipline of literary studies. Much harder to grasp is the connection between that and the other end of the Leavis programme, an Arnold-derived belief in a culture that was at once of the individual and of the nation, allowing the individual to take his or her place in what Coleridge had called the clerisy and Leavis, to my mind less convincingly, was inclined to call the reading public. The relevant mark of a national culture is the whole literature which the individual works make in comparison with one another. Leavis certainly believed that an education in "English" equipped one to judge the quality of life, or the Arnoldian *zeitgeist*. (And if not, by the way, what possible justification can there be for the size of English departments? There are better ways of priming the national economic pump.)

The connection between literary criticism and general judgement was made by way, thirdly, of a deep commitment to a particular kind of history. Leavis used to go down in his enemies' books as anti-historical. He was unusual amongst the Cambridge English faculty of the 'thirties in having taken part one of the History Tripos, not Classics, but what I mean is his inherently historical conception of "English". He was thoroughly in accord with a formula used in the names of what we would call the "period" papers in part one of the English Tripos (which is now [1992] about sixty years old in much the same form and, I report, having done some supervising for it quite recently, still going strong): "English Literature, Life and Thought" between such-and-such dates. The point of the attachment to *life and thought* was that for Leavis the literature was itself the expression of life at a

given time, and registered the great moments of change of sensibility. Leavis was more or less uninterested in year-by-year party politics, though he did tell with relish the story of what Admiral Richmond, the Master of Downing in the 1930s, said he would like to do with his six-inch guns to the fashionable fascists. Leavis thought of himself as a Liberal, but once when he sat on a platform after having signed a candidate's nomination papers he was so disgusted by the exclusive concentration on "standard of living" that he had to leave during the meeting.

The years I am talking about covered the Suez affair, and the agitation in France and Algeria that led to the return of General de Gaulle and the Fourth Republic; about which I and some of the rest of us were excited. A mob in Paris chanted *Moch l'assassin* [Moch was the minister of the interior making vain efforts to control the French police], Paris was noisy with the sound of motor horns trumpeting the rhythm of *Algérie française* and *The Manchester Guardian* (the "great liberal daily", Leavis called it ironically) published an editorial in French. In our supervisions Leavis never glanced at these events. I think I am right in saying that *Scrutiny* managed to appear throughout the War without mentioning it except as it affected printing and distribution.[1]

The sort of historical change I mean would nevertheless be called political by Marxists, though Leavis might have preferred to talk of sensibility or *weltanschauung*. At the heart of this was the judgement that something decisive had happened towards the end of the seventeenth century, when Western Europe, with England at the forefront, made

1 *Scrutiny* did have a symposium well-timed in September 1939 on "The Claims of Politics", with contributions from Richard Church, Geoffrey Davies, Christopher Dawson, Michael Oakeshott, Olaf Stapleton, L. Susan Stebbing and R. H. Tawney.

the critical moves towards the modern world of science, industrialisation, democracy, the mass. Leavis's interest was closely linked to T. S. Eliot's doctrine of the dissociation of sensibility, which he saw in the literature, particularly in the establishment of modern prose, with all its attendant advantages and disadvantages. To understand the difference between Shakespeare and Dryden is, amongst other things, to understand a great turning-point in history; and not for nothing was one of Leavis's favourite practical criticism exercises a comparison of a passage from *Antony and Cleopatra* with *All for Love, or, the World Well Lost*. Leavis, as I shall mention, was quite outstandingly good as a commentator on the English eighteenth century, partly in the way I am pointing to, of using the literature to convey a sense of a whole moment of life. His own doctorate was gained in this area.

It also supports the view of Leavis as a historian that something like once a fortnight, if I remember right, we used to have a "dating session", as it was called, looking at unattributed English passages of prose or verse with a view to saying when they were written and what signs of period they showed. The point of this was not to identify objects or events mentioned, but to look at style, for what that told about an age of the national psyche. This was great fun. Once or twice we made up exercises for Leavis, and of course he performed very well. He had a sense in particular of the nineteenth century almost decade by decade that I have never managed to attain.

Leavis's supervisions were certainly, in his own way, on English life as well as or by way of English literature. So it is worth noting that the charges of little-Englandism or xenophobia sometimes brought against him by people with only a

superficial acquaintance with his work are just ridiculous, as are the reductions, such as Professor Widdowson's, of Leavis's basing literary studies in a concern for the good of the language, to "worthy principles…which one would normally associate with the Boy Scount Movement".[1] Leavis knew his way about French literature; his Italian was pretty good (the story later told was that when he met the Italian poet Eugenio Montale, on whom he published an essay, they joined in a sort of antiphonal rendering of Valéry's "Cimetière Marin"). He had had the good fortune at the Perse School of being taught Greek by the "direct method" of W. H. D. Rouse, liked reciting verses of Aeschylus from memory, and took it for granted that if he used words like *spoudaioteron* or *peripeteia* we would know what he was talking about. I have the impression that he had little German, though he knew enough to have formed the opinion that Nietzsche and Thomas Mann were the only writers of decent German prose. I think it would be fair to call him a disliker of Germany but a judicious Francophile, his liking of France and French being qualified by deeply perceptive observations about the different paths taken by French and English literature and language since the sixteenth century. He pointed out more than once that the French love of *la clarté* had no real equivalent in English and that this does not necessarily tell against us.

I think Leavis used to meet the undergraduates three times a week, in years, making therefore nine hours a week of Downing seminars. There were about a dozen men in each year, and the numbers were occasionally swelled by visitors

1 Cf. Roger Elliott, "Language as a Foreign Language", in Roger Knight and Ian Robinson (eds.), *"My Native English": Criticisms of an Unnecessary Crisis in English Studies*, Gringley-on-the-Hill, 1988, pp. 127–8

from other colleges who had obtained permission to attend. Newnham girls occasionally came.

There were rarely as many as a dozen present because numbers fell away. The more bread-and-butter-inclined among us complained that Leavis was often again going over ground he had covered in his books. The same lines of Donne recurred, for instance. I also heard the other, contrary complaint that he was not treating subjects useful to us in the Tripos, but following his own interests. Both were sometimes true. In the first year I think we had a series on English poetry since the Metaphysicals that did follow much the same tracks as *Revaluation*.

I nevertheless found the supervisions on the eighteenth century, already mentioned, a kind of revelation about the links between art and life. Leavis was very knowledgeable about the conditions under which eighteenth-century literature was produced, for instance the importance of Pope's Homer in the economic (so to speak) history of the literature. He was also as usual able to make good use of personal details: one thing that sticks in my memory was his account of Fielding's embarkation for Lisbon, what it tells of the refinement of eighteenth-century civilisation that Fielding was hooted at by the stevedores because he had to be hoisted on board. But there was no relaxation of the particularity of attention to individual works of literature, and I still think his perception of Pope as an English poet (as a riposte to Matthew Arnold —whose notion of poetry "conceived . . . in the soul" naturally came in for critical attention at the same time) is one of the most critically original things he did.

The most striking thing about Leavis on the Augustan age, though, was how he was able to characterise the "strong,

positive" culture of the eighteenth century by well-chosen examples, not all of them literary (Georgian terraces came in): what he was able to make, for instance, of the fact that almost all eighteenth-century prose is good and fluent ("You can go a long way in the eighteenth century without meeting *bad* prose"); what it meant for the whole culture that prose was an ordinary possession—and how that might be a limitation as well as a liberation.

In the second year the sessions were mainly on the nineteenth-century novel. I don't remember much about that year. Leavis was ill during the second term and not on form. I actually got much more from him on Dickens and George Eliot in the third year, for Part II of the Tripos. There was and is a Tripos paper on Tragedy; Leavis conducted a series of sessions that were never worked up into a book but which were very important in his thinking and, I hope, in mine. These were on Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Racine, and ended up with Ibsen and the impossibility of stage tragedy in the nineteenth century.

The form of Leavis's supervisions in my time was a paradoxical combination of monologue/dialogue. Later on, in his remarkably active seventies, he was stumping the country delivering monologues on the need for discussion, and the "supervisions" had something in common. It wasn't that we had no chance to participate, though the ethos in which a seminar is thought to have failed unless everybody present participates was in the future. I myself didn't dare open my mouth all that often. Leavis was forbearing with not-very-intelligent remarks, and good at turning them to good account, a bit like that moment of *Mansfield Park* when Sir Thomas Bertram manages to make sense of something

said by Mr Rushworth, but the parallel may give some hint of the atmosphere—except that unlike Sir Thomas, Leavis had a pronounced sense of humour and was at one of his bests when saying something devastating in an understated, almost deadpan tone. On the few occasions I saw him answering questions after a public lecture he was also excellent: I remember his dealing with the then fashionable demand for *definitions*, after a lecture to the university English club. I later realised that his refusal to define his key terms, in particular *life*, beyond using them carefully, was in its way very Wittgensteinian, though I don't think Leavis realised this himself. In other words, it proceeded from a better notion of conceptual thought than that of the questioners.

In those days most of us had done national service and were grown up, but it's still true and not very surprising that we couldn't hold our own with Leavis on terms of anything like equality. My own contributions, I remember, were largely confined to supplying the occasional quotation. Leavis was a magnificent quoter in about five languages, but his memory was beginning to go.

It could still be said that he really believed in and practised criticism as discussion. He never lost his sense that literature is not private-and-personal, that literary criticism is in principle something we do in common, and if the talking was his it was dependent on the kind of listening that at least potentially could issue in a "Yes, but . . . ." I sometimes find myself saying something of the kind to a large lecture audience: formal discussion is not possible in a group this size, but unless the discussion is real, the debate between what I am saying and what you are thinking, criticism is not being practised.

So Leavis largely monologuised, and some of the monologues were what we could have found in his books. Like the lectures, this element did benefit from the living voice. Leavis's prose style is of course extraordinary—I have had a say about that elsewhere[1]—but in all its parenthetical complications and surprising moments of Anglo-Saxonate plainness it was extremely close to the speaking voice, and in the man didn't sound artificial.

The education for me, though, in the supervisions, was what some of my contemporaries objected to; I do claim to have been educable. There was a time, mainly in my second and third years, when, whatever the subject was supposed to be, Leavis couldn't help talking about Dickens, or about T. S. Eliot (who was then still alive). Leavis was then saying things some of which later appeared in *Dickens the Novelist* and *The Living Principle* but others of which didn't, for he kept recurring to Dickens under the heading of *tragedy* as well as that of nineteenth-century novelist. I remind myself that I am not talking about Leavis's whole career; but I think he did make a sort of strategic decision in about 1962, the year of the famous Snow lecture—the only literary sensation of my lifetime—*not* to pursue his thoughts about tragedy but to go instead for the prophetic "Discourses on Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope" that make up the wonderful book *Nor Shall My Sword*.[2] As regards the Dickens criticism, I think this is a pity.

1 "The Third Realm" (an essay in which I had a number of co-workers), *The Human World* 3, 1971, especially pp. 77–80

2 I quote from a letter of 18 February 1973 in answer to my question whether he had ever written down what he had been saying in those Tragedy seminars and, if so, whether I could publish it: "Nothing like notes for those disquisitions on Tragedy ever existed, & they depended very much on the stimuli of the occasion. It's one of the number of themes I've 'been going' to write on some day. But it would mean a lot of work, & I can't switch to it at present. . . . I won't forget the *H*[*uman*] *W*[*orld*], but Tragedy won't be next. Possibly Oxford Civilization, Auden & Nonsense (& Anglo-C[atholicism]." (He was then 77 and had published *Nor Shall my Sword* the previous year.)

It somewhat distorted the view of the whole *oeuvre* and allowed him, for instance, to hive off *Bleak House* to his wife and not to treat *Our Mutual Friend*—which he discussed in detail with us—at all. I remember his being extremely interesting on the Bradley Headstone tragedy and wish my notes were more copious. Leavis was certainly (aided by Eliot?[1]) on to the great difference in the Dickens *oeuvre* that begins with *Bleak House*, and that it is a difference which has to come into a discussion of tragedy in the novel.

Leavis on Dickens showed me what serious thinking about literature is like. Not, of course, by way of giving a model or a method. It sounds so reasonable when a student asks for a specimen answer to, for instance, a practical criticism question. What are the methods, what are the steps? Then if one answers "There is no method and no procedure" the student concludes that the teacher is a fraud. We had in front of us not a method to be learned, or a manner or a style to be imitated, but just thinking, done there, in supervision. Leavis needed to talk things out, and he did so in his own way, sometimes obsessively recurring to the same themes and even the same examples, and not leaving off until he was reasonably satisfied that he had said what he meant, or until exhaustion supervened as it sometimes did. The only comparable thing I have read of are the near-contemporary classes held by Leavis's acquaintance Wittgenstein. Hard thinking, no doubt, need not always be like this; to some people it might come more easily and not need an audience; but this was certainly the real thing.

1 Eliot remarks somewhere in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* on the great change in Dickens that begins with *Bleak House*.

On Leavis's perpetual recurrences to Eliot I can say something similar, though I now think his worryings-away at Eliot were partly vitiated by a deep personal dislike of the man and a deep impatience with his later development. When Eliot called on the Leavises Mrs Leavis, much more hostile than F. R., had served coffee through the serving hatch while Eliot chain-smoked. "He was the *lowest* man," Leavis said: *low* I think in the sense of uncheerful and unspirited. Eliot was an insoluble problem for Leavis because, absolutely honest man that he was, he could not but see in *Four Quartets* the major English poetry of his lifetime, and that a main part of his own duty as critic was to recognise Eliot. And it does make a difference to any critic to know that he is the contemporary of a major poet. On the other hand Leavis was so convinced that Eliot was on wrong tracks that I think he never brought himself seriously to consider the critical works Eliot was producing contemporary with *Four Quartets*. It wasn't just that Leavis, offspring of a rationalist father and instinctive Liberal in politics, couldn't forgive Eliot for joining the Church of England; he couldn't take it seriously. Leavis's attitude to religion, which I think has to come to the foreground of this reminiscence just here, seems to me, much later and with hindsight, to have been rather like George Eliot's. In my year we had two members of a Roman Catholic teaching order, another Roman Catholic who had dropped out of training for the priesthood, one future C of E vicar, at least one other active member of the Church of England, one Methodist and one practising Jew, and I don't think Leavis ever said anything that could have offended any of them. (I think it was later that I learned of his hostility to Anglo-Catholicism.) He was respectful to religion, and long years

later I wonder whether he was perhaps even slightly envious of believers, but actually to join them was not a possibility for him. I have discussed elsewhere his place as heir of Matthew Arnold in making literature a substitute for religion,[1] which I take to be the great flaw in Leavis's criticism. Perhaps one that makes sense of the notion of the tragic flaw (which he ridiculed)—something necessary to the man, for without it Leavis could not have taken literature so seriously.

Whether Leavis's suspicion of Anglo-Catholicism derived from his suspicions about T. S. Eliot I don't know. He had the not very good phrase for Eliot "an elderly male Anglo-Catholic spinster". He was contemptuous (quite rightly in my view) of *The Cocktail Party* and I remember his saying that Eliot "didn't know the right people." On the other hand it was more with amusement than hostility that he said of Eliot's learning, "Old Tom [I think he used the phrase] makes a little go a long way." Some of the agonisings about Eliot I heard in the supervisions got into print more than fifteen years later in that finely serious, important, but unsatisfactory book *The Living Principle*.[2] For all these reservations, Leavis on Eliot too was exemplary in taking us along with the grapplings of the first critical mind of the age about the first poet of the age.

As to imitation: we did pick up some of his mannerisms, but I think in my year anyway and among my friends we were all aware that we had, in the Lawrence phrase, to admire and do differently.

Leavis sometimes used the terms of traditional rhetoric and expected us to know what *synechdoche* or *hendiadys* meant; some of his best purely critical work is on the

1 Cf. my *English Prophets*

2 I reviewed it in *The Spectator*, not to Leavis's satisfaction though he made no complaints. There is a longer discussion of Leavis on Eliot in *The English Prophets*.

difference between metaphor and simile. But he followed his own principle. He would read something and say something about it in the spirit of, "This is so, isn't it?" There were no regulations about what the something might be, as long as it was relevant to the formation of judgement. It was at least as likely to be historical or personal as formally literary or rhetorical, for the seriousness of literature for Leavis was as a direct expression of life (which of course points to a number of questions and discussions about what was for Leavis always the central critical term), and he was quite clear that a concentration on the work of art need not prevent us from using what we know of the author. This is one of the reasons why it is wrong to assimilate Downing to the American New Critics, at least in the popular idea of them as never considering anything outside the text in front of them. Leavis was always willing to be, as Lawrence put it, in the midst of the fray. He had a taste for anecdote, sometimes of a rather scabrous kind. I forget which of the nineteenth-century French syphilitic poets it was whose lip, Leavis told us, came off one morning while he was shaving. At school I was told that Keats died of consumption; to this day I have never heard anyone but Leavis say, as he told us in a confidential tone, that it was the pox as well. He had some wildly funny accounts of Shelley's conversations with Peacock which I could not begin to imitate (one of them involved Shelley's getting into a visionary condition when his hat fell down over his eyes). Hardy's heart had, Leavis told us, by the terms of Hardy's will, been cut out to be buried somewhere other than the rest of his body, but unfortunately Florence Emily had left it on a dish in the kitchen and the cat had got it.

I must not give the impression that the anecdotes were hostile or heartless. (The Hardy one may have come in as the sort of life's little irony Hardy might have relished.) I remember his quoting James Smith (the only *Scrutiny* critic, in my view, with talents at all comparable with Leavis's own, and of whose delicate moral judgements Leavis said, "He 's a Yorkshire Roman Catholic, you know, of the most Protestant kind") on the Brontës: "The things those girls suffered!" He was also as sympathetic about Alexander Pope's physical sufferings as if he had known the man. Talking about Virginia Woolf and her not quite sane sensitiveness he unintentionally raised a laugh by saying about her suicide that "She had tried several times before." Those laughing received a gentle rebuke. He had been referring to her plight as one of the reasons (along with her deep-seated snobbery) why she couldn't be a great central judge of life, but when he reported her abnormally sensitive terrors ("Doors *bang*!!") it was not unsympathetically.

Leavis could be socially deterministic. It sometimes seemed enough of a judgement to say that somebody was "A Classic", or "a public school type". I forget what he had against the important Shakespeare editor John Dover Wilson, but in those days when people used still to talk about "long-haired intellectuals" Dover Wilson was according to Leavis a "short-haired executive type".

About the people he knew himself, and in particular about the Cambridge establishment, he could be recklessly indiscreet, and why he was never sued for slander I don't quite know. This was sometimes taken to a pitch of personal intensity that was at least eccentric. We got a lot of internal Downing politics, which properly should have been confidential. Out-

side the College he ranged from the informative-amusing to the savagely sarcastic. Talking about F. L. Lucas (a King's don notoriously unappreciative of T. S. Eliot and "himself a poet") on Tragedy, Leavis parenthetically mentioned that he had passed Lucas in the street but Lucas had not seen him: "Of course he was too intent on looking at his own reflection in shop windows." Leavis had a generic hostility to King's (also the college of E. M. Forster and George Rylands, whose mellifluous Shakespeare I seem to remember Leavis did not admire), and looked down on Keynes as a stock-market manipulator but did allow that he had done well to increase the College's endowments enough to keep the chapel in good repair. He glanced occasionally at the great King's homosexual tradition, but with surprising restraint, and though he didn't like E. M. Forster I don't remember that that was the reason. He gave a grotesque imitation of E. M. W. Tillyard being a Great Man as he looked round his audience, and claimed that he could see in the face of Matthew Hodgart the marks of his turning into an Authority (on James Joyce). As I remember it, T. R. Henn, soon to be President of St Catharine's, was always "the Brigadier", referring, apparently, to a certain element, as Leavis saw it, of posing in his manly demeanour. Another phrase for Henn was "great booby".[1]

He could also be scathing about the famous who had wanted to get into *Scrutiny* without realising that only the best was acceptable. He used to speak with respect of George Santayana but not of Auden, who had contributed to early issues. Even the inner "contributing connexion"

1 Professor D. W. Hopkins informs me that any impression I may have taken from Leavis of Henn's exaggerating his own military distinction was certainly wrong: Henn was twice mentioned in dispatches and his limp was "apparently the result of a rough aeroplane landing that he had experienced during his war service". See the entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

were not exempt. Much later, in the "Retrospect" to the reprinted *Scrutiny*, Leavis spoke up almost without qualification for *Scrutiny's* treatment of Shakespeare, to which he contributed remarkably little himself, but I can't help suspecting that the later reminiscence may have been an over-reaction to John Newton's essay "*Scrutiny's* failure with Shakespeare", the occasion of Leavis's break with *The Cambridge Quarterly*. In the seminars I remember his story of Derek Traversi's contributions. Leavis said he could recognise the arrival of a new essay by Traversi by the noise it made coming through the letterbox: there was always a peculiar leaden thump. Leavis never learned to type—Q. D. did the typing—and he could also recognise her adverse opinion of some of the contributions from an increased intensity of typewriter clatter.

The unamiable aspects of all this were particularly clear in the personalities about T. S. Eliot. In the recent past John Peter had published in F. W. Bateson's *Essays in Criticism* (a journal for which Leavis had a well-founded contempt) an essay arguing that the *angst* in Eliot proceeds from homosexual guilt, and that Eliot had been in love with the dedicatee of *Prufrock and Other Observations*, "Jean Verdenal, 1889–1915, mort aux Dardanelles". Eliot had immediately got his solicitors to work and the essay had been suppressed.[1] Leavis was quite sure not only that Peter was right but that Eliot was deeply twisted and hypocritical. I can't help thinking that this was what Leavis *wanted* to believe. It made his instinctive hostility easier to account for. Leavis had also got hold of a version of the tales circulating about *King Golo*.

1 In E. W. F. Tomlin's account Peter had apologised and withdrawn but had republished the essay after Eliot's death when the libel laws could no longer be invoked. To the best of my knowledge John Peter had just got it wrong.

To us this was recounted in something like the form "It may surprise you to know, gentlemen, that Mr Eliot is at work upon an obscene epic poem." I don't think this got anybody anywhere, including Leavis, as nobody had seen the work or had any idea what if anything Eliot was up to.

Leavis was *of course* not just a raconteur of gossip. The personalities followed from a deep and principled working-out of the position that *le style c'est l'homme même*. He believed that in entering into works of art we are meeting human souls, and that there is no barrier between concentration on works of art and other knowledge of the human souls who made them. Even the to my mind regrettable personal intensity about Eliot was certainly within Leavis's range of literary criticism.

In the 1920s, he later told me, he had still been suffering so severely from the trauma of the war that he couldn't sleep, and instead learned Italian. Accounts of the Leavis of that period portray him as nervously sensitive. He was not so in my day. As a small example, which I will use to contradict William Walsh's account of Leavis as needing abormal quantities of heat (which in the Downing of the 1950s he couldn't have found anyway): he never learned how to light a gas fire properly. There was no central heating in Downing, Cambridge winters are very cold, and if we were first in the morning to use his room on "E" staircase, his first action was to light the gas fire. This was well before the days of North Sea gas or radiant-convector heating. Town gas, made at the local gas works from coal, does not react in quite the same way as natural gas. As I remember it, Leavis's method was to turn on the gas, then look round for matches, allowing the gas to build up a sort of head, then to apply the

lighted match to the bottom of the fire, so that by the time he lit it there would be quite a bang. I was rather nervous about this myself but I don't remember that he was.

Leavis did mark essays, about three a year—I still have mine with his pencilled comments—but in my time, just after H. A. Mason had left Downing, most of the individual supervision was by whatever research students happened to be around. It wasn't until after I graduated that I began to know Leavis anything like personally outside the academic context, though there were the annual tea parties at which we consumed the scrumptious cakes home-made by Mrs Leavis. These reminiscences being of F. R. I must not begin an account of the almost equally remarkable Q. D., beyond warning you not to trust any post-war student's memoir referring to her as Queenie. I was on friendly terms with her to the end, but she was always Mrs Leavis. I think it was only the pre-war vintages who got on first-name terms with either of them. (In letters from F. R. I was always "My dear Robinson".)

Downing as its own castle included its own literary society, the Doughty, named after C. M. Doughty, author of *Travels in Arabia Deserta* and numbers of full-length unreadable epic poems. (Of Doughty, whom he had read, Leavis used to say that he allowed into his work no influence more recent than *Piers Plowman*.) For some reason I didn't go much to the Doughty as an undergraduate and most of my memories are from my postgraduate years. It was usually much more interesting than the University English Club and could call on well-known speakers from all over the country. (I never learned where the travelling expenses came from. We were conscious of Downing as one of the

poorer colleges, figuring in history as the sufferer of one of the longest-running Chancery cases, so that both it and Downing Street in London were only half completed.)

Leavis was certainly the dominant presence but quite often didn't say much. Sometimes he or more usually Mrs Leavis would give a speaker an agonising time during the questions. I remember an occasion when the excellent William Glock, in charge of music on what was then the BBC Third Programme, was given a detailed list of demands by Mrs Leavis including less frequent broadcasting of Schubert's incidental music to *Rosamunde*; but it was more common for F. R., if he didn't think much of a talk, to make his objections in his rather understated manner. William Empson once gave us one of the worst talks I have ever heard in public, from which one would have got no idea at all of the quality of his mind: he had had too much to drink and hadn't bothered to prepare the talk at all. Leavis was forbearing, but I'd better add my memory of his saying one day in supervision, "Gentlemen, I do not wish to shock you, but I have heard Empson say that sex is no more than blowing one's nose."

He was less patient with A. E. Dyson, the co-editor of the newly founded *Critical Quarterly*, who began his talk by saying, without any apparent irony, that after one year (or two?) as editor what he had to tell us was a simple success story. I forget the phrasing, but at the end Leavis asked ever so gently whether the success of a magazine hasn't to do to some extent with its quality as well as the sales figures.

Perhaps this is the moment to mention Leavis's legendary quarrelsomeness. I was at Downing at a slack time, between *Scrutiny* and the remarkable activity of Leavis's post-

retirement years. I was out of Cambridge by the time he resigned his post-retirement honorary fellowship in Downing and asked them to take down his portrait, and I was also at a safe distance from the great row with the founders of *The Cambridge Quarterly* and of the F. R. Leavis Lectureship, though later I heard both sides at some length. (The Lectureship trustees had got themselves into the not easily defensible position of appointing a lecturer of whom Leavis very articulately disapproved.[1]) In the other direction I was too late for the breaks with Boris Ford or Denys Thompson. I can only report what I know. Leavis did occasionally, perhaps self-indulgently, tell stories in which he figured as physically formidable. I forget which bully it was who was said to have felt the weight of his shoulder. He also liked the tale of the late J. C. F. Littlewood, who after a talk by the South African poet Roy Campbell had, instead of asking a question or starting a discussion, invited Campbell to come outside. But for instance Leavis was careful not to hurt our feelings when he marked essays. He knew that his adverse comments would be taken to heart, so when he had to make them he tried not to make us feel hopeless or stupid. The only exception I recall was about an essay by D. M. Wallerstein, which Leavis thought was frivolous and dilettante. Dilettantism was a thing he could not bear, and on that occasion, fairly obviously as a kind of exemplary punishment, he took the essay apart in front of the class. With visitors whether to the seminar or the college he was as far as I could see always mannerly and urbane.

1 Cf. a lucid essay by a disinterested commentator, Richard Stotesbury, "A Waste of Spirit", in *Leavis, Dr MacKillop and* The Cambridge Quarterly, ed. M. B. Mencher, Brymill Press, 1998

Leavis was actually very much a college man. He had strong views on the College's architecture, and relished the fact that Downing was the biggest court (in his day there was only one) in Cambridge, bigger than Trinity Great Court, and the only Cambridge *campus* in the proper meaning of the word. He admired the original Wilkins part including hall (drastically altered in the later nineteenth century) and master's lodge, and the more-or-less adherence to the original plan for the other nineteenth-century buildings they were able to fund. The court/campus originally had an open vista to the south, across the undergraduates' lawn, as well as a park to the north now occupied by the Downing Site of science departments. The College had had to sell off the latter and, to the south, a strip along the Lensfield Road, on which were built what Leavis called "dentists' houses" that enclosed the view, and he looked forward (beyond his time) to the falling-in of leases which would allow the College to demolish them. (The leases must have fallen in by now but the houses are still there.) The court was not completed on its present three sides until the early 1950s, with the chapel. Between the wars the northern corners had been built to a design by Sir Ernest Baker, which Leavis disliked as unsuccessful neo-Imperialist embellishment of the original style. But he thought the College had done well with the buildings erected during his own time.

He didn't dine in hall often, and on the rare occasions I was able to observe I never saw him eat anything: his digestion had been permanently ruined during the first War, and one story he was fond of was of Thomas de Quincey's saying some time in the 1850s that he hadn't had a square meal since the eighteenth century. ("He used

to live on opium, you know.") Leavis did turn up to the College Breakfast on graduation day, and was charming in a very Cambridgy way, reminiscing about college characters, talking about the graduation ceremony. He also enjoyed the Governing Body meetings, and I think relished and put to good use his reputation for intransigence. In fact like any other academic politician he sometimes had to admit defeat, but on occasion his colleagues' fear of what would happen if they opposed him was, I believe, a real political factor. My vagueness here is deliberate because I have in mind one particular episode some of the details of which are still confidential. It was when I was a research student and supervisor, and involved an undergraduate who looked like being sent down for failing prelims, the first year exam, and whom Leavis and I both wanted to save. Leavis went to a lot of trouble, writing me a six-page letter, riding his formidable bike out the three miles to Coton, to try to catch me (I was not on the phone and in fact was out) and supervising in detail my own representations to the Master. He was very insistent that the whole Fellowship, not just the tutors,[1] are *in loco parentis*.

Nowadays, in the cliché-history which seems to be all that is known of Downing, Leavis goes down as Cambridge English. He was a constant subject of conversation and gossip all over Cambridge, including by people who knew nothing about him; stories circulated which were obviously apocryphal: he was a Cambridge folk figure. But Leavis was always conscious of being an outlaw, and with some reason.

1 At Cambridge a tutor is the personal and moral supervisor, not academic—that is the director of studies.

He had been lucky to be able to survive at Cambridge. He was not safe at Downing until 1935 and was not appointed to a full-time university lectureship until 1946, when he was over fifty. A fellowship is usually not thought enough to support a family, and the Leavises had three children in such a way, as he remarked much later, on my hearthrug at 78 Bryn Road Swansea, that there had been a child under five in the house for thirteen (?) consecutive years.[1] He was never a professor at Cambridge, though after his retirement the title was conferred on him as a visiting lecturer at the University of York. At Cambridge he was promoted in his sixty-fifth year to the grade of Reader. On his death bed he was made a Companion of Honour. There is a certain irony in comparing this career-path with that of any number of mediocrities and performers of the hour. On the other hand, of all academic titles, along with the one by which he was always known, *reader* was the one that best fitted Leavis. He was indeed a doctor, much as the title belonged almost by right to Samuel Johnson, and he was a great reader. What is meant by serious reading is something we can still learn from him.

Ian Robinson

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1 For accurate dates see Ian MacKillop's biography *F. R. Leavis: a Life in Criticism*.