

‘The Essential Cambridge in Spite of Cambridge’: F. R. Leavis in the Antipodes

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I am concerned to make it really a university, something that is more than a collocation of specialist departments—to make it a centre of human consciousness: perception, knowledge, judgment and responsibility. And perhaps I have sufficiently indicated on what lines I would justify my seeing the centre of a university in a vital English School... I will only say that the academic is the enemy and that the academic *can* be beaten, as we who ran *Scrutiny* for twenty years proved. We were—and we knew we were—Cambridge—the essential Cambridge in spite of Cambridge.

(F. R. Leavis, *Two Cultures?* 29)

NO CRITIC HAS MADE A GREATER CLAIM FOR THE CULTURAL CENTRALITY OF ENGLISH and the practice of literary criticism than F. R. Leavis—not even I. A. Richards, the thinker arguably responsible for the motivating principle of Leavis’s criticism that ‘there is a necessary relationship between the quality of an individual’s response to art and his general fitness for humane existence’ (‘Manifesto’ 5). ‘Leavis conveys persistently the absolute conviction that criticism is a central, life-giving pursuit’, writes George Steiner (233), and Leavis’s influence on literary criticism as it was practised in English-speaking universities from the

1930s to the 1970s was immense. His influence on the study of subject English at secondary school was even greater. 'The stress was on the honing of critical perceptions, developing a responsiveness, sensitivity, discrimination', to quote Michael Wilding. And at its core was the idea that reading literature really mattered—indeed, mattered more than any other cultural activity—both to the maturing student as an individual and to the quality and continuity of the national culture he or she inherited. 'Literary study', according to Leavis, was 'the best possible training for intelligence—for free, unspecialised, general intelligence' (*For Continuity* 54).

In this sense, Leavis's critical endeavour can be seen as the consummation of a long tradition of English thinking (emphatically not to be confused with 'philosophy') that began with the Romantic valorisation of imaginative literature and found its prophet in the Victorian critic and educationist Matthew Arnold. 'More and more', wrote Arnold, we will 'turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us' ('Study' 235). Arnold had argued the need for a disciplined literary criticism and famously (and vaguely) charged the student of literature to engage with 'the best that is known and thought in the world' ('Function' 19). An undergraduate degree in English was not finally introduced at Cambridge until 1926, but the conditions for 'an English School with a notably different character from that of Oxford' had been created in 1917 by the introduction of a new course on 'Life, Literature, and Thought' and the option of excluding study of the English language and of English literature before 1350. English at Cambridge was no longer in the thrall of its historical (including antiquarian) and philological origins. 'With the further changes of 1926', writes D. J. Palmer, 'including the appearance of the "English Moralists" paper and of practical criticism, English at Cambridge assumed its distinctive form' (151, 153).

Though often personally at odds with the Cambridge English School, Leavis would take frequent occasion to distinguish literary criticism as he practised it from the literary scholarship studied at Oxford (and London).¹ According to Leavis, criticism as a discipline was at once prior and superior to scholarship, which even at its best threatened to distract the critical energies from their discriminating and evaluative, indeed judgmental task. 'For the purposes of criticism', he writes in an essay on 'Mr Eliot and Milton', 'scholarship, unless directed by an intelligent interest in poetry—without, that is, the critical sensibility and the skill that enables the critic to develop its responses in sensitive and closely relevant thinking—is useless' (*Common Pursuit* 9).² A morally engaged, practical criticism

¹ 'The distinction Oxford/Cambridge', as Francis Mulhern reminds us, 'has undoubtedly been over-polarized, and indeed mythologized, on many occasions; nevertheless, it is well-grounded in cultural-historical fact' (19, n. 44).

² 'In all the essays I wrote at Cambridge', writes Leavis's ex-student, David Ellis, 'I cannot recall ever providing a footnote, and there certainly seemed a relative indifference among my teachers

was Leavis's declared methodology, making 'the sensitive, exacting, reading of texts central to his lecturing and seminars' (Hilliard 40). Along with the New Criticism it spawned in the United States, practical or 'close' criticism would become a dominant form—indeed, ideology—of literary criticism until the 1970s.³ Leavis's version, however, had its own characteristic techniques and priorities, and its own vaunted rigour: 'if the study of literature is to play its central part it must be informed and governed by a more athletic conception of criticism as a discipline of intelligence than it commonly is' (*Mill* 2). Too much was at stake for any lazy impressionism, for example, least of all of the swooning, belletristic kind introduced by the 'hushed cult of Beauty' and 'religiose sensuality' that (according to Leavis) had vitiated poetry and criticism 'from the Pre-Raphaelites and Swinburne through Pater and Oscar Wilde to the nineties' (*New Bearings* 24). If in his famous reply to the historian of modern criticism, René Wellek, Leavis chose not to justify his literary critical priorities, his characteristic critical vocabulary enacted and enforced them nonetheless: 'concrete'; 'organic'; 'embodied'; 'vital'; 'robust'; 'insistence'; 'concrete realization'; 'achieved actuality'; 'vital intelligence'; 'inevitable naturalness'; 'liveliness of enactment'; 'a grasp of the real'; 'presentment of situations'.

What it amounted to, by force of reiteration, was a brand of phenomenological realism that hungered after 'the actual' in ways that could verge on the literal-minded, along with 'a kind of blind vitalist intuitionism', to quote Pamela McCallum (117), one that intensified and in the face of opposition became entrenched over the course of a long career in which Leavis projected himself as besieged by those only too willing 'in a Laurentian phrase, to "do dirt" on life' (*Great Tradition* 26). The poets and novelists of Leavis's canon had not only to have 'a firm grasp of the actual', they had to be on the side of life, whatever that might mean, and however it might manifest itself stylistically and/or prosodically: 'they are all distinguished', he wrote of the great novelists, 'by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity'. The privilege of great literature—and, after that, of reading great literature—is access to the 'human awareness' it promotes: 'awareness of the possibilities of life' (*Great Tradition* 9, 2). The shame of second-rate literature, on the other hand—and, after that, of reading second-rate literature—is the potential corruption it promotes: 'literary criticism, as it must, enters overtly into questions of emotional

to the edition I was using, the historical context of the text I was using, what critics in the past had made of it, and in general anything that might be filed under the heading of literary scholarship' (25).

³ That the New Criticism was by no means the exclusive form is the argument of a recent book by Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan showing 'the persistence of historical and materialist approaches to literary study through a midcentury long imagined as uniformly New Critical in orientation' (10).

hygiene and moral value—more generally... of spiritual health' (*Living Principle* 75).⁴

In poetry, this 'firm grasp of the actual' meant that a writer, for Leavis, must remain in touch with 'the living language': 'utterance, movement, and intonation are those of the talking voice' (*Revaluation* 11). In a revision of the Wordsworthian demand that the poet only employ 'the language really spoken by men' (Wordsworth 137), Leavis identified a strong poetic tradition in this 'talking voice'—a tradition from which the 'Grand Style' of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, notoriously, was seen as an aberration, denying the 'expressive resources' of the English language: 'a medium so cut off from speech—speech that belongs to the emotional and sensory texture of actual living and is in resonance with the nervous system':

It needs no unusual sensitiveness to language to perceive that, in this Grand Style, the medium calls pervasively for a kind of attention, compels an attitude towards itself, that is incompatible with sharp, concrete realization; just as it would seem to be, in the mind of the poet, incompatible with an interest in sensuous particularity. He exhibits a feeling *for* words rather than a capacity for feeling *through* them. (*Revaluation* 50, 51)

Today we can identify in Leavis's new literary and critical priorities the canonical revolution effected by a nominally anti-Romantic, anti-Victorian Modernism, one to which the recovery of the Metaphysical poets—and, pre-eminently, of John Donne—was central: 'how subtly, in a consummately managed verse, he can exploit the strength of spoken English' (*Revaluation* 14). In contriving and welcoming the rehabilitation of the Metaphysicals and its displacement of nineteenth-century literature as 'the great critical achievement of our time' ('This Age' 8), Leavis was a man of his generation and of his institution: 'The interest in modernism' writes Anne Samson, 'was almost a defining feature of Cambridge English in its early years' (21). What he found in the poetry of Donne was precisely the 'pressure of intelligence' and vernacular directness, the 'wit, play of intellect, stress of cerebral muscle', that he sought to emulate in his own critical response (*Revaluation* 14). Not that Leavis valued an exclusively intellectual literature or judged literature only by the extent and quality of its ideas—far from it—it was rather that, because of its unique capacity to integrate ideas and emotions, literature needed to be in constant negotiation with the thought of its time. Ideas were an integral part of human experience and it was the experience *of* literature and experience *in* literature that Leavis valued, without always being careful to

⁴ Where is 'the art that delights – and enlightens – by the intentional relaxation of moral awareness', asks Lionel Trilling, 'by its invitation to us to contemplate the mere excess of irrelevant life' (112).

distinguish between the two and without betraying any intimate knowledge of the contemporary intellectual resources upon which the right-minded poet was said to draw.

Later in his career, Leavis's paradigm for this integration, as for so many aspects of literature, would become D. H. Lawrence, whose 'gift', Leavis argued, 'lay not in thinking but in experiencing' (*For Continuity* 57). Behind this revolution lay T. S. Eliot's influential version of English literary history, one which discovered a 'dissociation of sensibility' afflicting the creative mind from the late seventeenth-century onwards, a psycho-spiritual catastrophe from which Eliot's own impersonal poetics offered restitution (288).⁵ 'Eliot's "theory" (the poet's own word) of the dissociation of sensibility is crucial to Leavis's construction of literary history, and to his cultural criticism' (Samson 49). With an irony that seems to have escaped both Eliot and Leavis, the 'disastrously single-minded and simple-minded' *Paradise Lost*, with its triumph of 'character' over 'intelligence', is said to represent a fall from cultural and spiritual grace (*Revaluation* 58).

Practical criticism, then, with a moral and experiential immediacy, is Leavis's chosen methodology or (and the word has never seemed more appropriate) *discipline*. His approach is self-consciously untheoretical, even anti-theoretical—in the celebrated exchange with René Wellek, who had asked him to 'defend' his critical position and 'become conscious that large ethical, philosophical, and, of course, ultimately, aesthetic choices are involved' (375), Leavis protested their irrelevance to his practice and his own indifference to 'philosophy'. 'The critic's aim is, first, to realize as sensitively and completely as possible this or that which claims his attention' (*Common Pursuit* 211, 213). For Leavis, writes Simon During, 'criticism is conceptually presuppositionless'; 'it is immanent in that its criteria of judgment derive (in theory) from its objects' (125). That Leavis is not being entirely ingenuous is suggested later in his response to Wellek when he confesses, almost parenthetically, that 'Ideally I ought perhaps... to be able to complete the work with a theoretical statement. But I am sure that the kind of work that I have attempted comes first' (*Common Pursuit* 214).

If Leavis circumvents the kind of elaborate psychological theory used by I. A. Richards to explain his own critical methodology, his critical approach is extensively justified in a series of essays, some of them book-length, on what he sees as the decadence of contemporary society and culture. Behind Leavis's criticism lies an historical interpretation or myth originating with the Romantics and comparable with T. S. Eliot's fall from a golden age of pre-dissociated sensibility: an elaborate, Spenglerian stadial history of the cultural decline effected

⁵ According to Frank Kermode, T. E. Hulme 'was one of the first of the English to discover, what was later to become a dominating concept in modern criticism, some kind of disastrous psychological shift, some original moral catastrophe, in human history about the time of the Renaissance' (124).

by materialism, utilitarianism, industrialisation, and what Anne Samson calls Leavis's 'unholy trinity of "mass-production, standardisation, levelling-down"' (39). The real villain in this myth is neither Milton's Satan nor Milton's God, but the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and 'the hubris of technologico-positivist enlightenment' (*Nor Shall My Sword* 12). And behind *this*, as George Steiner observes, 'shimmers an historical vision (largely fanciful) of an older order, rural, customary, moralistic' (245). The title of Leavis's early essay, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1930), says it all: literature (as distinct from popular or mass culture), when read aright—'the ideal critic is the ideal reader' (*Common Pursuit* 212)—is our only defence against the progressive decay of 'standards' in the 'technologico-Benthamite' dystopia Leavis felt he inhabited (*Nor Shall My Sword* 13). Literature and literary criticism mattered because they had the profound social function of 'fortifying citizens against the seductions of mass culture', to quote Chris Hilliard, 'the most ominous of which was the corruption of feeling and desire' (46).

Implicit in the fortification offered by literature and literary criticism against the fatally attractive corruptions that for Leavis attend upon popular cultural forms like film, television, and the Sunday newspapers, it is not difficult to detect the strong educational interest which drove and informed the Leavisite project.⁶ 'Although Leavis was regarded almost universally as a brilliant reader of literary texts, and a subscription to *Scrutiny* de rigeur for any self-respecting young Turk', writes Leigh Dale, 'it was primarily in the area of curriculum and pedagogy that Leavis and his followers were to have the greatest influence. Leavis was distinctive in his interest in schools and teacher training' (186). The literature young people were exposed to at school and the discrimination they developed there—learning to recognise the superiority of literature 'on the side of life' over popular fiction and film—would arm them against the conspiracy of the second-rate that, like 'drug-taking, day-dreaming and masturbation', threatened to undermine the health of their culture (Baldick 206). 'The teaching profession is peculiarly in a position to do revolutionary things', wrote Leavis (*For Continuity* 188-9).

And the university, as Leavis conceived it, was simply an extension of the secondary school classroom, where 'The practice of criticism', to quote Hilliard, 'was inseparable for Leavis from the pedagogy of criticism' (Hilliard 14). At the university, Leavis, 'an indefatigable teacher' (MacKillop 3), resisted the professionalisation of critical reading and writing that was specialised academic scholarship: 'the academic is the enemy' (*Two Cultures?* 29). (The subsequent

⁶ I use the common term 'Leavisites' to refer to Leavis's supporters, though I am conscious that some of his supporters have found it offensive: "'Leavisian" we accepted, but "Leavisite" was a term that those of us reading English at Downing in my time resisted and disliked', writes David Ellis (in his *Memoirs of a Leavisite*, I hasten to add): 'In the way it was used it suggested mindless discipleship, a blind following of the master' (12).

identification of critical reading and writing as ‘research’ could only have been even more abhorrent to him.) Literary criticism was the supreme ‘life’ skill—‘a training of intelligence that is at the same time a training of sensibility’ (*Education* 38)—and was best practised in the communal and collaborative setting of the formal or informal classroom. ‘I don’t believe in any “literary values”’, Leavis argued, ‘and you won’t find me talking about them; the judgements the literary critic is concerned with are judgements about life’ (*Nor Shall My Sword* 97).⁷

It is ironic—or is it tragic?—that, for all Leavis’s implying ‘that critical judgments are tentative, reaching for assent which is always provisional’ (*During* 125) and for all his pedagogical emphasis upon collaboration, he should have been so personally intolerant of opposition, so hectoring, so self-righteous,⁸ so limited in his literary tastes, and more and more the prisoner of his own convictions and allegiances. ‘Though he claims that he invites no more than qualified, challenging assent’, wrote George Steiner in 1962, ‘Leavis has come to demand, perhaps unconsciously, complete loyalty to his creed. The merest doubt or deviation is heresy, and is soon followed by excommunication from the kirk’ (241). More often than not, this bloody-mindedness, modulating in his later years into contempt and abuse, is put down to what Leavis called the ‘obloquy, slander and worldly disadvantage’ he suffered at Cambridge over the course of his academic career (*Letters in Criticism* 84), where David Ellis rightly notes there was ‘a strong degree of class feeling between Leavis and his enemies’ (52). The same cannot be said of Leavis’s notorious attack on novelist and scientist C. P. [Charles] Snow in the wake of Snow’s famous Rede lectures on the *Two Cultures*, for as Guy Ortolano points out in a comprehensive socio-political analysis of the conflict looking at the fragmentation of post-war liberalism the two men shared a surprisingly similar social and economic background (1-27).

Even accepting the truth of Leavis’s Cambridge ostracisation, however, we are left with a criticism fissured by contradiction—one that espouses collaboration and the common pursuit while seemingly intolerant of any disagreement; one willing to concede the subjectivity and relativity of literary value—adumbrating and reinforcing ‘the role of the individual as the locus of all significant understanding or insight’ (MacKillop and Storer 153)—while manifesting ‘profound certainties about his own rightness’, ‘a sharp voice and an unaccommodating viewpoint’, to quote the otherwise sympathetic William Walsh (18). Leavis was fond of quoting Dr Johnson’s famously prioritising critical deliberation over critical dogmatism (he would use it as his epigraph to *The Great Tradition*), but dogmatic and authoritarian was precisely what he frequently became: ‘academic freedom seems

⁷ ‘[I]n Leavis’s critique of the ‘academic ethos’ of Oxford’, writes Carol Atherton, ‘is a sense that the specialist nature of academic literary criticism undermined its capacity to be useful’ (149).

⁸ I am conscious that Leavis’s supporters are likely to disagree, and will quote David Ellis: ‘Leavis was not himself a sanctimonious prick, but he may have had a tendency to produce them’ (18).

to reduce itself to finding new ways of agreeing with Leavis's diagnosis of society' (Samson 82). While preaching a 'reverent openness to life', he remained closed to so much.

With literary criticism asked to carry such ethical, educational, and existential responsibility, it is not surprising that Leavisism should have become sectarian and evangelical—and, with that, combative. 'Leavis inspired an urgent sense of mission' (Hilliard 2). Far from physically taking Cambridge outside Cambridge, and unlike William Empson and I. A. Richards, Leavis himself rarely ventured beyond the town and the university. Indeed, in more paranoid moments, he turned down invitations to lecture abroad because he was frightened of what excluding realignments might take place within the Cambridge English School in his absence—Anne Samson talks of 'his claustration in Cambridge' (5). His position at Cambridge was tenuous and his representativeness arguably paradoxical; as we saw in the opening quotation from *Two Cultures?*, he imagined himself and his journal, *Scrutiny*, to be quintessentially Cambridge, but at the same time felt isolated and alienated from the rest of his Cambridge colleagues.

Leavisism, on the other hand—the critical practices and terminology he employed; his narrow canon and the obligation to separate sheep from goats; the cultural convictions about mass civilisation that he entertained—was a national and even global affair, spreading 'into the remoter parts of the Commonwealth—India, South Africa, Sydney and even West Africa', to quote M. C. Bradbrook (Thompson 37). When Leavisism travelled outside Cambridge, it did so conscious of itself as a 'missionary movement' (During 132) countering a prevailing hegemony in English studies, a hegemony which undoubtedly belonged to the Oxford School of English. 'Leavis and the Leavisites saw themselves as oppositional', writes Michael Wilding: 'They opposed the way English Literature was taught generally at university. They opposed the preoccupation with history and literary history, who wrote what when, what followed what'. The Oxford curriculum was more inclusive and capacious, hypostasised by textual and bibliographical studies and organised on historical principles; the Oxford ethos was distrustful of quasi-religious enthusiasm and the sense of 'vocation' characteristic of the Leavisite enterprise.

The story I want to tell in this essay can be organised around this antagonism between Oxford scholarship and Cambridge (specifically Leavisite) criticism, though it would be wrong to reduce it to an institutional or ideological force field and underestimate the personalities and choices of the individuals involved. It concerns the cell of Leavisite critics briefly established at the University of Sydney in the mid-1960s, not long before I arrived to begin my undergraduate degree there in 1970, occasioning a disruption whose memory informed disciplinary and departmental politics for at least twenty to thirty years afterwards.

The story begins with the appointment of Samuel (Sam) Goldberg (1926-1991) as Challis Professor of English Literature in 1963. Goldberg had done his undergraduate work at the University of Melbourne immediately after the war (1945-1947), where he lectured and tutored for four years before undertaking a B.Litt. at Oxford in the early 1950s. In 1952, while Goldberg was at Oxford, Leavis published a selection of his essays from *Scrutiny* (and elsewhere) under the title *The Common Pursuit*, from a phrase of T. S. Eliot's identifying 'the common pursuit of true judgement' as the aim of literary criticism. *The Common Pursuit* remains to this day a powerful and varied set of essays ranging from mature and cogent readings of individual poems and plays (like *The Dunciad* and *Measure for Measure*) and individual authors (like Hopkins and Swift), through revisiting the controversy generated by his own reading of Milton in *Revaluation*, to general essays defending the methodological independence of literary criticism (like the rejoinder to René Wellek, 'Literary Criticism and Philosophy', from which I have quoted). Goldberg was converted. Leavis's urgent, evaluative approach to literature and the Arnoldian 'high seriousness' with which he went about his judgmental business appealed to Goldberg, and would soon become characteristic of his own critical and pedagogical practice, which would be characterised by 'a fundamentalism in cultural matters, predicated on absolute conviction, akin to the doctrinal certainties of Calvinism' (Reimer 118). While respectfully differing in his choice of exemplary literary texts—Goldberg's first monograph, *The Classical Temper* (1961), for example, was a study of James Joyce, whose *Ulysses* Leavis had dismissed as 'a dead end, or at least a pointer to disintegration' in *The Great Tradition* (26)—Goldberg was impressed by Leavis's critical discrimination and cultural and pedagogical convictions, and he determined to emulate them when he returned to teach English in Australia. The ultimate success of this determination is hard to measure accurately with so many different English departments—let alone individual academics—working within different intellectual and pedagogical traditions. Some scholars, however, like Terry Collits, have argued that Leavisism would eventually establish a hegemonic hold over Australian disciplinary practice in a way that it was unable to do within Britain itself, making the term 'Goldbergism' more appropriate for the Australian phenomenon (25).

Goldberg returned to Australia in 1953, to the University of Melbourne—where he lectured in Renaissance literature, revived the University Literature Club, and established himself as a distinguished Leavisite critic, founding the *Melbourne Critical Review* on the model of *Scrutiny* in 1958 (later entitled the *Critical Review*, which Goldberg continued to edit until his death in 1991). The provenance and priorities of the Melbourne journal are clear from an editorial Goldberg wrote in 1961: 'The only proviso—one implicit in our title—is that we seek *critical* essays, in which literary scholarship or history is absorbed and given relevance in a living response to literature *as literature*' (2). He was soon able to gather round him a

coterie of young Leavisite scholars, including Margaret (Maggie) O'Keefe and Thomas (Jock) Tomlinson, who as a married couple accompanied and remained loyal to Goldberg through the vicissitudes of his university career.

The publication of Goldberg's monograph on Joyce, along with some trenchant articles in the *Melbourne Critical Review*, established him as a major critic and qualified him for the Challis Chair at the University of Sydney, which he was awarded in 1963, arriving from Melbourne with the Tomlinsons in tow and determined to take advantage of Sydney's generous recruiting policy by making appointments designed to establish a Leavisite ethos and curriculum. In the words of Michael Wilding:

The Leavisite project laid great stress on education. The analogy with the Jesuits was often drawn, the get them young and you've got them for life principle. But until they had got them young, Sam had to make do with what off-the-peg Leavisites he could find. Once he had got the system set up he would breed his own. Until then it was a matter of imports. There were overseas imports like me. And there were interstate imports from Melbourne where he had previously taught.

It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that these were the days of the 'God professor', when departments characteristically carried only one professorial chair, which was awarded for the duration of the incumbent's career and carried with it effectively autocratic control of the curriculum and of hiring and firing. The proliferation of personal chairs and democratic decision-making came later, though the degree of professorial consultation differed from department to department. Sydney was Goldberg's first opportunity to design and impose a Leavisite regime—to design a curriculum privileging a 'great tradition' along the narrow lines that Leavis conceived it (for the sake of cultural survival, as he would insist) and to make criticism rather than scholarship central to pedagogical and assessment practice.

'Goldberg was an exacting teacher who brought an uncompromising rigour to his discussions with students whom he was training to be a new breed of critic. Many former students from the 1950s went on to distinguished careers', writes Jane Grant in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. What she goes on to say, however, goes to the heart of Goldberg's problem: 'others felt intimidated or overlooked'. Whether you were a poet or a novelist, a critic or a student of literary criticism, Leavisism was all about establishing which side you were on. It was an ideology and methodology of differentiation and division, and one that Goldberg practised extremely well—which is to say, divisively. He never managed to convince other members of the Sydney department of the virtues of his new Leavisite regime, nor (by all accounts) did he take the opportunity or the time to try. Instead, as his

implacable opponent Andrew Reimer has written, 'Goldberg and his supporters' stuck to their sense of mission, seeing 'a literary education as a powerful moral and ethical instrument in a debased world':

They were intent on employing literary culture in the service of personal, social and perhaps even political amelioration. They attempted to persuade their students that exposure to great literature would somehow refine not merely their taste or aesthetic sensibilities but their moral capacities as well. Consequently they were vigilant against what they saw as the corrosive influence of poor, second-rate or expedient writing. Great flights of literary imagination had, in their view, the capacity to protect the world from barbarism. (169)

For two years, then, Goldberg presided over a divided English department. On his side, he had the Tomlinsons and a handful of new hires: John Wiltshire and Howard Jacobson (both from Leavis's Cambridge college, Downing), Michael Wilding (Oxford), along with Germaine Greer and four or five others brought up from Melbourne. Leading the other, 'Oxford movement' was G. A. (Gerry) Wilkes—who had been overlooked for the Challis Chair when it was offered to Goldberg—with support from Andrew Reimer, Bill Maidment, Ron Dunlop, Geoffrey Little, Thelma Herring, Jim Tulip, John Burrows, and others, some of whom (like Wilkes) had done postgraduate work at Oxford.⁹ (I name only the people who subsequently became my own teachers and colleagues or with whom I am familiar, some of whom have written at length on the affair.)

More often than not it was the students who were made to suffer for the mutual intolerance that prevailed in the staff room. Clever students were robbed of 1st-class Honours degrees because Goldberg considered them badly taught by the other side of the department, for example. On the other hand, an older colleague of mine at the Australian National University recalls submitting an essay on John Donne for his English tutorial at Sydney during the Goldberg era and being failed because his tutor was (he said) sick of reading rehashed, Leavisite garbage. (A history student who subsequently became a distinguished historian, my colleague had never heard of F. R. Leavis and remains puzzled to this day at his tutor's taking such offence.) The experience was not purgatorial for all the students, it should be said. Some, especially those who adopted or were adopted by the Leavisite faction, recall weekend group excursions to the Blue Mountains and the genuine pleasures of a life dedicated to 'the common pursuit of true judgement' through reading and literary criticism.

⁹ As John Docker points out, the original members of the Sydney English department who resisted the imposition of a new regime by the new Challis Chair had been educated under a different intellectual tradition from the Leavisite one Goldberg transplanted from Melbourne (130).

After two years and a series of furtive, factional meetings at pubs and other places within walking distance of the University of Sydney, in 1965 there was open insurrection. In an unprecedented move, Wilkes managed to persuade the University's Professorial Board to split the Department of English into two distinct streams—effectively into two departments—with English A adopting a more restricted, Leavisite curriculum and involving the training in intensive interpretation and evaluative argument characteristic of its practical criticism, and English B offering a more inclusive, literary historical survey and culminating (in its English IV Honours year) in a compulsory course on 'English Scholarship', including Palæography, Bibliography, and Editorial Procedure. 'The students looked on with a mixture of alarm and cynical bemusement', according to Riemer, 'knowing that they would soon have to choose between the two factions, the two courses, the two radically opposed ways of going about the business of English studies' (177).

The experiment, if we can call it that, did not last long, though as I suggested earlier what David Ellis calls 'the aftershocks of the great Sydney split' would be felt in the department at Sydney for many years to come (103). In the following year, 1966, Goldberg sought and gained the Robert Wallace Chair of English at the University of Melbourne, taking the Tomlinsons with him back to his alma mater. There is no need for us, as there was for them, to take sides. It is clear from all the accounts, no matter how prejudiced or interested (in the old sense), that there were positive, indeed admirable aspects to both approaches. Michael Wilding, having been recruited by Goldberg, came to reject the authoritarianism of his leadership and support a more pluralist approach to the discipline: 'Leavisism in power was not the same as Leavisism in opposition. In opposition it had a dialectical, leavening effect on the system within which it operated. In power it became totalitarian'. However, Wilding never lost sight of the value of what Leavisism had to offer:

I was far from unsympathetic to much of the Leavisite position... They believed that literature mattered. In an environment of cynicism and facetiousness and materialism and worship of Mammon, that was not a common belief. The Leavisites took a strong moral line, and coming from a working class puritan position, so did I. They set themselves against the deadening tedium and time serving of the older universities' way of life, and so had I.

It is part of the paradox that was Leavisism that its unapologetically élitist construction of culture and its contempt for the sensual and intellectual diversions of the masses was profoundly attractive to 'lower-middle class and working class students who felt excluded from the patrician traditions and styles of the older universities' (to quote Wilding again), students 'who loved literature, who needed

to believe that a study of literature was serious work, not ruling class relaxation or dilettantism'. Its communal activities, moreover, offered a shared literacy, a sense of purpose, and hope. Wilding was not the only one to see that the alternative of 'a Sydney literary culture in which a combination of old-style Oxford scholarship with a loose laissez-faire cynicism had taken on the semblance of an adequate philosophy' was in fact no adequate philosophy at all (Wiltshire 420).

My own experience as an undergraduate in the very diverse University of Sydney English department four years later was of a blend of both, or rather all, these priorities, though after the fashion of the department my destination for postgraduate study after taking out an Honours degree was Oxford, with its compulsory Palæography and Bibliography. Some scholars sympathetic to Leavis had remained in the department after Goldberg's departure and were excellent teachers, dedicated to their students and more than willing to accommodate their different talents, tastes, and beliefs. This I admire as a matter of personality or character, as well as of pedagogy. Still, one question we are left with from this otherwise minor academic battle is how far Sam Goldberg's critical convictions—his allegiance to F. R. Leavis's brand of Cambridge criticism—can be blamed for his leadership style? John Wiltshire thinks not: 'Leavis himself, or so I have been told, looked upon this little institutional history of sorrowful interest with an appropriate dispassion. It had, after all, little to do with him' (420). Or did it?

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