

Two Cultures

Can a Card-Carrying Leavisite Endorse Snow's Benthamism without Doublethink?

Notes towards a resolution

1. The Snow/Leavis argument (1959, 1962) has been construed as about Culture and Cultures – only one, two, or many. That is a red herring. It is really about the impact, positive and negative, of technology, of 'the modern world', in a broad sense. And behind that lies possibly a metaphysical dispute.
2. Snow's radical concern, the real thrust of his talk (which Leavis dismisses as 'crass Wellsianism') is the modernization of backward economies through technology. He believes there will be, not merely misery, but major and world wide conflict, one way or another, if backward economies are not given the benefits of modernization. He believes that, with radical large scale commitment, economies and cultures can genuinely be transformed and, indeed, that it is catastrophic not to do this. He is, in his own mind, pointing out the obvious, and mandatory.
3. Leavis's radical concern is the mediation of past ways of life, - which he believes possessed a degree of craft community which has been lost, and which was congenial to the emergence of great art, embodying living uses of language, - mediating them to the present. His analysis, a very powerful one, maintains that the march of mass civilisation, underwritten by radical technological change, has destroyed this, and that the task of literary people is to maintain what we have of culture based on those conditions to epochs without those conditions. Of course there is a paradox in that, which means Leavis becomes more and more desparate in the last part of his life.
4. What he means by 'living language' is enactive language, as in this, which I shall discuss:

MARK ANTONY

The April 's in her eyes: it is love's spring,
And these the showers to bring it on. Be cheerful.

OCTAVIA

Sir, look well to my husband's house; and--

OCTAVIUS CAESAR

What, Octavia?

OCTAVIA

I'll tell you in your ear.

MARK ANTONY

Her tongue will not obey her heart, nor can
Her heart inform her tongue,--the swan's
down-feather,

That stands upon the swell at full of tide,
And neither way inclines.

[c.f., also <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Scrutiny-1936sep-00158>]

5. Snow's vision of social amelioration is clearly in the tradition of Bentham, and Leavis's in that of Coleridge. Snow's is quantitative and Leavis's in the tradition of Romantic Organicist, individuation based, thought, which makes him sensitive, and Snow insensitive, to the enactive dimension. So far we have an apparent metaphysical collision.
6. But there is a third concept of Tradition, which might be called Roman, and, in modern terms, nihilist. Leavis identifies it with Flaubert and Eliot. But he also finds it, clearly, in such writers as Ben Jonson, Marvell, Pope, Johnson, Byron, and Mark Twain. We can say that huge swathes of modern writing fit into this dimension. *This* argument would equally well accept Leavis's analysis of Mass Civilisation. We may say Leavis 'avoids' the fullness of this dimension, just as Eliot or Beckett 'avoid' the full organicist dimension caught, on occasion, by DH Lawrence. That is an internal argument within a tradition of quality. But 'Roman' is contingency based, whereas 'Organicist' is ultimately Platonic. (I shall touch on the work of Rupert Sheldrake in opposing scientific shibboleths in this connection.)
7. Both Tradition concepts suppose an immemorial wisdom, whereas the quantitative analysis of Benthamite Utilitarianism is 'modern', even naively so. Yet in another sense it has become the default. Leavis saw that, in Snow, it had become the unthinking status quo, and he could not stand it, just as Nietzsche could not stand it in John Stuart Mill. *This* is in fact what gives the collision its 'portentous' and iconic quality. But, if Snow is a portent, it is because he represents the new commonsense, and we must ask if the Leavisian vision - even Tradition in *both* its forms - does not need to *assimilate* this, rather than dismissing it?
8. It seems to me that, in the modern age, there is much writing - I think of Orwell's minor novels, like *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, - and also much film, which celebrate a modern 'just so-ness', sheer ordinary contingency. Nick Hornby and Howard Jacobson have something of this. Orwell recognised it in his own way in Henry Miller. It is in the early Eliot of *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*, and *Portrait of a Lady*, and *The Hollow Men*. Leavis recognises that this early Eliot overcomes 'dissociation of sensibility'. And yet it is sheer stark 'this is how it is'. We do not build cathedrals any more, but this is how art expresses itself in Snow's world, where technology is totally here to stay.
9. What Leavis's work takes us towards, is the recognition of *historicity* (not just tradition per se but continuity, as Leavis puts it) as needing to be re-incorporated in this 'this is how it is' of Snow's world. For that, Coleridge, Blake, Jane Austen, and DH Lawrence are indeed indispensable (Joyce and Proust also!). But it seems to me that this *can* be realised in 'Snow's World', - provided Snow is *commanded to transcend* the pure present. Accordingly, the relation of Leavis and Snow, *two* portents as indeed they are, and apparent antipodes, takes us back to the master mind of our entire epoch, GWF Hegel.....

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