

Memories of F. R. Leavis

Recorded by

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Memories of F. R. Leavis

*My memories of Leavis have been assisted by my diaries and letters from the 1940s and 50s. I have also included (italicised) at appropriate points some quotations from my brother's journals and letters. **Peter J. F. Matthews** went up to Downing to read English in 1944 at the age of 27 after some years in sanatoria suffering from tuberculosis. His arrival was delayed until November by the late approval of his doctor who, however, was keen on his "Cambridge experiment". In the event his health deteriorated in 1946 when he departed for an international students sanatorium in Leysin, Switzerland where he died on 26th November 1947.*

*Writing in *The Leavises: Recollections and Impressions*, edited by Denys Thompson (CUP, 1984) **D. W. Harding** in the final chapter called "No compromise", concluded his contribution, and the book, with the following paragraph:*

Recollections of a distant past, like these of mine, include distortions, misinterpretations and factual errors; anyone who believes otherwise about his reminiscences is being beguiled by his good intentions. What is exempt from these hazards of recall is the residue at the end of a lifetime, the feelings left. For me, they are gratitude—that above all—with deep respect and, in an uncertain way, regret. I am left half wishing he had been different enough not to have had to endure, and to cause, so much unhappiness; but half convinced that a different person could not have done the particular work he had to do in face of rampant cultural inflation and the debasement of literary currency by influential people and institutions.

I first encountered Dr Leavis in my brother Peter's letters to me after his arrival at Downing College in November 1944. Peter had long nourished hopes of reading English at Cambridge after several years in various sanatoria and had, at the age of twenty-seven, been considered fit enough to undertake a university degree course. Downing was chosen because it was known to have a special interest in English studies, but the name of Leavis was unknown to him until his arrival. Peter's enthusiastic response to Leavis is vividly portrayed in his Letters and Journals and led me to apply to read English at Downing when the war, and my release from national service, permitted; when too, a vacancy should arise after the admission of students with higher priority, longer war service and so on, than mine. The circumstances of my admission to Downing is given in the Cambridge chapter of my memoirs, of which this is a distinct but inseparable part.

In the event it was October 1948 before I was offered a place, a year after Peter's death in a Swiss sanatorium. I joined about two dozen students who were divided into four manageable groups for seminar purposes. Two of these groups were of "Returned Men", that is, students who had been on six-month short courses at the beginning of their national service. The other two groups consisted of men who had either completed national service or had not yet had that experience. My school friends, John Coleman and Malcolm Ruel, who had been a year below me at school, also arrived at the same time, having both sat the Downing Scholarship and been awarded a Major Scholarship and an Exhibition respectively. (There was a link here with Peter: the English master, Basil Harvey had been advised by him on what to get his two scholarship candidates to read.)

Our first view of Dr Leavis [FRL] revealed a spry, shortish man, with tanned, lined face, bald-headed with a longish fringe of dark hair, shirt collar wide open, surmounted by a welcoming smile and alert, dark eyes. He had arrived at his room in the

middle of the Wilkins building on his bike, his gown stuffed in the basket on the front. We all gathered for an initial meeting and introduction to the course. "I am supposed to recommend you to attend lectures," he said. "I suggest you try them and decide which will be useful. My advice would be that any lecture which invited you to 'take it all down' is almost certainly not worth taking down at all." Peter's first encounter with FRL was recorded in his Journal dated 4th November 1944:

Mr Cuttle, whom I saw at 11 a.m., sent me off to introduce myself to Dr Leavis. Now here is the first real mind I've come into contact with, a sensitive spirit with a passion for good writing and the divine itch to exercise judgment. To look at he is smallish and untidy but far from insignificant. At most I should give him forty years, although his top emerges bald from a dark furze of side-hair. [He was actually forty-nine in 1944.] The note of intelligence is struck at once by the black eyes in the thin face. His present untidiness and air of distraction has ample reason in the illness of his wife, although I guess that the open-collared shirt revealing a triangle of reddish breast is a matter of personal preference. We talked—or rather, he did—of the importance of reading the critics, among whom he rated T. S. Eliot very high. I protested at Eliot's unfairness to Marlowe. Oh, yes, he said, he doesn't understand the Elizabethans. Virginia Woolf he considered a disappointing daughter of her father. About lectures he was quite cavalier, indicating that they are largely a waste of time. He would abolish them, replace them by discussion circles. He spread his hands. "But I'm not the local Mussolini and never shall be."

He was referring to the University lectures organised by the English faculty and held at various sites in the town. For College tuition each of the four groups sat in FRL's room once a week and we came together on a Saturday morning in a larger room in College for "dating" sessions, where we were invited to attribute passages of verse or prose to its period and, if possible, to its author. Duplicated sheets were handed out, and collected at the

end for further service in subsequent years (as distinct from the *printed* sheets issued at his University lectures). Our small groups also visited Ian Doyle in his room for tutorials in mediæval and Shakespeare studies. Doyle had been an undergraduate with my brother and was working on his Ph.D. An ascetic Roman Catholic, he was a stimulating teacher whose tutorials we looked forward to each week. In April 1949 I wrote: "It was amusing to see Doyle and FRL together, the former lean and pale-faced, FRL a rich, ripe golden-brown, the Easter sun having ripened him even more nobly than he was before."

The dating sessions were a stimulating parlour game which tested our previous reading, our "intrinsic knowledge" as Coleman called it, but also were a privileged insight into FRL's critical genius. Some memorable moments (or at least "remembered" ones) include the following. On a passage of high-flown Victorian prose FRL said: "Come on, who, apart from Winston, could have written this?" Someone offered Macaulay, correctly. "Yes; a style in which it's impossible to tell the truth." Of another passage, John Clay said it suggested to him a piece from a women's magazine. "Ah, there Clay, I'm afraid you have the advantage of me."

FRL's seminars were largely monologues though it was possible to interrupt the flow and we were sometimes invited to do so. They were, however, an experience in themselves. It is true that they stemmed from the pages of *Revaluation* with occasional interpolations since that 1936 critical masterpiece. But from the depths of the orange loose-covers of his arm chair, FRL communicated to us his deep enthusiasm for literature and his fine critical discriminations. **Peter** recorded, (6 November 1944):

Dr Leavis's supervision this morning, he uttering his enthusiasm for Ben Jonson. I need no converting. He said good things on Marvell—"urbane rather than Puritan: man of European culture who wasn't violently partisan".

Of Pope he would say, after quoting “Ask you what provocation I have had? / The strong antipathy of good to bad”—“it wasn’t true but it was significant that he could say it.” He recommended Peacock as a novelist one should read in the bath. Other asides of his tend to come to mind when a chance reference arises in one’s reading or in conversation. Of *The Way of all Flesh* FRL recalled Quiller-Couch’s astonishment at its author appearing in the syllabus of a course on “The English Moralists”. “Samuel Butler, Samuel Butler! How can he be a moralist? A man who turned against his own father!” We were introduced to classical architecture and landscape design with Pope’s Epistle to Lord Bathurst: “Whose ample lawns are not ashamed to feed / The milky heifer [*intake of breath*] and deserving steed.” The heifer would give milk, the steed had served its master, possibly in war, and was “deserving”. Of classical architecture FRL would say that Downing’s was quite the most beautiful court in Cambridge. He could, I have said, be diverted. He was speaking of Augustan “urbanity” and I interjected, “Where does Swift come in?” and we were treated to a summary of “The Irony of Swift” FRL’s essay in *Determinations*.

My own journal entry for 14th January 1949 reads:

—Today the term’s work began with a supervision from Frankie [as we used to refer to FRL at that time]—which, though stimulating are dangerous in that they do not demand active participation by the class, whatever he may think—followed by a two-hour session with Doyle. We had anticipated these with horror, for his supervisions of half that length had tended to be soporific, but his “dating” session was actually very stimulating. They were more useful than F’s because we compulsorily took part: F took our co-operation too much for granted.

There is some contradiction in my account at the time and my memory of the respective supervisions of Doyle and of FRL.

Two weeks later my journal observed:

—In making the point that literary criticism has become too much confused with social criticism he said that if he were to attack a poem by Edith Sitwell she would immediately bring a libel action—defamation—and subpoena every reputable critic in England and America to come to her support: they would all swear it was great poetry. “But then,” added F, “I am being humourless perhaps.”

In a letter to me, dated 8th November 1944, **Peter**, repeating much that was in his journals, had introduced Leavis to me, thus:

I’m fortunate in coming to Downing because it puts me into direct contact with Dr Leavis, my director of studies. Have you come across the name F. R. Leavis? Chatto & W. have published his various critical works: “Revaluation”, “New bearings in English Poetry” and others. Also he is editor of a literary monthly—or possibly quarterly—called “Scrutiny”, published here. I went up to see him on Saturday, the day after my arrival He holds Eliot in high respect as a critic “Of course, I quarrel with him,” he said. “And have done in public and private for many years: but it’s the quality of mind in Eliot that’s important.” What I shall get from Leavis is contact with a mind that loves literature, that has wit and knows what’s what in writing from exercising style himself.

He might not have used the phrase “exercising style” had he actually read anything by FRL at that time. Nearly two years later on the eve of his departure for Switzerland—and when he was further into his explorations of Catholicism, he wrote: *FRL writes gracelessly because of his inhibitions. He is delivering the last of the Puritan sermons but has denied himself the privilege of mentioning God.*

The other major part of the Leavis experience was the University lectures available to students in general. In October

1948 his relatively lowly status in the Faculty led to his lectures being given in one of the older buildings on the mainly science Downing Street site. We queued outside until the “farmers” (Land Economy students, future or actual landowners or agents) had finished their lecture. Then we crowded into a large, steeply tiered lecture theatre. On one occasion the queue was entertained by the sight of the Bunterish figure of Maurice Hussey (another of Peter’s contemporaries) asking in his high-pitched voice if this was where Dr Leavis was lecturing.

Inside we were enthralled. Printed sheets were handed out with passages of verse for the course on Practical Criticism. (These are reprinted in *F. R. Leavis: Essays and Documents*, edited by Ian MacKillop & Richard Storer, 1995, pp.95–116, although my set has a few differences from those.) It was poetry in the first term and prose the following term when new sheets were handed out. How to convey that experience? The slight, gowned figure, occasionally moving his neck from the unaccustomed constriction of a tie, spoke with an authority which transcended his physical appearance. His voice with its flat Cambridge accent (we all tried to imitate it) was vibrant and compelling as he read verse with great sensitivity even when he was disintegrating the poem. These lectures appeared in print in *The Living Principle* 1975, although some had appeared in *Scrutiny* and earlier writings: the analysis of Arnold’s sonnet on Shakespeare, for example, was included in *Education and the University*. What the printed page cannot convey was the *dramatic* quality of his lectures. They were practised performances with gesture and pointed phrasing and significant pauses. Indeed in *The Living Principle* FRL acknowledged “this is the kind of analysis where the pen is peculiarly at a disadvantage as compared with the voice— . . .” (p.116).* There were themes to be explored: “realised imagery”

* In this particular it is interesting to read the text of FRL’s lecture *Reading out poetry* which he gave at The Queen’s University of Belfast in 1972, with all the hesitations, colloquialisms and asides which are normally omitted in print: published 1979.

was one, and exemplified by Arnold's failure to realise the image of Shakespeare "planting his steadfast footsteps in the sea"—at this he stood back and went stamp, stamp on the rostrum—"You see." The words are there for their alliterative value, Arnold hasn't thought through the meaning. FRL said: "It is wrong to think of Shakespeare as a giant Olympian figure demanding our awestruck reverence from below: on the contrary he is a close intimate figure who is disturbing: he seems to know so much more about us than we know ourselves." Shelley's *Cenci* was illustrated by two passages, together with their unconsciously imitated Shakespearean originals: "Put out the light and then put out the light" from *Othello* where Shelley has a candle light "On whose edge devouring darkness hovers," an unrealised image (this was not included in MacKillop & Storer); and Claudio's "Ah but to die and go we know not where" in *Measure for Measure* becomes "Oh / My God! Can it be possible I have / To die, so suddenly?" etc. He prefaced his analysis of the *Measure for Measure* passage with the aside "Incomparably the greatest of Shakespeare's plays." A former school-fellow of mine, sitting next to me, murmured, "I wish he wouldn't say things like that." I agree: it *was* naughty because he was raising a wholly different question from the use of tactile and other imagery which the passage was illustrating. On another occasion when FRL was demolishing another of Shelley's poems, or rather Shelley's self-indulgence, John Clay was sitting next to a girl who was in tears: "What's the matter?" he asked, "he's right isn't he?", "Yes, that's the trouble" she whimpered. My adolescent preference was for A. E. Housman who also received some negative attention: "And also I remember / How Dick would hate the cold"—who's Dick? asked FRL.* Some of the poems featured in the lectures had been in I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* which was familiar to me and revealed an interesting variant on Richards' own commentary and on those of the students in that pioneering exercise. Leavis

* There is a comment on the "Who's Dick?" aside in MacKillop and Storer, p. 120.

told us that he had been one of the students in Richards' classes; he mentioned Mansfield Forbes, of Clare, as another.

Auden came in for criticism for his obscurity, the coterie allusions. He asked us to think about the meaning of the poem "Our hunting fathers" which he would deal with the following week. Few of us, I think, understood them to be *our* huntin', shootin', & fishin' fathers, not having that kind of background.

The prose analyses, given in the more respectable Mill Lane lecture rooms, were introduced with the observation that prose was more difficult to treat in short passages since verse works by compression and prose by expansion. He also noted that there was no equivalent to the distinguishing terms "verse" and "poetry". However the use of language is significant and reveals qualities even in short passages: Conrad *sees* in a way that tells us we lack observation in comparison.

I have said that FRL's lectures were dramatic (as distinct from rhetorical—we went to "Dadie" Rylands for that) and well-rehearsed despite the apparent spontaneity of tone. They could even be called "artful", in both senses of the word. I happened to catch a lecture two years running, in his "Critics and Critical Theory" course. At the end of one of the lectures he was saying: "I think you will find this in either Beddoes or Darley [leafing rapidly through the *Oxford Book of English Verse* and looking up at the clock as it approached the end of the hour] er, Beddoes? No, [shutting the book] it must have been Darley!" Well, at least he had made the point that there was nothing to choose between Beddoes and Darley (Beddoes whom I had otherwise only met in an essay by Aldous Huxley).

In a letter dated 2nd December 1944, **Peter** had written:

Leavis is a storm-centre. He stands for definiteness and precision, of a kind that is either admired or denounced. The danger is that his students tend to become Leavis-stooges, placeable by their jargon and method immediately they open their mouths. He is anti-Romantic and analytical, has a grande passion for Pope. So

that it did look to begin with, as if I had come to a man who would fortify me in my own prejudices. But I now see glimpses of welcome divergences. Milton, of course. Leavis, I gather is one of the leaders in the anti-Milton movement. I'm waiting now for the return of my essay, contrasting Milton and Dryden, in which I use Milton to show up Dryden in his second-rateness. For Leavis, urbanity, poise, wit and strength are the literary qualities; and very good ones too: within his particular scope I hope to get something of value from him, but hardly expect to become his echo.

FRL's other major achievements and addressed to a wider world outside Cambridge were the books and especially the quarterly review *Scrutiny*. Although four editors are listed it was effectively edited only by F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, although Queenie's name never appeared as an editor. H. A. Mason who was on the list (with L. C. Knights and D. W. Harding) appeared on the Downing scene at the end of 1949, replacing Doyle (who left for a post at Durham University library in 1950) as the additional supervisor. He did supply, as Doyle had done, the direct teaching, essays and tutorials that FRL's other activities had precluded. Mason was different. Where FRL was incisive, direct, precise in his use of words, Mason was expansive, affable, allusive, sometimes downright incomprehensible, with his tailed-off sentences, his assumption that we knew what he meant and would not be so obtuse as to need it all spelled out. (When it was reported some years later that Mason was off on a lecture tour to various universities, I suggested he would be followed by groupies, at which Geoffrey Strickland added "waiting for the end of the sentence"). Harold Mason merits a memoir to himself and will only be considered here in relation to FRL. One such memory was the occasion, as we were leaving a "Dating" session when I asked Mason why they had never collected a *Scrutiny* of Shakespeare [from the essays on different plays contributed by several hands over the years]: "Ah yes," said Mason with a characteristic hesitation, "that would be, a good, um, . . ." FRL,

on the other side of Mason cut in: "The problem is that the authors want them for their own purposes." A characteristic decisiveness.

Leavis has been criticised for not "teaching", for the monologue seminar, for lack of individual tuition. He did in fact mark essays submitted to him, with treasured comments in the margins (such as, for example, a comment on Chaucer's verse as "nervously fine"). However, my defence would be that there is more than one way of being a good teacher, of which his was inspiring a life-long love of the subject and a suggestive intelligence which planted seeds which it was up to us to nurture both as students and subsequently. His written style entailed sub-clauses and parentheses intended to clarify exactly the meaning, the nuances which would otherwise, in speech, be conveyed by gesture. He was not unlike the later James in this respect and similarly requiring close attention. This is not the place to comment on FRL's numerous writings even up to that date—1948 was the year of *The Great Tradition* most of which had already appeared in *Scrutiny*. However, I did ask FRL if he had seen Trilling's review of his new book in the *New Yorker*. He had, but although he admitted that the review had done no harm, he was quite agitated by Trilling's point that FRL had rather overstated his case against Bloomsbury. I was rather shocked by his reaction because it was quite the most intelligent review that had appeared, yet FRL picked him up on a minor point and intended to write to him privately. But Trilling was quite right. It was true that "Bloomsbury" was worse than Trilling realised but FRL was not doing his argument any good by insisting on it so incessantly.

In Cambridge "Leavism" and "Leavisites" were a recognised brand, possibly a force. Peter, writing in War-time, referred to FRL as the "underground movement", but by 1948 he was emerging above the surface. The Leavisites were not restricted to Downing although some of us found ourselves in a missionary

rôle, whether worthy or not. As a member of the University English Club committee in my second year (and secretary in my third) I was the “token” Leavisite and found myself representing the “Master” on occasions, notably at the pre-lecture sherry party for the visiting speakers. The most memorable of these encounters was with Alan Pryce Jones, editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*. (MacKillop records this in his biography of Leavis.) I had been prompted, in advance, by Mason, to ask Pryce-Jones why the *TLS* didn’t review *Scrutiny*, as they did, after all, review a number of relatively insignificant quarterlies. In a suitable pause in the conversation I took my opportunity. “Mr Pryce-Jones why don’t you review *Scrutiny* in the *TLS*?” (There was a palpable silence in the room.) “We have done, you know, from time to time,” was the urbane reply. “Not recently, surely?” I hazarded daringly. “No,” he drawled, “we consider it well-enough known among its subscribers.” I was greatly relieved when Milton Grundy (from Caius) said “*Scrutiny* is practically orthodox in Cambridge nowadays.” This exchange was duly reported to FRL and precipitated a virulent correspondence between him and the *TLS*.

Most of my fellow students had given up on the English Club, devoting their services to Downing’s own English Club, the Doughty Society. Some of my friends took the usual route from coffee-boy, to secretary, to chairman in successive terms, and most of the speakers were very good value. W. W. Robson from Oxford was one, and Danby who spoke on *the Shakespearean Dialectic* subsequently published in *Scrutiny*. It was after my time when Geoffrey Strickland was chairman that an event occurred which caused some mirth. I think the speaker was L. C. Knights. Mason was in the front row, FRL in the row behind him. As Mason started to light his pipe, his eye still bent on the speaker, he inadvertently put the still lighted match back in the matchbox. Whereupon the whole box burst into flames in his hand. FRL was heard to say, “Damn the man, he’s let off a bomb!”. The speaker

mildly observed: "I've never seen that done before." Geoffrey had the embarrassment of sitting in the front and trying to stifle his recurrent giggles.

FRL was personally courteous to his students and knew who we all were. It was characteristic that he should have attended the funeral of Ward Bowyer, an American student who had been shot down and badly burnt while flying with the R.A.F. We were gratified to see him there on a cold February day, his long overcoat and his academic gown, and even carrying a "square". He looked quite medieval, especially from the back, with his bald head and thick fringe of flowing black hair over his collar.

We were invited to tea at their house and met the formidable Queenie. My contemporary note dated 13th November 1949 reads as follows:

I was invited to tea at the Leavises yesterday. The other guests were Marius [Bewley], H. A. Mason . . . John Coleman, Reg Jinks and three others (one of them a Malay), Marius said afterwards that it was quite the pleasantest tea he'd had at Queenie's and certainly we were more satisfied than Malcolm was last week. When *he* went they all sat quietly in their seats while someone whom they didn't know argued with Frank about Lawrence; but yesterday the conversation ranged widely and we all contributed. The youngest child, Robin, aged six, was a delightful boy—terribly affectionate. Marius said he'd seen him lifting up his father's hand and kissing it. Queenie is a terrific talker—a dark little woman in horn-rimmed spectacles, plainly dressed, talking incessantly—even when other people are talking, she can be heard shooting out her rapid sentences to someone across the room. But the curious thing is she was always worth listening to. She was talking about Henry James, Hawthorne, *Partisan Review*, George Orwell, Huxley, Gide, Mauriac, E. M. Forster, Peggy Guggenheim, home-made cakes (which were excellent), her refusal to wear a hat ("I've only bought one since I was married and that was to return a call from a Master's wife. I

bought gloves, handbag, hat all new, and when I called she was out”) etc. Astonishing vitality she must have—quite apart from bringing up three children.* The elder daughter Kate (about 9 or 10 I should think) is a very happy looking girl, who looked in the room two or three times, smiled radiantly at everyone and disappeared. We all enjoyed it very much.

Robin Leavis featured charmingly in a story I was told in February 1951. T. S. Eliot had gone to tea with the Leavises and Robin was introduced to him and the conversation went like this:

“How do you do, Lord Eliot?”

“No Robin,” said his father, “Not Lord Eliot, Mr Eliot.”

“Oh,” says Robin, “but they made that man David Cecil a Lord.”

In my last year I organised an English Club session at their house at which Queenie spoke on Hawthorne. Someone asked if we could smoke. “I suppose so, if you must”, replied QDL at which Peter Lienhardt murmured to me “No-one who had read Lord Chesterfield could be so ungracious.” No ash-trays of course: smokers used their turn-ups for the ash. I realise, writing in 2003 that this incident reads like a time-warp and probably a refusal would now be considered more appropriate, or indeed the question would probably not be asked. Students with turn-ups on their trousers would also be improbable today.

* We never saw Ralph, the infant prodigy. Presumably he was in his bedroom composing a symphony. In fact Ralph would have been away at school, at Dartington. The following year I recorded that I had sent Marius a card depicting James paying his debt to Hawthorne and I had drawn a cat at James’s feet and a mouse under Hawthorne. Marius had shown the card to the Leavises and Queenie had been most offended. “Does he think Hawthorne’s a mouse? Why has he put a mouse at Hawthorne’s feet?” etc. Marius reporting this said: “Dear Queenie, the Leavises are awfully nice but they lack the lighter touch in their humour.” I should explain that Marius was devoted to cats and had brought his two cats over from America with him, but he also liked mice and found their mutual incompatibility distressing. A propos Dartington, FRL once mentioned in a seminar, that he used to accompany Ralph across London when he returned to school to ensure the safety of a rather valuable violin. One of the tribulations of the experience was seeing Bertie Russell, whose son was also at Dartington, “parading up and down the platform at Paddington, smoking his pipe, his latest wife patting his shoulders.”

On the day I went down in June 1951 I called on FRL at Chesterton Hall Crescent and was treated to an account of the history of his rebuffs by the Cambridge establishment. "I said to Q, [Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch] 'you know I should have that lectureship,' 'Yes, but Tillyard won't like it.' 'Tillyard, Tillyard, what's Tillyard got to do with it? You're the Professor.' 'Yes, but Tillyard can be very difficult.'" The other *bête noir* was H. S. Bennett, FRL's senior at Emmanuel. FRL had returned from vacation to find his room had literally disappeared, just a brick wall. He received a letter (telegram?) from *Oxford* from Bennett telling him his teaching post at Emma had been terminated: "And I know for a fact that he was only in Oxford for that one day." Bennett, he said, made a four figure income from school examining: "his table piled high with scripts." He also claimed that his wife, Joan Bennett, had spies who reported if her students went to FRL's lectures. These were the early days in the 1930s and it was, of course, W. L. Cuttle (who was Senior Tutor when I came up) who invited FRL to a new home in Downing. All this was very flattering though I did wonder why he was wasting his time telling me all this. It clearly rankled inefaceably, even fifteen years later when FRL had an established position and had become chairman of the Faculty examining board.

Many of his *obiter dicta* come to mind over the years prompted by chance remarks or observations. "I'm not sure that I wouldn't rather re-read *Clarissa Harlowe* than re-read Proust." He was scathing about the Scott-Moncrieff translation, instancing the rendering of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* as *The Cities of the Plains*. He disapproved in general of Biography, but made an exception for George Crabbe's life of Crabbe written by his son, "clearly written with affection." He disapproved of Parody too, with particular contempt for H. G. Wells's of Henry James, and challenged us to offer acceptable parodies. I didn't quite have the courage to produce "Saggiarius" (Mrs Hugh Miller), whose war-

time parody of Kipling's *If* has stayed with me: "If you can keep your mouth shut while all about you / Are speaking of the buzz-bomb in their street" etc.

Several of us were Leavisites but some were resistant. Peter Wood, aspirant Stage Director, for one, would argue that he would prefer to raise the taste of the general public a little way than limit himself only to the best. More interestingly, John Coleman, who was a major scholar and quite the brightest of my contemporaries both at school and at Downing, had been torn by what FRL stood for and by his natural bent as a potential writer in the mould of, say, Aldous Huxley. In the event he achieved a kind of fame as a film and novel reviewer (and notoriety for a pornographic novel published in France) but his failure to make a serious contribution to literature is sometimes attributed to FRL's influence.

People in other Colleges were taught to scorn FRL, some discouraged from attending his lectures even as late as 1948. In our first term the English Club ran a session to discuss poems written by members which had been circulated in advance. One of the poems was called *Invitation to a Practical Crit*, written pseudonymously. The poem was a clever compilation of quotations from a number of English poets, not all of which we recognised. Some of us decided to go along and attempt a response. We left the discussion to others for a few minutes. John Coleridge I remember chuckling at "When love's affection cools". Eventually I said: "There's another quotation you might have used. It comes from *The Family Reunion*—"Get Downing to draw you a hot bath." The author I subsequently learnt was Tim Rogers of King's who was later President when I was secretary of the English Club and remained a friend till his death. Tim was an admirer of his supervisor, George "Dadie" Rylands and once asked him if he should go to Dr Leavis's lectures. "Oh yes, by all means," he had replied. "The trouble with Leavis is that he thinks literature is a Desert Island where you are only allowed eight

books.” This I was told only a few years ago and I regarded it as near enough to *touché* to be worth recording.

In August 1950 FRL gave a broadcast talk on the Third Programme, one of a series on D. H. Lawrence on the 20th anniversary of his death. I was on holiday and missed it but have the text reprinted in *The Listener*. When we returned in the new term we asked him how it had gone. “They were all very kind,” he said, “but they made me sit at a table and talk into the black box. ‘But I always walk about when I lecture’ I told them. ‘No you must sit in front of the microphone.’ ‘What do comedians do? They don’t sit still’ ” he had protested. He said that he had been invited to broadcast for the Open University but he had refused and felt that disembodied education was inimical to the University experience. (He probably didn’t appreciate the rôle of tutors and the summer schools although he was always insistent that community was fundamental to the idea of a University.)

By my third year Geoffrey Strickland had come up, having won a scholarship and having been my protégé. He shared a room with Morris Shapira with whom my wife and I also remained friendly for most of his short life. Both were very important Leavisites of the future, Geoffrey having written and broadcast on Leavis, Morris having been adopted as FRL’s assistant and potential (though not actual) successor. FRL supported Geoffrey’s attempt to hold a “Peace with China” meeting in Downing during the Korean War against a threat from “Boat Club hearties” to break it up. FRL offered his room and assured Geoffrey, “I can be useful in a rough-house.” In the event it passed off peacefully, the opponents cleverly attending the meeting in sufficient strength to get themselves voted on to the committee which proceeded to wind up the society.

A propos the English Club I recall a rather curious exchange I had with FRL. I had invited D. W. Harding to speak to the English Club and I asked FRL if he wanted to meet him while he was here. “I don’t think so,” he said. “Harding is a psychologist, you know. He tends to know more about one than one knows

oneself.” This sounded odd coming from FRL who always seemed so self-assured and who extolled the Duke in *Measure for Measure* as one who “above all things strove most to know himself.” Indeed FRL used to say “self-knowledge is the beginning of wisdom.”

Leavis occasionally invaded Oxford and a talk to the English Club there (in November 1949) was reported to me by my school friend, John Adams, as follows:

The Dr abstained from generalizations about his topic basing his observations on practical criticism methods with the inevitable sheet passed round & a large number of the inevitable poems—The Piano, Tears, Idle Tears & some Shelley—From the West Wind—& his favourite targets in the chapter on Shelley in Revaluations—the first book I bought in Oxford—the second was Beljame. He based his observations principally on Shelley in fact & much of the stuff was a repeat performance of that chapter. He indulged in some incidental cannonade at Miss Sitwell, Mr Waugh, Mr Greene, & Mr Huxley. Oh & Mr Connolly. Some delightful digs at Sir J. C. Squire but the meaty & rather tough surgery was kept for the Lawrence poem—his understanding of & appreciation of which was wonderful.—& poor Shelley.

To reduce Shelley to his rather unpleasant essentials & reserve your comment only for those essentials that are unpleasant is, in Oxford, an act likely to create panic—to do it in the J.C.R. of St. Hugh's is sacrilege—the ladies were hurt—one of them was very nearly in tears—the only time I saw her cheer up was when Dr Leavis was discussing the poem Q prints in the Oxford Book as “Remorse”, he suggested there was something in Shelley's personal life that warranted remorse—that she could understand. But for the rest, they laughed—he was very funny—they attended & they were horrified. I could not stay for the questions—he talked till gone 10 o'clock. I had work to finish & so do not know how the articulate members of the audience reacted. I have no doubt there are a large number of people in Oxford who understand & agree with Dr Leavis's view of Shelley—but the reaction of a large number was pained resentment. One gentleman expressed surprise at his having

obtained a degree let alone a fellowship. Another horror at his having removed his tie halfway through the lecture—the shirt open to the navel. Probably the reaction of the body I went with is typical—he is a Shelley lover—Silence—he would say nothing.

John did go on to utter a reservation about FRL's own self-pity despite his justifiable assault on Shelley for his indulgence in that emotion.

After 1951

My links with FRL continued in a small way after I went down. I saw him in Cambridge on a number of occasions between 1951 and 1970 and also corresponded, initially to ask for references for my applications for library posts and lastly, in 1967, for my final employment as a lecturer at the College of Librarianship Wales in Aberystwyth. We (Celia and I) called on him on the occasion of my M.A. when we visited the house in Newton Road with our one-year old in her push-chair. Our conversation did not get very far: I recall that we discussed music and he ran down Benjamin Britten to my protests: "Ah but they say 'Bach and Britten!', 'Bach and Britten!'" We started to move as Alyson was getting restless, but as we emerged we found that Queenie and Kate and Robin had been looking out toys for her (indeed, after we left the house Robin came running down the road after us and pressed a spinning top into Alyson's hand). So we then spent another hour talking in the Conservatory. Queenie produced H. G. Wells's book *Games for Children* ("quite the best book he wrote" she said). We discussed children and education, Celia with the authority of an ex-Nursery School head teacher. We came on to the problem of Ralph and they cursed the effect of Dartington on him. They took away his violin, or wouldn't let him spend all his time on it. Ralph's problem was that he was so bright that his intellectual equals were too big but his contemporaries were so dull. There were legends about Ralph circulating in the College.

He is alleged to have challenged T. S. Eliot when he visited, asking him why he hadn't finished *Coriolan*. It is said that as a small child he was being taken on the bus to a concert in the town. "I'm afraid Ralph we're going to be late." "Oh that's all right, the first work is only X's first symphony and first works are always derivative," the ten?-year-old is alleged to have replied. We saw him only once in my time. It was his misfortune to be at home when the College Musical Society had put on, in the Hall, a concert by the Tiffin School Brass Ensemble. This had been a shattering experience from its 70 players. Lady Whitby (the Master's wife) had left at the interval and said she could still hear it in the Master's Lodge. Geoffrey's brother, Ted, up on a visit, had sweat pouring down his face. Ralph was there with Queenie, a limp looking lad of 16 or so. When FRL was asked later how Ralph had enjoyed the concert he replied: "Well you know, Ralph's real love is the harpsichord." Coincidentally the following week had featured Lady Jeans with her clavichord where even in the third row in the music room it was not easy to hear the instrument.

Other meetings with FRL included the opening of Downing College chapel in 1953 and the occasion in 1962 when he was guest of honour at the College Association when I was asked to propose the toast. My last personal encounter was in 1970 when he was a visiting professor at the University of Wales when I attended a seminar given to a group of totally silent students. His public lecture in Aberystwyth was also a memorable and fully attended occasion. My last letter, in 1978 was to congratulate him on the award of C.H. which elicited a note from Queenie, given below.

The encounters were always rewarding and threw further light on his personality. At the Downing Garden Party for the Chapel opening a small group of us surrounded him on the lawn. He had changed from his academics of the morning and was wearing a light seersucker suit. I observed two figures scarlet-clad in their gowns parading together up and down the lawn. They were Dr Tillyard, Master of Jesus, and Sir Sydney Roberts, Master of

Pembroke. I said: "There goes the President of the Library Association" [Roberts]. FRL said "There goes one of the most dangerous men in England: an expert on Dr Johnson and Dr Watson—at the same level." That, I think, was also the time when FRL reported that L. C. Knights had said to him that he couldn't do in Bristol what FRL was doing in Cambridge as the students weren't bright enough. (I suspect that this is something of a myth although entry into Cambridge had certainly become much more difficult academically than in my day, and less reliant on interview.) It is appropriate to recall here an incident while we were still undergraduates. I forget the details, possibly a visiting speaker to the Doughty Society. A group of us were talking in Geoffrey and Morris's rooms in College when FRL appeared quite late, about 10.45 pm perhaps. He had missed the talk as he had been in London speaking to students at, I suppose, University College. He said: "It is quite impossible you know. The students were very nice and I invited them to ask questions, but the chairman said they couldn't stay any longer as they had to go off and catch their trains." He was demonstrating by his and our presence the benefits of a residential University. Having spent my own postgraduate year at UCL I can confirm the social and intellectual limitations of the 9-5 University.

On another occasion in the early 60s he mentioned the portrait the College had commissioned of him. "I told them to put it alongside that of the other Downing eccentric, Dr Perkins, and put under it one word—*Exorcised!*" Accounts of his relations with the Master and Fellows appear in the letters to me, appended below.

On one of our visits to Cambridge we were crossing Downing on a Sunday morning. I had gone into the porter's lodge and Celia was waiting outside. FRL came across the lawn from his room and greeted her just as I was emerging from the lodge. I explained we were going to King's Chapel for the service. "As you know I regard King's as a centre of infection." But it was said with a smile.

The Downing Dinner was subsequently referred to by FRL as that dreadful dinner: "you were all right of course." In my speech I had spoken of my time at Downing as coinciding with FRL's increasing popularity among students and in the wider world. The choice of me as proposer of the toast was as surprising as it was coincidental. My chief at the National Library for the Blind, Dr Munford, lived in Cambridge and used to commute to London, usually with Stanley French, treasurer of the Downing Association. He had said that they were trying to find someone who would propose the toast for FRL as their guest of honour and Munford suggested my name. (Friends subsequently jested that it was because I was the only former pupil who hadn't quarrelled with him.) Unfortunately very few of his former pupils attended despite a special notice to them. I suppose it is true that the ethos suggested by *Old Boys* was inconsistent with that of *Scrutiny*. Indeed I was only involved on this occasion because I had attended Downing dinners in Manchester organised by Dr Henderson who was a voluntary judge at the Braille reading competitions I organised for the NLB's Northern Branch in Manchester and I owed him a quid pro quo. It may have been that visit to Cambridge that had taken place soon after the famous Richmond Lecture assault on C. P. Snow. The previous day I had been in London at a meeting of the Council of the NLB and was sitting next to Ian Parsons, the chairman of Chatto and Windus. As the meeting broke up I told Parsons that I would be seeing Leavis the next day. "Do give him my regards and tell him I hope to call on him at the end of the month." I duly passed on Parsons' message to FRL. "I'm afraid that won't be possible" he said, "my wife won't have him." Parsons had told me of his dilemma over the publishing of the *Two Cultures?* lecture. "Charles Snow," he said, "is another of my authors [although the only Snow book I have was not published by Chatto] and I felt I had to get his acquiescence. I explained that I had to publish it as pirate editions were about to come out in America." Of course

QDL had not forgiven Parsons for asking Snow's permission. FRL himself expanded on the publication of the lecture. He had been under pressure from *The Observer*: "a four-figure fee was being suggested." His hostility to the Sunday journalism would not permit such a lapse of integrity but he did allow *The Spectator* to publish it, though he was irritated by the drawings of Snow which accompanied his text.

About that time came the break with Downing. He gave me a graphic account of the meeting with the Fellows over the appointment of his successor. He wanted Morris Shapira who was already teaching in the College but hadn't a doctorate and hadn't published. The Fellows favoured someone from Trinity. "We met in the SCR: I gave my position and retired to my room. An hour or so later someone came to tell me they'd had a break for tea and invited me to join them. They were suspiciously friendly. I then went back to my room. The shadows lengthened and eventually I went to see what was happening. They'd all gone! They hadn't had the courage to face me."

In the early 60s Morris, Geoffrey, John Newton (of Clare) and others established the F. R. Leavis Lectureship Trust. FRL deprecated it for "getting money from impoverished school-teachers." In 1966 the same group started to publish *The Cambridge Quarterly* intended as a successor to *Scrutiny*. Leavis had given them his essay on *Anna Karenina* for the first issue. The second, however, published Newton's "Scrutiny's failure with Shakespeare" which FRL saw as a betrayal. Another "betrayal" was the appointment of Mason, who had fallen foul of Queenie, as the F. R. Leavis Lecturer. The great schism ensued, the break with all his natural successors. The story has been told from various viewpoints both in MacKillop's biography and in the subsequent Leavis Special Issue of *The Cambridge Quarterly* (25(4) 1996) (to which, incidentally, I contributed a chapter incorporating quotations from my brother's journals). It appears that Queenie had been kept in the dark about Mason's appoint-

ment and was furious when she found out through *The Times*. I was kept informed by Geoffrey in letters and in conversation. It was a sad experience for everyone involved: FRL had lost his friends and was caught in his wife's fierce anger. Happily, before his death, Geoffrey had been forgiven through a letter to the *TLS* which had met with Queenie's approval (see letter to GRS below). Earlier FRL had sent back the copy of his book on Stendhal which Geoffrey had tried to give him.

I was never implicated and perhaps FRL had not connected me with Geoffrey. I invited him out to Borth when he came to Aberystwyth (partly to relieve his hosts, Professor Johnston and his wife from his rather oppressive conversation). He refused my invitation on the grounds that he had been asked by others and could not accept one without offending others. I attended one of his seminars and was struck by the changes from the FRL I had remembered. It was still a monologue but he had now had his American experience and was much concerned with Dickens.

Encounters *about* Leavis, as distinct from *with* him have been numerous and not always on my initiative. It was in my last year at Cambridge that a mutual friend invited me to dinner with A. J. Ayer, indeed I cooked steak, my friend, Axel Stern having only one hand. Ayer asked me what I was doing and on Leavis's name arising I asked if he admired him. Ayer replied "I don't believe in literary criticism, but if I did, his would be the kind I should believe in." On a camp-site on the outskirts of Siena I met another English camper while I had gone to the tap to fill the morning kettle and within minutes of opening the conversation he asked if I had heard of F. R. Leavis. "I was taught by him," I answered. "You *weren't!*" The glory was reflected and the conversation persisted until my wife found me to rescue the kettle.

There have been other encounters, some of a lasting satisfying nature. A colleague of mine at Aberystwyth who was also a late convert to FRL effected my introduction as the possessor of letters from FRL, to John Tasker, who had edited an edition of

Leavis's published letters (*Letters in Criticism*, 1974). In 1995 I was invited to talk to the English faculty in Aberystwyth on the subject "Why read F. R. Leavis today?", not entirely, I suspect, convincingly.

Appendices:

I Letters from FRL to DAM

(a)

In reply to one from me informing him of my brother's death in Switzerland on 26th November 1947.

12 December 1947

Dear Mr Matthews,

Had I not been so busy with Scholarship examining your letter would have crossed one from me to your parents. It was the day before yesterday that I heard from Mr Cuttle of your brother's death: Mr Cuttle and I have been so busy that we've not met for any exchange of talk for weeks, and he finally telephoned the bad news to me.

I was very, very sorry to hear it. I feared that your brother's case must be one for some alarm, but not that it was so far advanced as that. The news came as a shock. I liked him extremely, had watched his development with the greatest interest and high expectations. The last talk I had with him just before his departure from Cambridge, was about a project for some long-range work he wished to undertake. As for differences I was not aware of them: they didn't come up explicitly in our discussions. I knew he had Catholic friends & I suppose he knew I was not a Catholic.

It is a great loss—I am sorry for the sake of the College. Please convey to your parents my sincerest and profoundest sympathy. And please explain that I was going to write.

I look forward to seeing you some time.

Yours very sincerely,

F. R. Leavis

Differences I had, rather unnecessarily, alluded to when writing to inform FRL of Peter's death were, indeed, partly on religious grounds but also that Peter had retained his early enthusiasm for Milton.

(b)

Downing College
Cambridge
[2 August 1956]

My dear Matthews

I hope the enclosed will do. I am extremely exhausted in the relevant nervous centres, having—against a good deal of worry—been working for hours and hours . . . at last minute reviewing.

The Tripos results! Comme d'habitude! Alas. The good men I know outside Downing have got II2s; the good innocent swots Is. And yet these days there seems to be no hope of an effective public opinion. But how unanswerable if it could be said audibly how scandalous it is that intelligent men shd be examined by a b c x & y!—‘Look at their published work’—even Queens has published.

All good wishes, yrs, F. R. Leavis

“Queens” referred to Mr Potts of that College.

[A cover letter for a reference]

(c)

Downing, June 4 1957

My dear Matthews

By all means use my name. Yes I can certainly write on the lines you suggest. Forgive an answer in ejaculatory scrawl: I'm Chairman of Part II, & feel I must get a margin of time in hand over & above that taken by the formidable mass of scripts. Damn the Registry & Co.

Guthrie isn't, of course, very distinguished; yet he is a man with real intellectual interests. From our point of view here a

very good man. Not merely ambitious for status, yet needing, or desiring, such a post—which he will perform both earnestly & sensitively. No tyrannical pressure of creative intellectual interest will get in the way. Yet he can be used to aerate the cultural climate of the College. I consider his election a great triumph (I discovered diplomatic & persuasive powers—in face of our great majority of scientists—I'd hardly supposed I had).

Glad to hear of Deborah & that all goes well (but for the inevitable wear & tear).

My wife joins in best wishes to you all.

In desperate haste, Yours sincerely, FRL

W. K. C. Guthrie, a classicist and University Public Orator, had been elected Master in succession to Sir Lionel Whitby. He was no friend to FRL as I discovered when I met him at a Downing Dinner in Manchester in the 1960s. I reminded him that I had proposed the toast to FRL at the dinner in Downing: "That must have been very difficult" he replied. I gave him a look and turned away. Deborah was my second daughter.

(d)

12 Bulstrode Gardens,
Cambridge
23 Feb. 1964

My dear Matthews,

Of course you used my name if you thought it would help.

I'd better write now & say that there has been no inquiry yet.

I should have sent you a note before this, but have been both distracted (in the routine way) & languid from the battle with a virus in my talking works (which I've gone on using).

Huff, Henn, Jack & Willy—there's a George too & a Joan & dear John Holloway—carry on (or know nothing at all about their institutional or Xn ways) the brilliant & triumphant circles in which I (I'm told) figure as the comic & dis-comfited villain. I had, unwillingly, a conversation with Mr

R. H. S. Crossman that gave me, after all, much satisfaction, but not him. He then went off to see the Provost of Kings—about whom I had innocently given him my opinion!

Cambridge. Speriamo

All good wishes to you and yours. FRL

The Provost was Noel Annan. There is an extended account of the meeting with Crossman (unnamed) in The Human World No. 4 August 1971, "Elites, Oligarchies and an Educated Public". The post was Deputy at the London Library for which I was interviewed by Sir Rupert Hart-Davis. The post was being vacated by my friend Oliver Stallybrass who, however, warned me against accepting.

(e)

12 Bulstrode Gardens

Cambridge

Sept 26 1964

My dear Matthews,

Thanks for your letter. I hope the decision comes easily when it comes to the point.

With direct reference to that embarrassing occasion of two years ago, when my "intuition" was well-founded; at the end of July, on receipt of a dry note from the Master, I resigned (my note reached him on the same day) my Honorary Fellowship. Don't please ask for specificities: it's best that, for a while, they shouldn't be much talked about. I've used my H-bomb.

Best wishes

FRL

The "embarrassing occasion" was the Dinner referred to above.

(f)
University of York
Heslington, York
Department of English

May 17 1967

My dear Matthews,

Thank you for your note. I hope one of those applications will bring what you want. I shall of course if / when referred to.

I myself finish with York this academic year. The second year hadn't (by me, anyway) been intended.

The Library here is an impressive-looking structure.

Best wishes,

Yours sincerely

F. R. Leavis

(g)

I recently (2003) extracted this Reference from the files of the Department of Library & Information Studies, University of Wales Aberystwyth and include it as a sample of FRL's generous regard for former pupils.

F. R. Leavis 12 Bulstrode Gardens Cambridge telephone 52530

July 30 1967.

Dear Sir,

I remember Mr D A Matthews, about whom you inquire, as a keen & scholarly student while he was working for the English Tripos. He is cultivated, keenly interested in literature, & has an excellent command of articulate expression. I have seen him from time to time since he left Cambridge, & he seemed to me to have developed well. I should expect him to make a good lecturer.

Yours sincerely

F. R. Leavis

The Principal
College of Librarianship Wales.

(h)

August 12 1967.

My dear Matthews,

Thank you for your letter. I hope things turn out satisfactorily—& with expedition, reassuringly—at Aberystwyth. I've never accepted an invitation from there: it's so far to go for an evangelical foray. As for my reputation—if it was of any use to you so much the better. I write from a Cambridge where I belong even less than when I had my name removed from the books of Downing (a consummation that in spite of my sick divination of something nasty brewing there, I hadn't explicitly foreseen at the time of that dreadful dinner, when I found myself studying the faces of Master & Senior Tutor).

All good wishes to you & yours. Yours sincerely, F. R. Leavis

This application was successful and I stayed at Aberystwyth until my retirement in 1989. FRL did, however, accept an invitation in 1970 to be Gregynog Fellow of the University of Wales, visiting and teaching alternately at the University Colleges of Aberystwyth and Bangor. Of the "dreadful dinner" see above.

(i)

12 Bulstrode Gardens, Cambridge

Jan. 7th 1978

*Mrs Leavis thanks you on behalf of
Dr Leavis for your letter and regrets that
Owing to the state of his health he is unable
To answer correspondence*

I know the above sad news will distress you—my husband had a general collapse in early summer—no wonder at 82, when he had never taken so much as a Sabbatical term in his life & none but working holidays! The award is really ironic in the circumstances, but at least the kind letters such as yours, from old pupils & admirers, give him pleasure when I read them to

him. He needs nursing night & day & neither reads nor writes now, but suffers great mental misery from his disabilities & being unable to finish the book he was writing. I was very happy to have your letter.

Q. D. Leavis

II

A letter from FRL to Geoffrey Strickland and a reply from GRS and a final letter from FRL to the same. The first will serve as a postscript to the story of "betrayal" and the last letter showed a full reconciliation following a broadcast for the Open University on FRL's New Bearings.

i

12 Bulstrode Gardens,
Cambridge CB3 0EN
24 Feb. 1974

My dear Strickland,

When I got home on Friday from York my wife said, handing me the current T.L.S.: "There's a good letter here." She was obviously and unaffectedly very pleased. It was a good letter—is, rather. Thank you very much.

Our last epistolary exchange was painful. The worst—or one of the worst—things about the Newton-Mason-Gooder & Co. conspiracy was that I had been so wholly unsuspecting & the progressive realization of its cunningly calculated scope and cruelty made me see my unsuspectingness as criminal,— & moreover I didn't know whom I could trust. For instance I didn't know how I stood with W.-T. [Whalley-Tooker], that upright Etonian, who had said to me: "Of course, I know nothing about literature," & seemed to think that no disqualification. He inevitably for some years thought there was something crooked about me.

Well, I won't insist on being morbid. I never supposed that you were among the initiators. Believe, then, that neither Volpone [Mason], nor Newton, nor Mosca [Shapira]—, their necessary go-between and confidence-brewer, had the least excuse for what they did to me—& to my wife. Far from it.

As for my piece on Xenia, the editor of Nuova Antologia, who was bringing out a Montale number, asked me for a contribution. How had he heard of me? I guessed that Montale himself, whom I know and admire, had given him my name and address. Naturally, I didn't want to risk snubbing him, though I knew I wasn't qualified. I was in process of learning Xenia by heart, & I knew there were three things I could say about it that nobody else was likely to. And so . . . etc.

I should have refused the Listener permission to reprint my critique, but out of concern for Professor Singh of the Queen's University, Belfast, who had translated my English, suppressed the impulse.

I go to York again tomorrow.

All good wishes,

F. R. Leavis

The introduction to the translation of Montale's Xenia was post-humously reprinted in The Critic as anti-philosopher edited by Professor Singh.

ii

9.3.1975

Dear Mr Leavis,

Your letter of a fortnight ago came as a very agreeable surprise. I'm glad that you and Mrs Leavis like what I said in the T.L.S. and relieved that you didn't feel that more harm than good had come from the attempted defence operation. At least, the correspondence has drawn people's attention to the essay on Montale who might not have known of it otherwise, a consequence, I imagine, unforeseen by Guido Almansi, author of L'estetica del osceno and Professor of

Comparative Literature at Norwich. I'm pretty sure that Almansi's lordly swipe at the "cultural isolationism" of British intellectuals was made with a well judged sense of an approving British audience.

As for the Trust, I wish to God it had never been founded. I imagine that most if not all those who have been involved in it feel as I do. And I'm afraid that, as one of the initiators both of the Trust and the Cambridge Quarterly, I have to accept a great deal of the blame. I hope you will believe me when I say that I have never been a knowing accomplice in any conspiracy to deceive you. But I have been guilty, like others, of unimaginativeness and heedless pride; pride in being actively involved in a daring enterprise, as it seemed at the time, a grand coup: that of ensuring the continuity of your work in Cambridge and the work of Scrutiny, in defiance of the English Faculty and with your own knowledge and approval.

What we failed to imagine or foresee were the almost inevitable consequences, what was really at stake, as well as the actual damage to everyone concerned and to you more than anyone else. I have only one excuse, and it is by no means tantamount to exculpation: I believed that you knew and approved of our plans.

It seems obvious enough now, but we should have known that the appointment of any permanent "Leavis Lecturer", especially a lecturer who was to edit a journal which would normally be expected to review your work and that of Mrs Leavis, was almost certain to give rise to a false situation, if not to actual disaster. We were asking far more of you than we had any right to ask and by committing ourselves and you to so much and to so many years of mutual trust and respect, we were placing intolerable restrictions on our freedom and your own.

One consequence I regret is that I have had no communication for the last ten years with you or Mrs Leavis. I am very sorry indeed that during that time Mrs Leavis has been seriously ill and I was cheered by the evidence in The Times

the other week that things were now a great deal better. I am looking forward to the book on folklore, children's tales and the novel. I now have two small boys of my own and therefore some additional reasons for wanting to read it. It is unlikely, I realise, that you will ever come to Reading, though people do pass through it. We should be most happy to welcome you if you ever came.

Please accept my very warm good wishes to you and Mrs Leavis.

Geoffrey Strickland

iii

F. R. LEAVIS 12 BULSTRODE GARDENS CAMBRIDGE TELEPHONE 52530

14 July 1976

My dear Strickland,

Thank you for sending the copy of your talk, & for what you say. I hope I deserve the latter. This isn't 'modesty'—there are various ways of saying 'I hope': I do think I'm a better critic than Arnold. But it's only since The Times advertised last year my 80th birthday that it has become the thing to credit me with having had influence. Yes, I had influence with Eliot. Though we rarely met (he was a snob) & corresponded very sparsely, we were very conscious of one another & were intimately acquainted. He was uneasy about that. I was surprised to get a letter out of the blue from him when the 1950 edition of New Bearings came out (the book had not been reviewed in The Criterion). Eliot remarked that he read 'with great interest the "Afterword" & that he now agreed with me' about Pound's Cantos: boring.

All good wishes,

Yours sincerely,

FRL.

On 14 July 1916, as we bumped over the pavé southward from Dunkirk on an army lorry, I was surprised to see all the

villages & market-towns be-tricoloured. 'I wonder,' I thought, 'how they knew it was my 21st birthday.'

Geoffrey had given an Open University broadcast on FRL's New Bearings in English Poetry. The Times had published a photograph of Mr & Mrs Leavis.

III

The following tribute to FRL after his death was published in an internal publication at the College of Librarianship Wales called CLW News, November 1978 and will serve as consummation.

LEAVIS—A PERSONAL VIEW

The death of F. R. Leavis was a matter of personal sadness to those who had been privileged to know him, and of public interest throughout the English-speaking world (even the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* carried a paragraph).

The public comment was as mixed as one would have expected in so controversial a figure. It was easy to see who among the commentators had "had the experience" of F. R. L. and who had "missed the meaning". Even many Cambridge English students denied themselves the opportunity of hearing him either because their tutors had warned them against him or because they felt he was the enemy, on the *other side*, in the academic civil war which characterised the Cambridge English School.

If it was possible to take over a stock hostility there was a corresponding danger of uncritical adulation. It was a paradox that someone so very unorthodox ("Good man but unorthodox" said the Master of the College when we took tea in the Lodge) and who appealed to the rebel and non-conformist in us should have created his own orthodoxy and his own conformists. And the real paradox is that the essence of his teaching was an insistence on the first hand response. Many of the critics are wide

of the mark when they concentrate on his particular judgments of writers. His major contribution was not so much his opinion, his “placing” of writers, as the process by which he arrived at these conclusions. Literary criticism is a valuable discipline because it requires total concentration on the words on the page and bringing to the literary experience all the knowledge and experience the reader has of life. This is why our response is always changing as experience changes. And literary experiences are among those which shape our lives and our responses to life.

Leavis was a moralist in the tradition of Johnson and Arnold. His judgments, therefore, were ultimately moral judgments. Shelley was limited by his emotional self indulgence. A girl was in tears in the lecture room as Leavis did some surgery on Shelley. Her neighbour said: “What’s the trouble? He’s right isn’t he?” “Yes” she whimpered, “that’s the trouble.”

Of course he was often intemperate, he did overstate his case, he was too often counter-productive. These were the results of a passionate commitment and perhaps they were an inevitable concomitant of his best achievements of perception and critical sensibility. I regretted the animus, however, which informed some of his attacks and which he would have been quick to perceive in writers he was criticising. (After all he refused to defend Lady Chatterley in court because the book was not good enough: he could not have testified that it was a major work of literature because, inter alia, of the extra-literary animus Lawrence displays towards Sir Clifford.) If he taught us polemic, or the dangers of polemics, he also taught us integrity or to be ashamed of lapses of integrity. His acerbity, however, was also a consequence of his treatment by the academic establishment from his earliest days when he attacked Milton and defended Eliot as a major poet, to the end when he parted company with his college in a row which, ironically, contains some echoes of Snow’s Cambridge novels.

The public comments tended to underrate three aspects of F. R. L. First was his range of interests. In the 1930s he was

anticipating the organic community movement of the seventies; criticising the non-human scale and nature of “mass civilisation”. Secondly, his wit. Leavis was often characterised as humourless and even fanatical. He could be extremely funny, often in a rather savage way. When Edith Sitwell got her literary agents to ask for her essay “On Stupidity” which she claimed to have contributed to *Scrutiny* she was pulling everybody’s leg. Leavis wrote back:

In reply to your enquiry about a Dr Sitwell: we can find no record of such a name among the past contributors to *Scrutiny*. Is it possible there has been some mistake? *Scrutiny* is a quarterly review devoted to literature. But we know that now and then over the last twenty years odd confusions have arisen out of indistinct handwriting: agents have misread inquiries about *Scouting*. Is that by any chance the mistake in the present case? The explanation we venture to suggest, will turn out to be of that order.

The agents replied that the Dr Sitwell was Dr Edith Sitwell the poet etc. Leavis wrote back: “The best thing would be to show Dr Sitwell our answer to your initial enquiry and ask her whether she can think of any reason for suggesting that her stupidity should be looked for over one period or another.”

The third absentee from much of the comment was his great charm and courtesy, especially with students. The magnetic personality was evident in the lecture room despite his apparent disdain of the audience, but in fact he did not much like lecturing and certainly disapproved of lectures as a teaching method, preferring the seminar or discussion circle. With a small group he was at his best, especially in the “dating” sessions—attributing a stanza or a paragraph to its period and if possible, to its author. It was astonishing how much one could learn through this intellectual parlour game. Of one piece of high-flown writing, he asked: “Come on, who, apart from Winston, could have written this?” Someone offered Macaulay. It was, and characterised by “a style in which it’s impossible to tell the truth”.

When another student said a piece of prose suggested a story in a women's magazine, Leavis commented: "Ah there, I'm afraid Clay, you have the advantage of me."

The privilege his actual pupils enjoyed was quite different from the view offered to those who merely attended the lectures. These were exciting and brilliantly staged occasions, the more so for being so throw-away in manner. The person we knew was kinder, more sensitive and warmer than he appeared to the larger audience or in print. We who practice in the same trade can't hope to do as well, but one could not have had a better teacher.

David Matthews

Postscript 2003

On 22nd September 2003 a seminar *Re-reading Leavis: a Discussion Day at Downing College, Cambridge* was organised by two young English lecturers, Dr Chris Joyce (University of Surrey) and Dr Gary Day (De Montfort University). Some forty of us attended, by invitation, and heard a number of papers which led to lively discussion. Two of my contemporaries were present and the late Geoffrey Strickland was remembered. I have submitted a report on the event to *Dow@Cam* the College newsletter for 2004. It reads:

The former Master, Dr Stephen Fleet, kindly opened the proceedings: a gesture, perhaps, of reconciliation on the 40th anniversary of Leavis's resignation of his Fellowship. The discussions were preceded by short papers given by the two organisers plus Michael Bell, Ben Brown, Bob Eaglestone, David Gervais (editor of The Cambridge Quarterly), Mary Grover, Ian MacKillop (Leavis's biographer) and Neil Roberts, from the Universities of Warwick, Royal Holloway, Reading, Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam: a wide representation.

Subjects also ranged widely including such topics as Wittgenstein, Adorno, Bakhtin. And Leavis's response to French literature, his use

of language and his survivability, of which indeed the response to this Discussion Day was a tangible demonstration. A paper on Mrs Leavis led to lively reminiscence.

A particularly valuable experience had been preparing for the day by advance reading, or rereading of some of Leavis's own later writings.

David Matthews

Leavis *does* survive, as a name which continues to recur in the literary press, and as a critic of rare sensibility and intelligence, whatever “respectful reservations” one may have. His writings remain important in their insistence on cultural and intellectual standards in a world characterised by dangerous shallows and where depth is despised as “elitist”.

D. A. M

January 2005

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