

## The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain

**Review Number:**

849

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 31 December, 2009

**Author:**

Guy Ortolano

**ISBN:**

9780521892049

**Date of Publication:**

2009

**Price:**

£55.00

**Pages:**

308pp.

**Publisher:**

Cambridge University Press

**Place of Publication:**

Cambridge

**Reviewer:**

Patricia Waugh

The idea of the 'two cultures' was launched by C. P. Snow in the Rede lecture, delivered in Cambridge on 9 March 1959, and entitled, 'The two cultures and the scientific revolution'. Snow claimed that the 'intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly split into two polar groups' (1), scientists and literary intellectuals, and that a 'gulf of mutual incomprehension' had grown up between them. Whereas, 30 years ago, they might have managed 'a frozen smile across the gulf' (2), the two cultures now stare at each other with mutual hostility and dislike. Snow blamed this state of affairs on the attitude of disdainful *hauteur* adopted towards modern technological and scientific knowledge by a powerful and backward-looking literary intelligentsia. Literary intellectuals were blamed for throttling the very embryonic energies of industrial and economic renewal: energies that would be vital in the alleviation of world poverty and in the stimulation of national economic growth. They were responsible for holding the nation in the grip of a degenerate vision of 'culture'.

Strictly, however, the status of 'controversy', the term foregrounded in the title of Guy Ortolano's fine and painstakingly-researched book, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* was only conferred some three years later, when the Cambridge literary critic, F. R. Leavis, entered the fray with an intemperate response to Snow in his Richmond lecture, 'Two cultures? The significance of C. P. Snow'. (3) Recognising, perhaps, that Snow was by then much better known as a novelist than as a one-time scientist, Leavis spent much of the early part of the lecture undermining Snow's authority to speak by pillorying the banality and vulgarity of his literary style. Even in the remainder of the lecture, he answered Snow's charges only obliquely. He went on to advance a thesis honed (alongside the

critical writings of I. A. Richards and the American New Critics) and refined over a 30-year career as a founding father of Cambridge English and modern literary criticism; a thesis therefore entirely familiar to many of his academic contemporaries: that in a society like the present where the advances of science and technology threaten a future of momentous and 'insidious' change, 'mankind ... will need to be in full intelligent possession of its full humanity ... a basic living deference towards that to which, opening as it does into the unknown and itself unmeasurable, we know we belong'.<sup>(4)</sup> For 30 years, Leavis had pursued a mission to justify the establishment and growth of the 'English school' or the discipline of English Literary Studies as *the* vital centre of university education, the *only* centre which might hold together the fragmenting specialisms of an increasingly technological era. The English School would radiate an influence, 'a centre of consciousness ... for our civilisation' <sup>(5)</sup>, by preserving a 'living culture' against the fragmenting effects of the advance of modernity in its guise of economic and technological or material progress (referred to disparagingly as 'jam tomorrow'). The pursuit of other kinds of knowledge or cultural practice, for Leavis, depended on the vitality of this bedrock, 'a prior human achievement of collaborative creation, a more basic work of the mind of man (and more than the mind), one without which the triumphant erection of the scientific edifice would not have been possible: that is, the creation of the human world, including language'.<sup>(6)</sup>

Though Leavis's vision of English literature as a creative centre of civilisation had been a vital force in the establishment and development of English as a highly respected academic discipline in the first half of the 20th century, even his disciples and fellow subject-builders were astounded by the vitriol unleashed in the lecture and its direct attack on Snow as a writer and intellectual. The American liberal, Lionel Trilling, described the ensuing furore as a 'morass of personality-mongering'. Yet, despite the *ad hominem* tenor of the original skirmish, the *concept* of a 'two cultures' *controversy* has had a more vivid and longer lasting shelf-life than any other critical term associated with its original protagonists (with the possible exception of Snow's suggestively economic epithet, 'the corridors of power'). 2009 is the 50th anniversary of Snow's lecture. Admittedly, it has had to vie for attention with the more publicly acknowledged 150th anniversary of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, but the Snow anniversary has still attracted major international conferences, reviews, essays and comments in arts, science and humanities journals. The publication of Guy Ortolano's monograph in this anniversary year is to be welcomed as an important contribution to the deeper understanding of the historical circumstances of the controversy and its enduring legacy, and the book is appropriately at its strongest when discussing the life and influence of Snow himself as a figure placed within a variety of post-war cultural debates around growth and decline, education and intellectual allegiances. Academic interest in the relations between the sciences and the humanities has never been so high as now, enhanced and nourished by the rise of the new disciplines such as Science Studies and the growth in history and philosophy of science. But no major discussion of the relation between the arts, humanities and sciences has since proceeded without some positioning of itself in relation to the conceptual space set up by Snow's phrase.

The most recent and equally infamous (though more narrowly academic) outbreak of hostilities in disciplinary relations between the humanities and the sciences, dubbed the 'Science Wars', followed the publication of the physicist Alan Sokal's hoax article, 'Transgressing the boundaries: towards a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity', in the cultural studies journal, *Social Text* in 1996.<sup>(7)</sup> Sokal's subsequent *Lingua Franca* unmasking of the piece as a spoof aimed at postmodern misappropriations of scientific concepts and discourses (and unmasking too the editors of the journal who had accepted the article in good faith), unleashed an academic mayhem surpassing even that of the earlier controversy. In the Science Wars, the battle was fought between those who lined up behind the banner of postmodernism, relativism, and anti-foundationalism, as ideological or epistemological positions representing themselves as antidotes to the supposedly 'totalitarian' effects of 'grand narratives', the metaphysical systems of modernity arising out of Enlightenment philosophies and models of enquiry (including science), on the one hand; and those who argued for the incontrovertible association of progress, truth and justice with the Scientific Revolution, Enlightenment philosophies of reason, and the defence of positivist method, on the other. More noticeably perhaps, in this later contest, the battle-lines were evidently non-reducible to strict disciplinary boundaries, though in the eyes of most of the scientists at the centre of

the debate, the humanities *tout court* were identified as relativists and nihilists, whilst the scientists identified themselves with the ideals of Enlightenment, progress and modernity. One of Ortolano's main arguments, as we'll see, is that comparisons between different historical outbreaks of a 'two cultures' kind are invidious because they obscure the real historical issues at stake in such contests, but this later disciplinary blurring was fought self-consciously in a conceptual space already set up by the earlier debate and it helps to shed retrospective light on some of the more mystifying aspects of the blurred disciplinary alignment of the Snow-Leavis controversy. Ideological lines are almost never entirely congruent with simple disciplinary boundaries. In the Science Wars too, probably as many liberal or left *literary* intellectuals threw their weight behind the 'science' banner (as defender of Enlightenment and progressive values) and against postmodernism as those who tied their left or liberal credentials to postmodern culturalism. Though the disciplinary line-up seemed more clear-cut in the Snow-Leavis controversy (given the greater homogeneity of English Studies at that time and its general preoccupation with a Fall myth of modernity, and given that the empiricist framework of science mapped fairly neatly onto Enlightenment concepts of truth and progress) it was still more complicated and the ideological underpinnings also refused to fall neatly into a simple 'science' versus 'literature' camp.

Though Leavis had far more insistently than any of the protagonists in the later Science Wars flown the flag of English studies as *the* central discipline in the revitalisation and continued existence of a national English culture, and more so in fact, than any critic who followed him, his differences with Snow were more about conflicting visions of a Good Society, and more about philosophical, moral, or even temperamental differences in their respective visions of its necessary intellectual sources, its building blocks for future consolidation, and its ideological underpinnings. (Ortolano quite rightly points out the many similarities between them, including their shared meritocratic vision and a liberal outlook, though Snow's is appropriately described as a technocratic liberalism and Leavis's a variety of radical liberalism). Like the Science Wars, their controversy too was an extension of their underlying differences and social visions as much as it was a battle between disciplines, but those visions were embedded in the specific practices, epistemologies and self-conceptions of the disciplines of the natural sciences and of English literary studies. No one, surely, has ever doubted *that*. Indeed, every culture has staged its own version of the debate; every culture has witnessed struggles for dominance between rival paradigms of knowledge which have always been struggles also to establish a structure of values formulated *within the current terms of the discipline* which might not only underpin educational reform but ensure the integrity of a vision of a Good Society, *for that particular society*. In antiquity, an emergent rationalism vied with a literary culture concerned with the training of the orator-lawyer; in the Renaissance, an emergent humanism with an entrenched Scholasticism, the foundation of a theological training and world-view; since the 19th century, the cultures of the humanities have found themselves repeatedly clashing with the positivist or rationalistic foundations of the research model of scientific training, which is now the dominant paradigm of knowledge both in university education and in the wider culture. In each case there are complex ties between practices and epistemologies and social visions and concepts of the Good which are seen to be bound to the very methods as well as the objects of enquiry.

In the early part of the 20th century, the period leading up to the 'two cultures' controversy, debates concerning knowledge and cultural and human values tended to flourish on two main fronts (by the time of the Science Wars, postmodernism had launched a full attack on the very possibility of grounding *any kind* of knowledge or value). On one hand, was an outright acceptance of the narrow (logical) positivist model of knowledge which insisted that propositions were meaningful only insofar as they were verifiable by reference to testable facts, so that any claim falling outside that narrow definition is of the order of a meaningless evaluation, an expression of opinion or preference, and strictly non-referential. Within this model, disciplines either sought 'scientific' or logical status in referential terms and took their foundational cues from scientific methodologies and language, or they sought to elevate the realm of value as one of ostension or of judgement, the nature of which was seen to be too significant, too rich and nuanced, to fall under the umbrella of mere mundane reference. I. A. Richards tried to have it both ways, by insisting that the language of literature is non-referential, but that the methodology of literary studies and, in particular, literary criticism, might be brought under a scientifically methodological description. Leavis plumped

unswervingly for the latter, insisting that literature is a judgment on life; but in some ways Leavis too tried to have it both ways, by insisting that literature represents a kind of thinking and knowing that is closer to the pre-reflective, to a kind of largely inexplicit and linguistically embodied and performative knowledge enshrined in its highest and most valuable form in great works of literature. This is what he means in the lecture by the idea of the 'creative collaborative' that must also underpin scientific enquiry itself.

Leavis began his academic career transferring from history to English. In this discipline-hopping, he followed the model of his early mentor, I. A. Richards, who had moved from philosophy, under the tutelage of Moore and Russell and Cambridge Realism, to establish the methodological basis for English Studies along the lines of scientific enquiry, 'objectivity' and close observation of texts. Leavis, enormously influenced by T. S. Eliot, and in some ways, never ending the struggle to come out from under his shadow, added to Richards' 'practical criticism', a canon of texts, a vision, and a pedagogic mission for English. This was mostly developed from Eliot's early criticism (the essays in *The Sacred Wood*, 1920, and 'The Metaphysical Poets', 1921) with its emphasis on the internal *integrity* of the literary text and its vision of cultural rejuvenation tied to a grand and sweeping vision of the search to restore a 'unified' sensibility in the modern world. For Eliot, increasingly by the 1930s, that experience might only be recovered finally through a return to a Christian society, but for the consistently secular Leavis, only through a fully sensitive response to the formal and expressive organicism of the literary text. Snow's attack was directed specifically at *modernist* literary intellectuals (though he confusingly refers to literary intellectual culture as 'traditional'), for Leavis's programme of reform was built on the back of Eliot's vast influence as the leading modernist poet of his time, an authority underpinning his critical mission to overhaul the literary canon in order to place a premium on the restorative and necessary complexity of the modernist literary work. For Leavis, the critical appreciation of such complex formal organicism was the first step on his journey to reintegrate into modern civilisation the values of a minority culture, and to overcome the deep-seated and insidious 'dissociation of sensibility', the major cause of the 'sickness' of advanced industrialised Western cultures. (Interestingly, by the time of the debate with Snow, Leavis's literary vision of a national culture that might only restore an organic community through the artifice of organicism of the complex modernist literary text, had undergone something of a transmutation into a post-Imperial retreat from Britishness towards a revival of pastoral 'Englishness' as a key to the regeneration of national values. This was evident on a variety of cultural fronts, but particularly in Eliot's late work, in the popularity of the music of Vaughan Williams and in Leavis's growing preoccupation with the fiction of D. H. Lawrence.)

If it is taken for granted that the controversy between Snow and Leavis, like the Science Wars between postmodernists and scientists, was never narrowly disciplinary, it is still the case, however, that there can be no comprehension of its more profound nuances without a full understanding of the disciplinary history of English Studies and its situation within an academy and culture whose assumptions about enquiry are already firmly on epistemological models supporting the natural sciences, such as those drawn from logical positivism. What placed *science and literature*, specifically, at the heart of the debate that erupted in the late 1950s between Snow and Leavis, was in part related to this complex history; in part, bound up with Snow's defensive position as a traditional (ie. realist and non-modernist) novelist vis a vis Leavis as the first and most influential academic critical proponent of modernist poetics in Britain (*New Bearings in English Poetry*, 1932); and in part, a consequence of the enormously influential pedagogic role of Leavis in developing the critical writings of Richards and Eliot to claim, grandiloquently, for university English, *the* key role for this new modernist vision of English in preserving cultural values and protecting and revitalising complex modes of thinking and feeling. This task would always, for Leavis, stand outside of the remit and capacities of science and science-based ways of understanding the world, whatever their importance to the future material advancement of Britain. Leavis's real indictment of Snow, and the reason for the seemingly excessive and eccentric attack on his literary *style*, was that Snow was regarded by Leavis as not even capable of recognising the significance of what he was incapable of grasping.

If Snow's intellectual vision was shaped by post-war theories of Britain's economic decline, so that he saw the future of Britain harnessed tightly to the success or failure of technological investment and scientific thinking, Leavis saw himself entrusted with Eliot's sweeping Myth of The Modern Fall, the Declinist theory

to outdo all other others, broadly: that in the 17th century, and for reasons left tantalisingly vague in Eliot's original argument, cultural life, language, and customary living in Britain, fell into a generalised 'dissociation of sensibility', a severance between thought and feeling, whose unification and restoration to cultural health would rest significantly with the work of literary culture and, in particular, the writing of an appropriately linguistically complex (ie modernist) literature and its criticism in the contemporary academy. By 1962, Leavis was at the end of his career and the hey-day of the Eliot-Leavis-New Criticism hegemony was drawing rapidly to a close: English Studies had already started to diversify in substantial ways, in part branching leftward into left-cultural critique, but also, increasingly, toward a repudiation of what had begun to appear as the naive empiricism of the earlier and foundationalist phase, and towards what would become known, simply, as 'theory'. Snow too was past the high point of his career as a novelist; his subsequent steady move to the right would lead to his political marginalisation in the years following the 1964 Labour victory. In some ways, though they did not know it, both were delivering a collaborative swan-song and yet a swan-song with an amazingly vigorous and flourishing after-life.

This is the starting point for Ortolano's study, which departs in significant ways from this thumbnail sketch of disciplinary and intellectual history. For it is certainly true that the leading question posed at the start of his introduction and designed to launch the investigation and justify its methods of enquiry is not satisfactorily answered by the outline offered above which views the debate largely through the lens of literary and intellectual histories. Ortolano concedes that 'the controversy was charged by disciplinary tensions, and it somehow fits into a longer tradition', but, he continues, 'neither explanation sufficiently accounts for the arguments and energies of this particular episode. The fact of personal difficulties between Snow and Leavis is similarly unhelpful: after all, they had coexisted peacefully in and around Cambridge for more than three decades, and they both later denied the existence of any enmity between them prior to the debate. *Why then, did this familiar topic inspire such ferocious controversy in the early 1960s?*' (my italics). The answer, he tells us, will 'lead beyond personal antipathies or disciplinary rivalries, and into the cultural politics of postwar Britain' (p. 7).

With something of C. P. Snow's own forthrightness, Ortolano is quite explicit from the outset about his purpose in writing *The Two Cultures Controversy*: 'I argue that what has previously been read as a *disciplinary* dispute about the arts and the sciences was actually an *ideological* conflict between competing visions of Britain's past, present and future'. But surely such assertive confidence begs a number of questions: In what sense are 'disciplines' ever ideologically innocent? And (even allowing that disciplines are at least always invested in presenting themselves as ideologically pure, as in pursuit of 'knowledge' and not ideologically driven), has there ever been a significant and informed commentator on the 'two cultures' controversy who has not seen it as an ideologically fraught engagement with visions of British future, as well as seeing it as a debate about the kinds of knowledge and related values that might secure that vision? In his magisterial introduction to the 1993 Canto edition of Snow's lecture, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, Stefan Collini suggests that Snow had launched a phrase to name a debate that has been particularly intense in modern civilisations and that the phrase has stuck as a kind of convenient shorthand, but more than this, he demonstrates how the cultural climate at the end of the 1950s and early 1960s was in effect stage-built to receive a performance along 'two cultures' lines of such epic proportions: the gloomy traditionalist prognoses of economic decline and post-Imperial retrenchment and national suicide running alongside the modern meritocratic optimism and/or scepticism of a younger generation beholden to and benefitting from educational expansion and access to new social and cultural opportunities. But given the personalities, lifestyles and commitments of the protagonists, the performance was always likely to be as much a contest between the styles of rival divas as a clash of competing cultural visions: Collini notes with some wry humour that 'a malevolent deity setting out to design a single figure in whom the largest number of Leavis's deepest antipathies would find themselves embodied could not have done better than to create Charles Percy Snow' (p. xxxii).

In this sense, Ortolano's thesis is hardly original, and the case for the controversy reflecting the cultural tensions in post-war Britain is already eloquently made in Collini's compact and forceful introduction, but what is entirely new in Ortolano's account is the ferocious exclusivity with which he pursues this argument

in order to attempt to expose the idea of a disciplinary contest as almost entirely a smokescreen for an ideological conflict between two models of meritocracy and debates about national decline. Only a few pages in and he makes the startling claim that, 'to explain the two cultures controversy by referring to a conflict between two disciplinary cultures would be akin to explaining that witches were persecuted in early modern Europe because they were witches, or that fugitive slaves were returned to their owners because they were property' (p. 9). Really? Surely this kind of assertion is of the same order as Jean Baudrillard's famous and provocative statement that the Gulf War may never have happened because the reliability of the discourses of participants and witnesses must always give way to the superior (read ironic) perspectives of the outsider, the person that Ortolano refers to as the 'historian as the stranger' who brings a different set of concepts and categories to the task of understanding (in Baudrillard's case, eg., what do we mean by war; or even what do we mean by 'happened'). Ortolano states his full intent at the end of the introduction: 'this book aims to achieve more than complicating the images of "science" or "literature" in this or that controversy: it seeks to dislodge the "two cultures" as a category of analysis ... to analyse any episode through the lens of "two cultures" imposes categories born of a unique historical moment upon very different circumstances, and those categories then shape the interpretation of that episode by situating it within a narrative of disciplinary conflict' (p. 26). To read according to Snow's 'concept' then is to fall into what (analytical) philosophers think of as a category error, and in this case to obscure the view of the actual ways in which the participants fail to fit their own conceptual construction, so that chatter about disciplines masks deeply convergent views of history. Ortolano's statement is a pointer to what is best and most dubious about this book. For what might appear to be wilful and unnecessary intellectual vandalism on Ortolano's part, might be read instead as a testimony to the persistent and unignorable potency of the very entity of which Ortolano claims to have ridden us: the significance of rival or divergent disciplinary perspectives in any complex cultural analysis, the very thing, indeed, that he claims to have 'dislodged'.

For this book is also, despite its claims to the contrary, another chapter in what is dismissed on its very last page as 'the huffing and puffing of disciplinary squabbling'. But in seeking to disempower the conceptual category which provides the title of the book, Ortolano seems to imply that the 'two cultures' controversy as a 'two cultures' controversy never really happened and that generations of commentators have been bamboozled by the phrase ever since. His hermeneutics of suspicion then seeks to provide a more over-determined and causally complex account by diving under the generalised conceptual net applied by the participants themselves (and by literary and intellectual historians since), in order to defamiliarise such heuristic devices by returning them to the pressures of actual historical contingencies. Here Ortolano does some sterling work, including impressive and exhaustive research in the archives relating to the history of the University of Cambridge in the period 1930–60; a particularly interesting chapter about the founding and history of Churchill College; and a very full account of responses to and the aftermath of the delivery of both lectures. Although the book unearths little that is not already known about the life of F. R. Leavis, it does dust off and add significant detail to some forgotten chapters in that of C. P. Snow and his various associates. A useful chapter returns to the reassessment of the idea of post-Imperial British decline as an ideologically and politically manipulated myth and relates the findings of more recent historians in this field to the question of Britain's 'decline' as raised by Snow in his lecture (though it barely does justice to the grandiloquent 'Declinism' of the Myth of Dissociation which drove the establishment and acceptance of English Studies between 1920 and 1950). In short, Ortolano does an excellent job in bringing to attention a number of overlooked contexts for the debate, and although his arguments are not as original as he implies, he does remind the reader too of some of the ways in which rival claims in intellectual debates are almost always underpinned by specific historical and ideological circumstances which may not be apparent to the participants themselves, nor even to subsequent commentators on the debate if they accept too naively the original terms at issue. Where the book fails is in its obsession with the need to 'dislodge' or demolish the category of 'the two cultures' as a disciplinary contest in order to explore its historical subtexts. For the conceptual category was never so ahistorically lodged in the first place. One can only assume that in claiming to approach 'the furore as an opportunity to enter its world with the eyes of a stranger', as he claims, he is, in effect, seeking to establish his *own* disciplinary authority to speak the last word. When exercising the specialist skills of his own discipline, he does an excellent job, but he doesn't want to confine himself to that and so the book overreaches in its argument. There are two basic problems: one is that in

assuming that interpretative strategies must of necessity be agonistic ('dislodge' etc), he assumes too the *inevitability of disciplinary rivalry* and inadvertently therefore appears to aver performatively the very thing he claims assertively to deny as a significant category in his account. The second follows from this: the assumption that the skills and perspectives of his own discipline (neither Snow's nor Leavis's) might 'trump' or correct all others and hold the key to final understanding of what was really going on between them and why it caused such a long-lasting fuss. But the 'stranger' emerges at times less as one who comes bearing gifts while seeking and accepting hospitality and lodgings, than one who comes to vandalise and buy out the property. Ortolano therefore overlooks or fails to acknowledge the significance or usefulness of interpretative perspectives that arise from or are rooted in other disciplines. So he fails for the most part to engage with the literary style and the *rhetoric* of the original lectures: there is, curiously, no close reading of either, and only a cursory summary of their content. Much that is at the heart of the controversy is therefore either marginalised or ignored. At the risk of sounding like F. R Leavis, I will end by trying to give some examples to illustrate this important point.

Snow reflects at the beginning of his lecture that the term 'the two cultures' was very carefully chosen: he was searching, he said, for 'something a little more than a dashing metaphor, but a good deal less than a cultural map'.<sup>(8)</sup> It isn't difficult, re-reading the lecture, to see that the 'dashing metaphor' is the kind of thing that, in Snow's eyes, is likely to be offered by those on the *literary* side of things – colourful, slapdash, subjective – for it is not far into the lecture either before a familiar stereotype emerges of literary culture (he calls it 'traditional' but his named targets are all modernists) as a kind of inchoate conglomerate of degenerate aesthetes; their vanity most apparent in their insouciant attitude to science, but their real moral reprehensibility apparent in their indifference to the ordinary grounding of empirical science in truth, accuracy and attentiveness to the world outside. So, as one trained in science (though with a vocation as a writer he tells us), he prefers something that's more substantial, a 'good deal less than a map', but still, clearly on the way to being one: gently dipped, at the very least, in the dye of the real. Plain words, caution, and care: the marks of what he later claims to be the 'moral component right in the grain of science itself'.<sup>(9)</sup> Snow is aiming to impress with his care for truth and precision. For realistically, of course (and using the term in its scientific and philosophical sense), an actual 'map' of a geographical terrain would need the kind of trigonometric correspondence to real space that has made ordinance survey our first port of call when we set off to navigate our way around a landscape. If the map failed to refer accurately to the real, and we lost our way and fell off it into a ravine, we might well feel justified in suing Ordnance Survey confident that the law would take seriously our claims. As Snow reminds us, we'd be sunk without this kind of care for truth: the kind of truth offered by classic science and, despite his training in Rutherford's lab and his knowledge of the theoretical controversies over the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory, his model of science is classically positivist, regarding its mathematical models and propositional statements as reliable maps, if not always quite mirrors, of the real.

But the emphasis on laying out a specifically *cultural* map, rather than a map of disciplines, is also fundamental to his argument. If science is not even thought of as a culture, but simply a conglomeration of academic specialisms (as suggested in Leavis's response, in fact), or at best a shared method resting on a logical foundation, he lays the blame for this unwholesome state of affairs at the imperialising feet of literary intellectuals. It is literary intellectuals – mandarins – for Snow, who have taken it upon themselves to assume that they *are* the culture. Indeed, we might agree: even the placing of the question mark in the title of Leavis's lecture, 'Two cultures? The significance of C. P. Snow', conveys a tone of *haute* consternation; that Snow should be so impertinent, not simply deluded enough, to assume that a technologico-Benthamite pursuit of 'jam tomorrow' might ever constitute a culture. In a later lecture, Leavis denied that there had ever been a debate and that it was simply 'absurd to posit a culture that the scientist has *qua* scientist'.<sup>(10)</sup> Clifford Geertz has defined a culture as 'signifying webs in which we are embedded': a culture is a complex of values, world-views, customs, beliefs, and practices, which constitute a mode of *phronesis* or practices as opposed to a mode of theoretical mapping. Snow seems to suggest that if science is simply grasped as a method and a body of information about the natural world, then the cultural value of the 'scientific outlook' as an extension of ordinary experience in its level-headed responsible realism will never embed its inherent values as superior to those of literary intellectuals. In some ways, Snow and Leavis were both kicking

against the restrictions of the positivist separation of facts and values in its last gasp and its lingering and very real effect on disciplinary outlooks: Snow, because it inhibited the acceptance of science as a ‘culture’ (ie a structure of values) and therefore inhibited the embedding of the scientific outlook as the key modernising force in contemporary society; Leavis, because in detaching ‘value’ from ‘knowledge’, the positivist model was instrumental in sustaining a non-cognitivist view of literary discourses and a view of science as the *only* viable mode of knowledge. For him, the realm of ‘value’ as engaged by humanistic enquiry and literary criticism, in particular, is underpinned by and inseparable from an alternative kind of knowledge – not the knowledge of ‘fact’, the explicit knowledge of the scientist – but a kind of pre-reflective knowing that grounds human beings in their cultural worlds and provides that sense of being out of which that other kind of knowledge – the explicit kind, science – has developed and on which it finally rests. Though most often read in the Romantic humanist tradition of *Kulturkritik* (inherited from Herder’s emphasis on linguistic rootedness and national culture and from Schiller’s rather more Kantian emphasis on the autonomous and disinterested play of the literary text as a release from the realm of natural necessity), Leavis’s idea of the centrality of language in understanding, knowledge and interpretation is often closer to 20th-century phenomenology with its emphasis on the importance of a sort of knowing that anchors human consciousness and its sense of being in the world. But Leavis clearly felt, in his embattled stance against ‘crass Wellsianism’ and the reductive discourses of scientism, that to make this explicit would involve using a language and a rhetoric at odds with what he is trying to adduce: the kind of knowledge that would be destroyed in any boot-strapping attempt to find explicit definition or rules for its nature. You cannot point to it in a laboratory, he says, in the Richmond lecture, or even on a page, for it is in the work of ‘creative collaboration’, of language as a mode of social intercourse and exchange, that we derive our fundamental sense of identity in the world. Language is what houses us in the world and in a culture and, without its creative renewal, the culture stagnates and dies. If science stands outside observing and offering causal explanations of natural phenomena, then literary practice expresses a world always already given to us as value-laden, and in which we are always pre-reflexively anchored. For Leavis, literary language is the highest and densest expression of this kind of knowledge as experience. This does not mean that science is not equally valuable in its own demesne. But for Leavis, it should be *equality with difference*: and given that science had so hegemonically, as he saw it, colonised the terrain of ‘knowledge’, then the discipline of literary studies could only make its claims, in its own terms and language, by asserting its significance through a complex performativity that eschewed, always, the explicit. That is why the terms of this debate, the Snow-Leavis controversy require that the commentator begins with a responsiveness to the rhetoric and language of the participants, as well as drawing on the empirical and analytical skills of the cultural historian or the ‘stranger’, and the conceptual grasp and intellectual range of the historian of ideas. The attempt to understand the Two Cultures controversy should not require the further staging of yet another ‘turf war’, but instead offer an opportunity for a ‘creative collaboration’ between disciplines, in attempting to arrive at a properly complex and multi-perspectival understanding. Paradoxically, however, the history of attempts to understand the significance of this particular cultural event has all too often metamorphosed into further disciplinary skirmishes. There is much that is fascinating and illuminating in this well-written and exhaustively researched book: it is a pity that its author has not managed to avoid turning his very valuable disciplinary perspective into yet another triumphalist contest. But perhaps we academics, even after 50 years, and whatever our disciplines, still feel most at home when the gloves are off.

## Notes

1. C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*, introd. Stefan Collini (Cambridge and New York, 1993), p. 3.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Ibid*, p. 29.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. F. R. Leavis, *Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow* (London, 1962).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Ibid*, p. 26.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Ibid*, p. 30.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *Ibid*, p. 27.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. 7 Alan Sokal, ‘Transgressing the boundaries: towards a transformative hermeneutics of quantum



- gravity', *Social Text*, 46/47 (1996), 217–52 .[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*, p. 9.[Back to \(8\)](#)
  9. Ibid, p. 13.[Back to \(9\)](#)
  10. F. R. Leavis, *Nor Shall My Sword: Discourses on Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope* (London, 1972), p. 10.[Back to \(10\)](#)

**Other reviews:**

h-net-reviews

<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php> [2]

oxford journals

<http://tcbh.oxfordjournals.org/content/20/2/252.full> [3]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/849>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4439>

[2] <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25388>

[3] <http://tcbh.oxfordjournals.org/content/20/2/252.full>