

# Chapter 1

## Introduction: The Heretic Who Survived?

F. R. Leavis was a major literary presence of the twentieth century, by any account a key figure on the English-speaking cultural landscape. He died almost four decades ago after a long, prolific and embattled career as teacher, critic, educationalist and social commentator. He was a co-founder and guiding light of the Cambridge-based *Scrutiny* (1932–1953) which has good claims to be considered the most influential literary-critical journal of the last one hundred years. The influence of this journal and of Leavis on generations of teachers and educationalists in secondary and tertiary education must be judged immense and far-reaching. The counter-reaction to Leavis was correspondingly deep and widespread. Indeed, so deep is Leavis's influence that it often passes as unnoticed, even by those who are the main beneficiaries of it.

In the history of thought about the university Leavis is one of the few English thinkers worthy to be placed alongside other Europeans such as Jaspers, Horkheimer and Ortega y Gasset. Since Leavis's heyday, however, higher education has had to take account of needs and groups largely by-passed by the old academic culture. Leavis, where he is talked about at all, might seem to have little productive to say to these new constituencies.

We are thus faced with a paradox of a once immensely influential critic and educator who has, to all intents and purposes, vanished from contemporary debate about higher education, except as a historical point of reference. Did Leavis speak too soon when he claimed he was the heretic who survived? Two factors are at work here. The first is the way in which Leavis's socio-educational thought is closely embedded in critiques of specific literary texts—take away the reader's familiarity with these texts and Leavis's arguments may seem perplexing, even wilful. The second is Leavis's apparently resolutely negative verdict on the 'democratic mass university'. The prevalent image of Leavis as an erstwhile Young Turk who later lapsed into a rearguard, even knee-jerk, reactionary has impeded any real curiosity about the nuanced, and in some cases still heretical, ideas he has about the university.

What purpose then might our reading or re-reading of Leavis have in these changed and still-changing circumstances? How can the work of Leavis serve today as an intellectual tool for understanding, and possibly changing, higher education?

The way in which I seek to answer these questions in a positive way is by pursuing three main premises as follows.

*Leavis is a rich source of ideas and experience to do with higher education and society.* Leavis's life and thought can help us to understand better not only their subject but issues of wider social and educational import. The lessons of Leavis's career in higher education, and how he himself articulated these lessons, still speak powerfully to contemporary policy and practice. I have devoted substantial space to Leavis's thinking about pedagogic practice as a major source of authenticity and wisdom: Leavis's views on educational policy and practice were forged and tested in the discipline of daily teaching over more than 50 years, an activity that was gladly embraced and which came without benefit of sabbatical and for much of his career without financial security. While Leavis's wholesale dismissal of mass culture has not worn well, the depth and seriousness with which Leavis poses key questions about culture, society and education, and his positive conception of language and speech communities, retain considerable force.

*Leavis has a lot to say about the contested, elusive subject of creativity.* We can learn much critically from Leavis on this subject to help clarify, deepen or extend our ways of understanding and talking about creativity in higher educational contexts, including pedagogic practice. Here I have sought to extract Leavis's thinking about creativity from its primary literary sources, offering a minimum of example to indicate how Leavis extrapolates from texts. This tactic is not without risks, including that of reducing Leavis to a series of unanchored propositions but it is, I believe, a necessary one to help us appreciate that when Leavis talks about creativity, and he talks about it on nearly every page, he sees no distinction between its instances in imaginative literature and in other, educational and social contexts.

*The future prospects of higher education are increasingly seen as linked to the future prospects of creativity.* I leave this premise relatively open for the time being, given that it lends itself to diverse interpretations. It is here that Leavis exerts a potentially powerful leverage on current thinking about the future of higher education. It may be that we arrive at different conclusions from those of Leavis, even after giving him a fair hearing; but that the issues at stake are critical I take as given. Those who argue that what we think about creativity in higher education does not matter very much, or that it is an elitist concern that can look after itself, are not in my view advancing coherent arguments, least of all educational ones. A changed understanding of Leavis has, I believe, the power to alter the way we think about higher education, to inform discussion about what might constitute 'the creative university'—which is not to be equated solely with major innovations, measurable outputs or matching skills supply to the workforce.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of Leavis's life and work, its intellectual lineage and his contemporary standing. Chapter 3 offers a schematic outline of Leavis's educational world-view, derived from his critical and discursive texts, in order to bring out the holistic nature of Leavis's social and educational thought and practice. The following Chaps. 4 and 5 take an in-depth look at Leavis's idea of the critical exchange which in my view represents his most enduring contribution to thinking about practice in teaching and learning in higher education. Chapter 6 explores

Leavis's heuristic thought about the future of higher education and 'the creative university'. Here I have largely side-stepped Leavis's battles in the culture wars during the 1960s and 1970s to focus on issues of wider and more contemporary interest. While Leavis rested his case largely on the strength of 'English' as he contended for it, it is not solely for those teaching and studying within 'English', whatever their ideological stance, that his abiding interest may lie. Chapter 7 offers a personal reflection on what it meant to me to be 'taught by' Leavis as a student of English in the 1970s. I should explain that after university I put English and Leavis to one side for many years to pursue a career as a professional in mental health. One day, as I was struggling to make sense of why many service users in severe distress felt oppressed, even betrayed by language, I was reminded, perhaps in desperation, of Leavis's description of language as 'our incomparable living ally'. 'If only', was my first thought. But I stopped in my tracks and this proved to be the start of a long journey towards appreciating what made him say that and why.