# Chapter 4
# Leavis and Pedagogy: Critical 'Theory'

## 4.1 Leavis's Paradigm of Critical Exchange

> A critical judgment has the form, 'This is so, isn't it?' […] though my judgment asks to be confirmed and appeals for agreement that the thing is so; the response I expect at best will be of the form, 'Yes, but—'.

Ever since its definitive formulation excerpted above (Leavis 1969: 47), Leavis's paradigm of the critical judgment (or exchange) has signally gained the attention of many of his expositors. Robinson (1973) sees it as underlining a general truth about the nature of language and 'its relation to the individual's critical activity by which we live' (235). Strickland (1981: 157) regards it as an example of the critic responsibly pursuing truth claims about the real world, a project which he sees structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers as having misguidedly abandoned. As a contribution to ideas about higher education, Barnett (1990) sees the formula 'This is so, isn't it?' as 'an essentially open conception of truth, in which truth claims are invested with personal meaning, commitment and judgment' (58-9). Matthews (2004) argues that Leavis's procedure in the paradigm is determined by 'the conviction that "we" *shall* get further by argument, rather than by acceding either to convention, orthodoxy or absolute truth' (60, emphasis in original).

During and after his lifetime the paradigm became a byword for Leavis's approach to teaching. Bradbrook (1984) half-mockingly characterised it as 'the language of *Scrutiny*' (40) and the 'Yes, but—' formula was frequently used as a strap-line in contemporaneous reviews of Leavis (see Watson 1977). Latterly, philosophical dimensions of the paradigm have been pursued by critics (Joyce 2009; Gorodeisky 2014). Kramer (2011) also draws attention to the paradigm's emphasis on literary value judgments attained through dialogue: 'the interpretation is an individual one and a trans-individual one; the individual interpretation is preserved and superseded in the collective one' (104).

Because the paradigm is often lifted out of context, it is worth looking at this to see what Leavis is saying, and as importantly not saying. Leavis expressed the paradigm

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in varying degrees of detail throughout his career; the fullest exposition of it occurs in one of the Clark Lectures given at Cambridge in 1967 and is printed in *English literature in our time and the university* (1969). In the lecture Leavis sets out to characterise the nature of standards in English studies; he is keen to avoid any misconception that these are susceptible to metrics as conventionally understood: where English is concerned, 'No one, then, who knows what standards are and what is the nature of critical authority could talk of "fixed standards" or of "providing them with a legal backing"' (Leavis 1969: 47). The paradigm is then introduced (Leavis 1969: 47) to exemplify the critical or pedagogic process by which individual value judgments are developed and form the basis of standards rather than being derived from them.

> Essentially, as I've said before (I suppose) in a good many places but the point has to be made and much hangs on it, a critical judgment has the form, 'This is so, isn't it?'. And the concurrence appealed to must be real, or it serves no critical purpose, and, if he suspects insincerity or mere politeness, can bring no satisfaction to the critic as critic. What, of its very nature, the critical activity aims at, in fact, is an exchange, a collaborative exchange, a corrective and creative interplay of judgments. For though my judgment asks to be confirmed and appeals for agreement that the thing is so; the response I expect at best will be of the form, 'Yes, but—', the 'but' standing for qualifications, corrections, shifts of emphasis, additions, refinements. The process of personal judgment from its very outset, of course, is in subtle ways essentially collaborative, as my thinking is—as any use of the language in which one thinks and expresses one's thoughts must be. But the functioning of criticism demands a fully overt kind of collaboration.

The paradigm may be seen to have three main components: personal judgment; critical activity; and the functioning of criticism. These form successive stages of widening reference, from personal to inter- or trans-personal to public and institutional. For Leavis, the function of criticism is of necessity an inclusive concept, encompassing more than the critical act. Critical pedagogy is a matter of increasing intellectual and social initiation into a collaborative community, the emphasis falling on the continuity in transitions between individual (student), collaborative interplay and community this creates and sustains. Elaborating on the synthesis of these last three constituents, Leavis explained (1972: 207) a few years after the lecture in question was delivered that:

> A university that is really one [...] will make it possible for the student (who won't be just a 'student') to feel he belongs to a complex collaborative community in which there are his own special human contexts to be found, and will make him, in his work and the informal human intercourse that supplements it and gives it life, more and more potently aware of the nature of high intellectual standards.

One of the widely accepted functions of higher education is to stretch its participants, in terms of their pursuit of academic rigour, standards of performance and intellectual integrity and development of autonomous critical capacities. Indeed, it is argued that a distinguishing feature of higher education is its potential for developing awareness of these capacities as a pervasive characteristic of everyday life (Barnett 1990). Leavis seeks to consolidate this argument by stressing the nature of the student's belonging to, or living into, a 'complex collaborative community' in which awareness of 'high standards' owes as much to informal as

formal contact—the 'hidden curriculum' (Jackson 1990). This community will not be limited by the student's discipline, although it will make space for it; the phrase 'special human contexts to be found' also suggests a process of discovery and sense making not restricted to the acquisition of specialist knowledge and skills.

Readers unfamiliar with Leavis may question the use of inverted commas placed round 'student' in the above quotation. Leavis continually struggled to find terms that would adequately characterise the contribution and status of each of the participants in a pedagogic relationship (see Chap. 7). The word 'student' troubled him as much as the word 'teacher' because both were at best approximations to the kind of finely balanced pedagogic relationship he cherished. An early formulation represents perhaps one of his best if circumlocutory shots at defining this relationship, in the introduction to *Revaluation* (1936) where he acknowledges his indebtedness to 'those with whom I have … discussed literature as a "teacher", adding, 'if I have learnt anything about the methods of profitable discussion I have learnt it in collaboration with them' (Leavis 1936: 14). Leavis saw no reason why the discussant should not also be the co-teacher or co-researcher, and this helps to explain why he disliked drawing a dividing line between 'undergraduate' and 'postgraduate' (he spoke of 'more or less senior') and did not wish his lectures and seminars to be advertised as exclusive to either group (in Layram 2011: 25 Sept 1967).

## 4.2 Form and Function of the Critical Exchange

Leavis holds that a critical judgment has the form of 'This is so, isn't it?'; however, this does not mean that it necessarily consists of a literal question or request expressed in precisely these words, as Leavis makes plain when he says 'the "but" standing for…'. The appeal to corroboration via 'a fully overt kind of collaboration' is, in Leavis's view, a defining feature of university life in general, although this is not to suggest that every interaction between a teacher and a student will be framed as one of joint working. The collaborative exchange is essentially open-ended and persuasive; when it operates heuristically, that is as a mode of discovery, it consists of what Polanyi (1959: 229) calls 'statements in the fiduciary mode', statements of personal commitment that should have the words 'I believe' attached to them. The goal of such statements is to move beyond the merely personal assertion of a belief or conviction without resorting to criteria dependent on an idea of objective knowledge, that is, impersonal knowledge, independent of individual persons doing the knowing. For Leavis the literary critic and Polanyi the scientist-philosopher all knowledge is embodied, personally committed knowledge. There is moreover no method or template for achieving this goal (Leavis 1982: 190):

> I have had a habit of telling pupils that you can't prove a value-judgment but I go on to say that you can always (no doubt I ought to say generally) get beyond the mere assertion of personal conviction. The process of 'getting beyond' is tactical, and its nature is most clearly brought out in the 'practical criticism' of short poems. But what is brought out in this way is the essential critical process.

Davies (1992) suggests that the paradigm of the critical exchange, far from being coercive, is intended to subvert inflexible modes of instruction: 'The oppressive statement gives way to the tactful, sympathetic inquiry … the authoritative monologue to the open-ended conversation' (37). Its aim, according to Leavis, is to allow critical judgments to '[find] their bearing with regard to one another, and not a theoretical system or a system determined by abstract considerations' (Leavis 1982: 213).

To an extent the paradigm shares features of the Socratic method of teaching (Overholser 1992), including the asking and answering of questions to stimulate critical thinking, and a dialectical method in which participants work collaboratively to construct a meaning rather than win an argument. Where it departs from this method is the absence of any ironic dissimulation of ignorance which might act as a disruptive force to undermine student and text alike. The paradigm's 'isn't it?' is not ironic understatement. The critical exchange is reality-oriented and provisional, though never arbitrary. Its main purpose is not intellectual display for its own sake but the getting of wisdom, which represents 'a more securely poised resultant, one more fully comprehensive and humanly better centred […] than any ordinarily brilliant person could offer us' (Leavis 1975: 69).

## 4.3 Leavis's Paradigm: An Empty Metaphysic?

Criticisms have been advanced against Leavis's idea of the critical exchange on theoretical grounds: indeed this has proved to be one the major sources of antipathy towards Leavis from as far back as the days of *Scrutiny* (Matthews 2004: 65). One of the most cited criticisms at the level of theory is that made during Leavis's lifetime by Perry Anderson (1968) in the course of his 'Components of the national culture'. (For a discussion of objections to Leavis's paradigm at the level of practice, see Chap. 5.) Although this study was written several decades ago, it conveniently states one of the main, enduring charges against Leavis, namely that he lacks an explicit epistemology underpinning his practice and critical valuations. As far as we know, Leavis did not read or respond to Anderson's critique; had he done so it might have struck him as a recapitulation of arguments made by René Wellek in 1937, to the effect that Leavis had not 'stated [his] assumptions more explicitly and defended them more systematically' (cited in Leavis 1952: 211). Leavis believed he had answered these objections conclusively at the time, arguing that while 'it should be possible to elicit principles and abstractly formulable norms … [and] be able to complete [my] work with a theoretical statement' (Leavis 1952: 214) he had kept his criticism as close as possible to the concrete. Leavis thus left the door open to 'theory', or at least did not turn the key, and it is this door that Anderson, having absorbed the earlier debate with Wellek, pushes against in his critique. As such he has been taken as a continuing point of reference on this theme by several critics of Leavis (Watson 1977; McCullum 1983; Bell 1988; Scruton 1998; Matthews 2004; Storer 2009). Anderson's criticism has the advantage,

moreover, for the present discussion, of bringing together a number of theoretical objections, and directing these squarely at Leavis's paradigm.

In his study, an analytical survey of trends in mid-twentieth century socio-cultural criticism in Britain, Anderson seeks to explain why Britain had, by that date, not produced its own national school of socialist-Marxist thought, as had many other European countries. Where this sociologically informed account should have been there was a conspicuous 'absent centre'. Literary criticism, as advocated by Leavis, was the only discipline to move to occupy this centre, a remarkable achievement given the relatively low status of criticism as a discipline of thought in Britain and other countries. Having effectively occupied the centre against much institutional resistance, however, Leavis was unwilling or unable to produce a theoretical justification of why his conception of criticism should have been there. Anderson pays high tribute to the criticism, stating that Leavis is 'a landmark that has yet to be surpassed' but concludes: 'The paradox of this great critic is that his whole *oeuvre* rested on a metaphysic which he could never expound or defend' (50). Concentrating diagnostically on Leavis's critical exchange, which he duly appreciates as being based on an interrogative rather than an assertive form, Anderson (1968: 52) all the same sees this being placed in the service of an unarticulated metaphysic which refuses to acknowledge the central assumption of its epistemology, namely that of 'a shared, stable system of values':

> If the basic formation and outlook of readers diverges, their experience will be incommensurable. Leavis's whole method presupposes, in fact, a morally and culturally unified audience. In its absence, his epistemology disintegrates.

The extent to which higher education is necessarily based on a consensus of broad societal values or engenders a clash between them is, of course, one of the key questions for theorists of culture and pedagogy (Clark 1986; Barnett 2014). Previous critics on the Left, notably Raymond Williams in his *Culture and society* (1959), had taken Leavis to task over his presupposition of a culturally unified audience in the shape of the 'organic community' (Leavis & Thompson 1933: 87–92). This was the chief metaphor in Leavis's early and middle career used as a regulatory ideal—also for Leavis, somewhat contentiously, a historical reality—of a pre-industrial, pre-capitalist society in which work and life were a harmonious whole and where people lived 'unawares… as integral parts of the rural community' (Leavis & Thompson 1933: 86). Anderson refers to Leavis's 'organic community' as coming from an 'enormous nostalgia … of the past which pervades his work' (52), which is designed to disguise from its creator the absence of any equivalent present-day cultural unity. Leavis, however, in a lecture given in 1967 (Leavis 1972: 85, emphasis in original) that predates Anderson's critique, disavowed any recourse to such nostalgia when he stated:

> We [he and co-author Denys Thompson of the 1933 work] didn't recall this organic relation of work to life in any nostalgic spirit, as something to be restored, or to take melancholy pleasure in lamenting; but by way of emphasizing that it was *gone*, with the organic community it belonged to, not to be restored in any foreseeable future.

That said, Anderson contends that, having formulated an *idea* of a unified audience in previous cultural phases it is incumbent on Leavis to posit the theoretical ground on which such an audience might be reconstituted. As it stands, then, Leavisian critical method and pedagogy, as putative tools designed to bring this audience into existence, are deeply incoherent on an epistemological plane.

## 4.4 A Shared System of Values?

Anderson's emphasis on the *incommensurability* of reports on experience, whereby readers in a post-Enlightenment, late modern culture have no necessarily common measure or shared ground, introduces a new twist to previous criticism of Leavis's studied avoidance of stating his methodological assumptions. The use of this term parallels Kuhn's (1962) innovatory use of it in *The structure of scientific revolutions*; there it refers to the lack of measure between scientific paradigms, the particular sets of theories and beliefs or epistemologies which both enable and constrain research. While Anderson and Kuhn have different ideological inclinations (Wolfart 2000: 385) each draws attention to the inability of those located on different sides of a paradigm to communicate across the dividing boundary. According to this view, Leavis's belief in the value of dialogic exchange leading to ever-increasing concurrence is exposed as groundless, since in the absence of any set of values commanding widespread assent (such as those which Leavis had detected historically in the 'organic community'), which would frame and give direction to the dialogue, there can be at best only a mass of arbitrary and incompatible viewpoints with no other goal than to generate further viewpoints. At worst, according to Anderson, this underpins Leavis's recourse to 'an insistent metaphysical vocabulary ['life', 'actual', 'vital'] combined with a positivist methodology' (Anderson 1968: 51). (With this idea of insistence Anderson usefully gives us a tip worth pursuing: see Chap. 6.)

This argument of incommensurability, which finds perhaps its strongest expression in the fragmentary postmodernist 'language games' of Lyotard (1984) and his followers (see Readings 1991), in my view misses a large part of what Leavis is offering by focusing on the dialogic process of critical exchange in the abstract (see also Bell 1988: 133–134) rather than in its paradigmatic, embodied instances. This is not to suggest that the challenge represented by 'theory' is disposed of by an appeal to British empiricism. Scruton (1985), for example, seeks to counter Anderson's dismissal of Leavis by claiming that 'it is one of the strengths of British culture that it has traditionally produced, not sociological theories of itself, but social and cultural *criticism*' (133, emphasis in original). Leavis, however, goes some way to meeting theory on its own ground, and his reasons for eschewing any probative intent about its relevance to critical pedagogy are not due to an inability to abstract but rather to a concern about the opportunity cost: 'I do not see what would be gained by the kind of explicitness [Wellek] demands (though

I see what is lost by it)' (Leavis 1952: 215). (This opportunity cost is discussed further in Chap. 5.)

In a literal sense, the 'basic formation and outlook of readers' (Anderson 1968: 52) is dependent on presupposing certain universals or common grounds—hence the word 'university' itself—although, needless to say, how and in what these universals and commonalities might be embodied is a matter of debate: the idea of 'the university' is simultaneously a presupposition and work-in-progress (Leavis 1982: 171–285; Barnett 1990, 2014). But that there might be certain universals, to be (re-)discovered, such as what is meant by 'the pursuit of knowledge', is one of Leavis's necessary faiths in his continuing to 'believe in' the university (Leavis 1982: 171–185) (see Chap. 6).

While the idea of incommensurability might seem to be able to adduce much evidence, for instance, in siloed thinking among the disciplines, in practice much inter-, cross- and transdisciplinary communication continues to take place (Gibbs 2015). Higher education is not short of instances that may seem to increase the likelihood of educator and student speaking at cross purposes: asking different stakeholders in higher education what they comprehend by 'the value of a degree', for instance, might well provoke the kind of pluralist response that would illustrate Anderson's broader thesis of divergence (see Woodall et al. 2014). Indeed, being tossed into a welter of contradictory, irreconcilable voices is often what it *feels* like for students, especially as they manage the transition to university study (Booth 1997). This adaptive process is both cognitive—a certain degree of cognitive dissonance is required if learning and adaptation are to occur—and ethical—'both students and lecturers in higher education have moral role obligations … derived from the functions of the roles being voluntarily undertaken by each party' (Regan 2012: 14).

In a fundamental sense, therefore, educators need to be points of stability and consistency, even at times ones of fixed reference; it is hard to imagine how otherwise they could facilitate the creative potential of students (Craft 1997), let alone maintain the business of teaching, assessment and research (one likes to think that the creative potential and the business should go hand in hand, difficult as this alliance may be to maintain in practice). That said, any espoused sense of stability need not rule out multiple voices, diversity, flexibility, negotiation and compromise, as Leavis's metaphors of dialogue and play and the sense of kinesis in 'shifting' in his critical exchange suggest. Nor need this stability entail the unreflective unanimity in the disciplines that Leavis castigated with regard to C. P. Snow's vision of the scientific culture: in Snow's words, 'Without thinking about it [scientists] respond alike' (cited in Leavis 1972: 50). Perhaps this phrase of Snow's is shorthand for agreed conventions or 'tacit knowledge' (Polanyi 1959). If so, Snow's expression of unanimity among the scientific community over methodological norms and practices is insufficiently distinguishable from groupthink and unconscious bias. That kind of stability, or inertia, is derided by Leavis in his critique of Snow (Leavis 2013) as being deeply at odds with the risk taking and experimental freedom that he valued in teaching and research in the sciences and humanities alike (Leavis 1982: 182).

Returning to Anderson's 'shared, stable system of values' that must in his view underpin the epistemology of the cultural critic, reader and teacher alike—at least a teacher like Leavis committed to a model of pedagogy in its interrogative rather than assertive forms—Leavis is certainly committed to holding certain presuppositions but the *Scrutiny* project was based on the premise that in modern civilisation any such shared system of values could no longer command wide assent. Had Leavis assumed the contrary, or that such a system of values could be reinstated programmatically, then this would indeed be a damaging criticism. Anderson acknowledges, with a view to the socio-political upheavals of the twentieth century, that 'nothing was less obvious or to be taken for granted in Leavis's day than a stable, shared system of beliefs' (Anderson 1968: 52); but he writes here as if Leavis were an unwitting victim and propagator of this assumption rather than one of its deepest explorers. Indeed, the wider realisation that this state of affairs could no longer be taken for granted in the cultural and pedagogic realms was in no small part due to Leavis's socio-cultural analysis and educational methods, whether people subscribed to these or not.

Leavis as a lifelong teacher evidently 'believed in' values in the sense that these obtain in the kind of educational arrangement which Weick (1976) calls a 'loosely coupled' system, one in which people are often bound together by shared values, norms and expertise (Regan 2012) rather than simply by the obligations of shared tasks, such as teaching and marking exams (Becher 2001). It is from his allegiance to this kind of systemic thinking about culture and organisational values that Leavis's conception of the university as 'more than a collocation of specialist departments' (Leavis 1972: 63) derives. However, at this level these shared values and norms cannot necessarily be taken for granted either, as the pioneering sociological analyses of higher education conducted in the pages of *Scrutiny* set out to demonstrate. Q.D. Leavis in her 'Discipline of letters: a sociological note' (Leavis 1943), for example, had provided a case study of how unquestioned academic norms based on 'conventional literary and cultural values' (14), underpinned by 'scholarship and social snobbishness' (12), could be profoundly corrosive of academic life and anti-educational in their effect. Moreover, it is by virtue of engaging in dialogue based on critical, reflexive practice—exemplified in the close reading of major literary texts—that, according to both Leavises, we (if we count ourselves 'literary critical readers' and even if we do not) largely discover and clarify what these values and norms might be (Leavis 1967: 14–15). Anderson, to my mind, underplays the heuristics of Leavis's paradigm as well as the element of the oppositional which, as Matthews (2004: 60) points out, is intent on questioning convention and challenging orthodoxy.

Anderson's charge that Leavis's paradigm must be accounted as resting on a failed metaphysic appears to leave many of these scruples at the level of theory and practice out of the account. Perhaps the most important is Leavis's 'necessary faith' in the university's commitment to a 'sustained effort of collaborative human creativity… [that] creates, and recreates, its sense of possible solutions, further problems, and remoter goals as it goes on' (Leavis 1972: 186–187). This mode of systemic thinking about pedagogy and higher education (see Knight & York 2003),

favouring incremental learning rather than upheaval, aligns Leavis with thinkers like Polanyi and in opposition to those who espouse variations of utopian millenarianism; while Anderson might well agree in principle with Leavis's notion of 'necessary incompleteness' in programmatic action, in practice Leavis's commitment to a liberal meliorist approach probably further limits his validity as a cultural thinker for Anderson as it did for Williams (see Watson 1977: 154–165). Certainly, if anyone thinks that Leavis has any remotely immediate solution to what he calls the 'appalling problems' facing humanity he leaves the reader in no doubt when he states on the same page as the preceding quotation from him, with an implied nod to the 'solutions' of Marxism and scientism alike: 'I haven't suggested what solution for the appalling problems will be found …—I don't know. In the nature of the case, nobody knows, so nobody can tell us' (Leavis 1972: 186). While this might sound on the face of it like an abnegation of responsibility, the eschewal of ultimate totalising solutions is for Leavis the presupposition of any major creative and experimental thinking in response to global and local problems in which pedagogic practice in the university might be seen as having a hand.

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