

7. *The Dilemma*

The dangers are obvious; but it is not so obvious how to avoid them. We have answered no problems, but only uncovered some. Perhaps this is the beginning of progress. After all the theoretical firework display is over, we are left with the world, the revelation, and our own responsibility. Christians have a light, which must be trimmed and held aloft to guide humanity; but they have no map to plot the path we must take.

If Jesus had been asked, 'What does your teaching apply to?' we may guess that his reply would be something like that which he gave to the Pharisee who asked, 'Who is my neighbour?' His answer to that question, enshrined in the parable of the Good Samaritan, was 'It is up to you who your neighbour is'. The answer to our question, 'What does the gospel apply to?' might be 'It is up to you what it applies to'.

It is an uncomfortable answer, because it leaves us with an ill-defined, and yet a heavy, and even a revolutionary, responsibility; but unless Christians can re-capture such a state of mind, they will have little to say to the world we are moving into.

Snow against the Poets

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To this second edition¹ of his now famous Rede lecture Sir Charles Snow has added fifty pages of further thoughts provoked by the extraordinary amount of attention it received. One can say 'extraordinary' without irony, or with little. In itself the lecture was not very remarkable—neither deep, nor subtle, nor closely reasoned, nor witty. But it made its points with force and it was exceedingly topical. Moreover Sir Charles is an interesting and versatile man, and as a writer he has a beguiling knack of combining a certain high seriousness—solemnity even—with the common touch. One feels that he has tried hard not to be spoiled by success—not, in a sense, to be changed by it at all. He brings the whole of himself, his feelings as well as his gifts and experience, into all that he writes. He does so here. Allusions to Rutherford and G. H. Hardy,

¹*The Two Cultures: and a Second Look*, by C. P. Snow; Cambridge University Press; 10s. 6d.

dropped with a tone at once admiring and affectionate, and to high table conversations, evoke the Cambridge background and the thrill of having been a young research student there at 'one of the most wonderful creative periods in all physics'. Allusions to the working class origins widen the perspective and humanise it; reference to important tasks well performed in the civil service add the impression—and a perfectly just one—of a man who knows much from the inside about power and the workings of power. Indeed the only 'inside' allusion one misses is to the novelist's art; which is a pity since so much of the lecture, on its more polemical side, and so much of the comment now added to it, amount to an indictment of the 'literary intellectual' and, indirectly or by implication, of a good deal of the literature which he either produces or spends much time and energy discussing. It is exclusively this indictment that I propose to examine briefly in what follows.

Indictment is not, I think, too strong a word—certainly not for what Sir Charles says about literary intellectuals as a class, and though his judgment on the books they write or read is more qualified, he is obviously deeply suspicious of a great deal of modern literature. Writers mentioned with more or less explicit disapproval—which need not, of course, prevent Snow admiring some of them from a point of view not relevant to his present purpose—are Dostoevsky, Henry James, Joyce, Eliot, Yeats, Pound, Lawrence, Orwell, Faulkner, Amis and Beckett. A mixed bag; but they are all more or less tainted, for this critic, by the same vice: ignorant of or indifferent to science, they ignore 'the natural order as though it didn't exist', and in consequence take a 'static view of the human condition', in particular of man's 'social condition'. There is, I should add, a slight difference, here, between the lecture and the subsequent comments. In his lecture, given to a university audience, Snow approached his main point—which was in a wide sense political, i.e. the need for educational reforms in this country to equip it to take a larger share in making the present scientific revolution serve the good of humanity as a whole—he approached this point, first by stressing the cultural disunity in our universities (scientists and 'Arts' dons can't exchange ideas; and this is the fault chiefly of the latter) and secondly by way of a fairly sweeping denunciation of literary intellectuals generally as, for the most part, complacently blind to the cultural value of science, politically reactionary and absurdly given to idealising the pre-industrial world ('Intellectuals, in particular literary intellectuals, are natural Lud-dites'). Even in 1959 these last two charges could seem a little out of date, with, to support them, the allusions to Pound and Yeats, to Ruskin,

Thoreau, William Morris and Lawrence. It was open to a critic to object, at this point, that Snow was flogging dead or dying horses *unless* he could show some deeper connexion between literary culture and 'reaction' than the right-wing tendencies of some outstanding poets of the 1920s and '30s and the fact that a succession of sensitive—and also, in some cases, powerful—minds between Ruskin and Eric Gill had abhorred industrialism. That there is some deep connexion, however, Snow evidently feels; and in his later comments on the lecture he comes a little nearer to showing what, for him, it is. This is on pp. 90–96 where he at last begins to consider the literature of the intellectuals as literature, that is to say, to take the evidence for his case against them, not from this or that anti-industrial or anti-organisational outburst (the 'screams of horror', as he puts it, of Ruskin or Lawrence) but from the novels and poems they like and admire. And the charge brought against them itself now shifts in its emphasis, putting them under suspicion of treason to society as such, not merely industrialised society. It says in effect: 'As the scientist has the future in his bones, so you have the past in yours—this your reactionary ways and your Luddite dreamings have sufficiently shown. But there is more to it than that; you are radically *anti-social*. Not that you aren't prepared to *take* all you can from society; you have always taken what you could get from princes and rich patrons; but you aren't at all prepared to *give*. And this is clear from the static view you implicitly take of society, as a mere given setting for the things that really do interest you, among which social change—that change for the better the scientific revolution is *malgré vous* effecting—is not, definitely not, included. You want a "social cushion unaffected by change" (p. 96) to fall back on—or at least you don't care whether it changes or not because at bottom you don't give a damn for society; as most of the literature you admire shows, and as Lionel Trilling has pointed out (agreeing in diagnosis, if not in the conclusion drawn therefrom, with the Marxist Georg Lukacs), saying that what you deeply desire is "freedom from society itself", escape from all "societal bonds" '.

The above gives, I think, the gist of Snow's critique of the sensibility underlying the 'modernist movement', as he calls it, including in this term most of 'the high talents in western literature' from Dostoevsky to Samuel Beckett. The charges involved—that artists are indifferent to morals and the common good—are not new, of course; moreover one may admit that they are often not unfounded. It is far from my purpose to meet Snow on this ground. But questions arise in this connexion which he does not stop to consider and are worth considering; above all

the question as to what is essential—as being inherent in art as such—and what is adventitious—as being contingent on this or that temperament or set of circumstances—in the social and moral *indifference* that Snow feels in the ‘modernist movement’. It is a question whether he is not badly missing the point in seeing in this indifference only ‘the romantic conception of the artist carried to its extreme’. With this phrase Snow presumably points to an eccentricity; and implies that there is a more ‘central’, a truer conception of art than the romantic one. No doubt there is; but what, for him, is it? He does not say; the question does not seem to have occurred to him. But earlier, in the lecture, he had said what he does expect from novelists (and presumably in their different ways from artists generally):

It is hard to think of a writer of high class who really stretched his imaginative sympathy, who could see at once the hideous back-streets, the smoking chimneys . . . and also the prospects of life that were opening out for the poor, the intimations, up to now unknown except to the lucky, which were just coming within reach of the remaining 99.0 per cent of his brother men.

That is a judgment on nineteenth-century novelists, contemporary with the industrial revolution. I am not directly concerned here with its truth; but clearly it is a moral judgment implying blame; those novelists, it says, were, in the manner and under the aspect indicated, a deplorably selfish lot. Their quality as novelists or artists only comes in through the implication that they were gifted with ‘imaginative sympathy’ which they failed to use enough; but very likely Snow also means that if they had been more generous as men they might have been greater novelists. They would in any case, he very clearly means, have been more use to society. Turn seventy pages and we find essentially the same judgement being passed on the writers of that ‘modernist movement’ which began, as we have been told, in the last century and is still with us. They are found wanting in the same way, though now the judgment is supported with a little more analysis, thanks to Snow’s reading of Lukacs. As their predecessors failed to support the industrial revolution (they are not accused of having *ignored* it) so do the moderns fail in respect of its issue, the scientific revolution. As artists they have developed, or at least changed (for Snow seems to dislike the novelities that Lukacs’s ‘long and sustained analysis’ has revealed to him: ‘rejection of narrative objectivity; dissolution of the personality’—giving incidentally no hint of being aware that such phrases, thus baldly thrust at the reader, are the stalest of *clichés*); but as men these moderns are as un-

generous, as unimaginative as their predecessors. But now this negative quality in them is identified with a negative way of looking at history and at society; with a characteristic 'ahistoricity' and a 'static view' of the human social condition. I hope I do Snow no injustice if I take these terms to mean that he finds the root vice of modern literature to be the supposition that in most important respects man, in particular social man, does not change from one age to another; this in turn being due, as to its tap-root moral cause, to the lack of imaginative sympathy already mentioned. Again, I will not directly dispute the truth or falsehood of all this, but only try to make out the conception of the art of literature—and so, broadly speaking, of one of our 'Two Cultures'—that it implies.

This is not easy because Snow appears far less interested in the motives and point of view of writers and artists than in those of scientists. No doubt he understands scientists better; certainly he respects them more as a class. He can neatly formulate the 'two motives' of the scientific process: 'one is to understand the natural world, the other is to control it'. He has kept a fresh enthusiasm for physical science: 'the most beautiful and wonderful collective work of the mind of man'. Again, on the moral side scientists seem to him by and large sounder than other intellectuals; 'there is a moral component right in the grain of science itself'—and not, or nothing like so much, it is implied, in whatever it is that interests the *litterati*. By their fruits, in any case, you shall know them; literary intellectuals are by and large reactionary, selfish, parasitical. Very well; but what we miss in all this is—and the lack is strange in a practising novelist—any effort of imaginative sympathy (to use Snow's own phrase) such as might have led him to some glimpse of the deeper springs of literary or any other art. He never stops to ask himself whether poets and novelists have any motive for going to work other and deeper than that of keeping their place on that 'social cushion' which alone enables them to be, with impunity, socially so useless (p. 96). Delicately perceptive as to the scientist's motives and qualities, Snow deals with the *litterati* like a barbarian. He even dislikes them indiscriminately. One cannot suppose, for example, that *if* Samuel Beckett is an anti-scientific reactionary (as it is implied he is) he is so in the same sort of way as D. H. Lawrence. It is surely obvious that the evidence in Beckett's case, such as it is, must belong to a wholly different set of data from that of Lawrence's 'screams of horror'. One might have expected that, if only for clarity's sake, Snow would have attempted to distinguish, in terms of the motivations and causes involved, at least between explicit anti-industrialism (Ruskin, Morris, Chesterton, Gill, Lawrence) and that implicit hostility or in-

difference to science which he attributes—as stemming from a profound rejection of all ‘societal bonds’—to Beckett and the rest of the ‘modernists’ listed above; not to speak of the Fascism of a Pound or the ‘disgruntlement of the under-employed arts graduate’ attributed to ‘Amis and his associates’. All these names and attitudes are in effect crudely lumped together.

And yet one has also the strong impression that when, near the end of his book, Snow cites Lukacs’s analysis of ‘modernism’ he feels that he has at last got near to the psychological roots of the *litterati*’s alienation from science and social progress. Those roots are in the ‘ahistoricity’, the ‘static view’ of the human condition which Beckett—to take perhaps the clearest example of a ‘modernist’ in Snow’s sense—displays. The critical question which, to my view of the matter, arises now is this: Is Snow’s complaint essentially a complaint about the *content* of a certain literature, or is it more deeply aversion to (implying perhaps a misjudgment of) an underlying motive or spirit which underlies that particular content and in a sense pre-exists independently of it even while it shapes and forms it? On the way one answers this question, it seems to me, will depend the view one takes of Snow’s critique of traditional culture and, what is more important, the view one takes of the forces in the modern world which he represents and speaks for. In fact of course the question, in the personal way I have put it, cannot be answered, because Snow has not made his own thought clear enough; but it is well worth while to define what *may* be his position, what *could* be the assumptions he is voicing.

If his objection to the ‘modernists’ is only to the content of their work, then it need not, in theory at least, imply any special theory about art or poetry as such. He objects, we have seen, to the fact that they do not take certain themes into their work, drawn from the progress of science and its application to human welfare. The objection is chiefly a moral one; had these writers been more generous and humane they would have adopted such themes; in some sense, it is even implied, they *ought* to have adopted them. They on their side might well retort that it is nobody’s business but their own *what* they choose to write about, and that it shows a very shallow view of art to suppose that you can dictate to them in this sort of way; and certainly Snow’s attitude here does remind one a little of those Catholics who complain of Greene or Mauriac for not handling religious themes optimistically enough. Still, so far as content only is in question the argument remains on a philosophically superficial level. It is another matter if the question of content be extended to include a question as to the very nature of art or poetry, as to the underlying motive and capacity which makes people artists or poets at all; if

one were, for example, to say: 'Yes, I do have the right to propose such and such themes to you artists, and someone may have the right to compel you, by this or that means, to adopt them—or any others that seem socially valuable—into your work. And this because you are simply the servants of the community. You cannot appeal to any title deed of freedom; to any faculty or power in you that is not, or cannot be made to be, entirely subordinate to the collectivity. Science has examined the nature of man and it finds no such power or faculty. If there be such a thing, show us where it is. You are warned!'

It is easy to see how some such argument as this could be drawn from materialism of a Marxist type, where everything in man is subordinated to the needs of the productive working community. Sir Charles is not, so far as I know, a Marxist but a liberal agnostic. Yet much of his book could easily serve an illiberal cause; as, no doubt, could many of the things said or written by his adversaries the *litterati*, many of whom would be hard put to it to justify their claim to freedom for the artist on the principles they assume in other contexts. There is confusion on both sides. Yet wherever poets exist, there implicitly is a claim to freedom which cannot *per se* be gainsaid on moral or political grounds; though, to be sure, society may rightly protect itself against the results of it. Poets are dangerous, for as such they are carriers of an intellectual force which has its proper term or end, not in the moral good of the poet, nor in the welfare of society, but in the perfection of a thing to be made, to be placed objectively into existence, the poem, the word-child and love-child of the mind. Poetry is in the order of art, not morality. Subjectively it is an internal state of creative or expressive attention to things; and to things taken quite generally; it entirely prescind from attention to any particular kind of thing. The poet's only concern *qua* poet is to get whatever he attends to into words suited to it and to his attention. Hence a certain 'strangeness' of poetry with respect to the interests proper to the moralist or the statesman; a strangeness which has nothing to do with 'romanticism'; a strangeness, finally, which the poet himself may terribly feel and suffer from, finding himself a living bearer of and witness to a distinction, a conflict between forces which seem humanly irreconcilable. Yeats, for example, knew this:

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life or of the work,
And if it takes the second, must refuse
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.