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The Cambridge Affair

'Dons in bitter row over Eng Lit policy.' Saturday or no Saturday, it is doubtful whether even half the *Guardian's* readers took the time to read the report that appeared under this headline on January 17; and of those who did, there must have been many who wondered just what it was about the denial of tenure to a young Cambridge academic, Colin MacCabe, that warranted a full column on the front page of a national daily. They'd seen nothing yet. Over the next two weeks there followed reports, interviews, letters and editorials, got-up treatises and well-drilled leaks, all designed to explain and/or pass judgement on Cambridge's worst academic controversy for a generation. Before a third week was out, the affair had reached its first climax. On Wednesday February 4, the University's Senate met to debate a motion calling for the suspension of the English Faculty pending an inquiry into

its administration and appointments policy. The *Guardian's* front page was dominated by photographs of a trio whose names were now familiar to the paper's least vigilant reader: MacCabe and his supporters Raymond Williams and Stephen Heath.

But how much had been clarified by now? MacCabe, after five years as an assistant lecturer in the Faculty, had been denied tenure, and so, effectively, dismissed. The decision, a controversial one at every stage, appeared to be part of a concerted 'traditionalist' effort to curtail intellectual pluralism in the Faculty, to the disadvantage of a broad, internally diverse 'radical' or 'modernist' current — the appointments committee had crowned its judgement on MacCabe by ridding itself of his two senior supporters, Williams and Frank Kermode. The issue, the press revealed, was 'structuralism', a fateful dogma to which

MacCabe was said to give his allegiance. But structuralism here is the intellectual equivalent of a UFO: strangely brilliant, glamorously incomprehensible, and quite inscrutable in its designs on civilisation as we know it. The ostentatious bafflement of sections of the press is the sign of a deep cultural disturbance.

The Cambridge Tradition

Cambridge has witnessed such disturbances before. It was there, some fifty years ago, that 'English' was effectively created in its modern form. I A Richards, William Empson, F R and Q D Leavis and L C Knights are the most prominent of a generation that emerged in the twenties and rebelled against the 'scholar-gentlemen' of literary studies, making a 'critical revolution' that forged a quite new discipline with new analytic methods, new standards, new traditions and a new cultural status.

The press was naturally quick to summon up the controversies of the twenties and thirties — particularly those associated with the Leavises. But today's protagonists also have invoked this history, with far more deliberate purposes in mind. Here is Raymond Williams, writing in the *Guardian* a week after that first report. 'Consider a group of youngish men who decide that the

established methods of literary history and appreciation are inadequate. They move instead to the problems of any writing and reading: problems centred in language. They begin research and teaching in new kinds of direct analysis, and they also keep in touch, theoretically, with related work in contemporary philosophy, psychology and sociology. At the same time others of their colleagues are exploring the complex relations between literature and history, ideas and contemporary society. To mark this emphasis they give the title, *Literature, Life and Thought*, to a central part of their syllabus.' The *double entendre* of this paragraph is very effective. The main line of the Cambridge tradition, Williams is suggesting, runs down not to the conservative bloc that currently dominates the Faculty committees but to the opposing coalition whose prospects as teachers and researchers in Cambridge are now under threat. MacCabe too has taken essentially this position.

There is real value in reaffirming the qualities of that early period now; Williams is right to emphasise 'how deliberately open, experimental and challenging — how essentially unafraid — that whole enterprise was'. Moreover, there is substantive point in the general comparison he makes between the first and the present waves of intellectual radicalism — and between the established forces who dispensed tenures then and now. But comparisons are by definition limited, and so, correspondingly, are appeals based upon them. No purpose is served by avoidance of the fundamental *difference* between the new wave of the twenties and their counterparts fifty years on, for this difference is in fact the source of the wider disturbance.

The Ascendancy of 'English'

Williams' account of 'the critical revolution' does not allude to its ambition for the *status* of English. Yet this was the rationale of the innovations he describes and the declared goal of their most committed exponents: to win for English the role from which religion and classics had now been dislodged, as moral control-point of the entire culture. So much is there to be read in the early writings of I A Richards, and the history of the Leavises and their journal, *Scrutiny*, stands in evidence of the dedication it inspired. The Leavises, of course, were self-styled 'outlaws', but the central claim for which they fought was not the minoritarian creed they insisted it was. On the contrary, by the end of the Second World War it had been established as a basic tenet of English education. Seldom expounded as doctrine, it was nevertheless deferred to quite generally,

and no other discipline entered a rival claim. The cultural paramountcy of English was taken largely for granted, in schools, in universities, and in the literary world beyond.

This too is 'the Cambridge tradition', but in this case it is the 'traditionalists' who truly belong. Not only do the radicals stand apart from it; their work constitutes a powerful challenge to it, and thereby calls into question certain settled features of the dominant culture as a whole. What is the nature of this challenge? It would be too difficult to try here to synthesise Williams's 'cultural materialism', and utterly self-defeating to attempt yet another capsule-summary of the critical (and journalistic) conveniences 'structuralism' and 'post-structuralism'. It is possible, however, to separate out several lines of argument and to indicate their bearing on the dominant tradition of English literary studies.

'Culture', understood as a body of permanent values by which society might be judged, was always crucially important to this tradition. Williams began by displacing the



Colin MacCabe

term, using it now to mean 'a whole way of life', a complex, historical process in which the conventional elements of 'culture' were joined by forms of expression hitherto disregarded as legitimate objects of study. Then, in a parallel operation, he unveiled the historical development of the idea of 'literature' as a distinctive and intrinsically valuable body of expression in language, and argued for a shift of analytic emphasis to the notion of 'writing', in which the conventional literary modes would take their place in the ever changing historical continuum of what Marx called 'practical consciousness'. These twin losses of privilege were followed inevitably by a third. If 'culture' was not a permanent resource to be defended or drawn on as the occasion dictated, and 'literature' was not a linguistic thing apart, what exactly became of 'criticism', the discipline whose own special claims were based on these very convictions?

MacCabe's work, it is well known, draws

on different sources from Williams's. Structural linguistics and psychoanalysis (both sharply criticised by Williams) and, latterly, the post-Althusserianism of Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, are among its main references. Yet it converges with Williams's work in certain salient respects. The main theme of MacCabe's writing has been the processes by which meaning is produced in language. The theoretical elaboration of this theme has entailed critiques of the twin notions of an already existing *subject* of speech or writing (a source whose expression the latter would be) and of a similarly pre-given *object* (external data whose reflection it would be) — in one word, a critique of any traditional idea of *experience*. But in attacking experience as a criterion, such arguments undermine both the romantic conception of 'literature' as privileged perception and the prevailing notion of 'criticism' as privileged 'response'; once again, the tradition is threatened. And not only a professional tradition; for the effect of such a critique, if it were carried to a victorious conclusion, would be to undermine the *authority* of literature and so confound the long standing claim of literary intellectuals to privileged cultural insight. It is worth recalling now that, long before his career was derailed by a hostile appointments committee, MacCabe's book *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* was scandalously treated in sections of the London literary press.

The Prospects in Cambridge

For the present, the main issue will continue to be the circumstances of the judgement of MacCabe's case for tenure and the need for an authoritative independent review of it. Related to this, however, is a larger matter of policy. In English, as in any intellectual field, free competition is the best guarantee of progress. But it would be naive to imagine — the more so as education cuts bite deeper — that goodwill may be trusted to secure it. The pluralism that the Cambridge opposition is demanding cannot be safeguarded if it is not entrenched in correspondingly composed administrative bodies. But this consideration rules out any narrowly 'proceduralist' approach to the redress of MacCabe's situation. The temptation to repress intellectual challenges by administrative means will win out again and again unless the administration is reformed as one designed to accommodate debate as the *normal activity* of the Faculty that it sustains. With this goal in view, it is perhaps best that intellectual differences be stated now with all possible plainness, where necessary breaking with the received ambiguities of 'the Cambridge tradition'. O