forum

LITERATURE, FRESHMAN, AND MORALITY

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I

The controversy that my title is meant to point toward is, I am quick to admit, often boring and fruitless. I trust that there is no need to describe it at length. Someone has asked the students to read a book that offends someone else's sense of sexual decency. Someone has assigned some such novel as Last Exit to Brooklyn or Our Lady of the Flowers -- some novel replete with all those virile Anglo-Saxon monosyllables and sometimes with painstakingly detailed explorations of such taboo practices as masturbation, homosexuality, lesbianism, and so on. And someone -- usually some parent, alumnus, trustee, or "friend of the college"-- is incensed. The Dean begins to get the irate telephone calls, and we hear the innuendoes about night-life in the dormitories, the arguments ad hominen, and the tired cliches about Socrates being made to drink hemlock. It tends to be a relentlessly repetitious controversy, but it does often involve important assumptions, and it may be that if these could be brought to the surface and discussed, the controversy might be carried on with a degree of cogency that it too often lacks.

My own experience in these matters is limited, and there may be better reasons for assigning or refusing to assign some supposedly licentious book than I have heard. But the ones I have heard are these. Those who condemn the book say either that it may corrupt the young or that it may tarnish the image of the college in its surrounding community. Those who defend the book sometimes say that the college ought to teach it because it will have a liberating effect on the students: it will "shake them up" and help to emancipate them from their provincialism and middle class values. Or, if this argument is not thought to be effective, those who defend the book may do so on the grounds of its relevance to the contemporary world: Deer Park, they say, will give the students a valuable insight into the manners and mores of our society, will show them what our society is really like.

One of these assertions lies slightly to one side of the issues that I hope to discuss, and I would like to get it out of the way in a preliminary and perhaps abrupt fashion. Those who condemn the book say that it may tarnish the image of the college. Parents may withdraw students, alumni may withdraw support, and contributors may withhold funds. The problem here concerns the degree of loyalty and responsibility that a college owes to its surrounding community. While a college does have such a responsibility, its

first responsibility must always be to the intellectual life and the heritage of thought and culture which it represents and transmits. If a book has an important place in that heritage, then the college should see to it that the book is represented on its campus whatever the expectations of the community might be. But the college does, of course, have a responsibility to this community. I should say that it is just what Socrates identified as the responsibility of the rational man: to be able to give coherent reasons why he believes what he believes and does what he does. The college need not truckle to the community, but it must be able to reply to it with cogent and rational grounds for the manner in which it conducts its affairs.

If we can set aside this "public relations" argument, we are left with three assertions. I will, in lawyer-like fashion, list the assumptions and then go on to deny them.

1. Literary choices are to be made in moral terms and on moral grounds.

2. A college should seek to impart moral or spiritual enlightenment to its students.

3. The justification of college study lies in its relevance to the contemporary world.

II

Both sides to the controversy, whatever their differences, seem to agree that choices among works of imaginative literature ought to be made in terms of morality, and they even imply that the purpose of literature is a moral one. Although their ideas of morality may differ, they are both judging on moral grounds: one side is condemning the book because it sets at naught some value they cherish -- chastity or conventional standards of decent discourse, perhaps; while the other side is praising the book because it has a moral or spiritual effect which they cherish -- emancipation or liberation or something on that order.

The precise relations between morality and literature are a vexed and vexing matter. Here there is neither the space nor the necessity to develop them completely. It is obvious that literature presents us with characters making moral decisions and with authors recommending moral values, and a host of examples make it clear that as moralists we may use literature in a variety of significant ways. It has even been said that every serious author has some scheme of values or view of life which he wishes to persuade his readers of, and while we may wish to deny the "every," it is obviously true of many or even most authors. (It is especially true of authors since the Romantic Era.) And since a person's ability to grasp this scheme of values is one of the most convenient tests of his ability as a reader, it is to be expected that a good deal of attention will be focused upon it in the

classroom.

Considerations such as these make it easy and natural for us to go on to say, as was traditionally said, that the purpose of literature is a moral one: literature exists to delight and instruct. It may be easy and natural to say this, but it is also false. The word "instruction," it is true, may be so manipulated that one may say that literature "instructs," but this turns out to be a sense of the word quite removed from the sense it bears in normal discourse, and these days it is better to be blunt about the matter. The purpose of literature is not moral or spiritual "uplift" or enlightenment, and Philip Rahv was quite accurate when he recently observed that "the relation between literature and truth or moral insight is sometimes very erratic, if not altogether deceptive."[1]

There are, of course, more famous names that might be invoked here -- one thinks of Coleridge's insistence that the purpose of a poem is pleasure and not truth -- but these appeals to authority hardly seem necessary. It should be obvious at this late date that those who define literature in moral terms are letting themselves in for some unpleasant consequences. The very first critic to judge literature in terms of its moral value was Plato, and the result of that decision is known to all of us. The poets were thrown out of the just republic because they are not trustworthy as sources of moral insight. And if Plato's premises are granted, we must admit that he was quite right. It may even be that Leo Tolstoy, given his premise that the purpose of literature is moral improvement, was correct in saying that Uncle Tom's Cabin is superior to Shakespeare's plays.

Such aberrations may tempt us to deny that morality has any relevance whatever to literature, but this is, of course, quite as extravagant as it is to define literature in moral terms. How do we react to the moral principles and decisions that we find in literary works? If we are good readers, we play a game of "let's pretend." We accept the author's premises hypothetically and for the time being, and then we see what he makes of them. We grant that ghosts may exist, that statues may come to life, that prophecies always come true, that Nature never did betray the heart that loved her. For the test of a work of art is not its "truth to life" but its internal coherence and consistency. If this coherence is maintained, we do not scribble "How true" or "What nonsense" in the margins (as we might in the margins of this essay). There are, for example, works of the imagination which ask us to accept the premise that the act of murder is not very important and can be quite comical. Anyone who might be "corrupted" by such a work would not be in need of moral enlightenment; he would be in need of instruction about the nature of literature and the manner in which it is to be received.

Admittedly, there are occasions on which this game of "let's

pretend" breaks down. On the one hand, we may come across statements, creeds, or allegiances which we believe to be profoundly true, and we may remove these from the novel or poem and make them our own in our own daily life. (As Yeats' lines "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are filled with a passionate intensity" are for many people today not dramatic utterances in a poem but a truth whose authority is beyond question.) On the other hand, we may find the author's outlook to be so pernicious -- as in Ezra Pound's poems recommending anti-Semitism -- that we are unable to assume it even hypothetically. We must simply close the book. Such an example might suggest that there is some consensus gentium of humane or "universal" values which an author must not violate if he is to win our acceptance. While the great majority of authors do in fact write within the limits of some such consensus, still this is a rather misleading and perhaps ultimately false doctrine. As is certainly suggested by Homer's calm acceptance of murderous brutality or the grim pleasure with which Dante places his contemporaries in the burning pits of Hell.

Literature does not and cannot tell us what powers, if any, govern our world, nor what forms of conduct are pleasing to them. And if we make such enlightenment the aim of our reading, we will stultify and even destroy our interest in literature. Our list of acceptable authors will be reduced to those who are in possession of the "truth"; we shall say that these authors have written "great" literature while all the others have written "mere" literature, and it is all too possible that we shall end by continually gazing at ourselves in the mirror that we have defined as "great" literature.

Of course, the act of reading imaginative literature does have important ethical and moral significance. By submitting ourselves to the moral outlook of a wide variety of authors we become aware of moral possibilities of which we previously knew nothing, we may develop some sense for the complexities of ethical decisions, and we may even develop a sort of ethical tolerance and balance. But this reading does not and cannot of itself give us moral wisdom, and it cannot even insure our commitment to moral concerns. After all, our acquaintance with the literary world need be very slight to show us that those who have read a good deal of imaginative literature are not morally superior to those who have not done so. Tolstoy's many diatribes concerning the moral superiority of simple, unlettered folk to the literati of his time are gross exaggerations; it is also exaggerated to simply reverse his position and speak as though literature does in fact confer such a superiority.

III

We have now arrived at our second assumption -- that a college has a duty to impart moral or spiritual enlightenment to its students. In the controversy that we are discussing this assumption appears when those who defend the allegedly salacious novel do so

on the grounds that it will have a certain moral effect: it will be emancipating or liberating and will lift the student above the narrow provinciality of his middle class values, presumably into some sort of higher wisdom.

There are several things that might be said here. One might deny that we in fact have the close and copious knowledge of our students' values which would be necessary if we were to know just what we are to liberate them from. (Are we to unhesitatingly accept the students' rather faltering attempts to articulate their attitudes, when we know how difficult we ourselves find it to say anything meaningful about our own values?) Or one might remark that there is never a reasonable approach to precision in the use of the term "middle class" -- at least not in this context. What is the middle class, and how do we know what its values are? This "middle class" is, indeed, on its way to becoming a rather ludicrous anachronism, for the allegations that one hears about it today are almost precisely the same as those that may be inferred from the early works of Joyce, Mann, or Gide, works which appeared nearly half a century ago. It is difficult to believe that this "middle class" is some timeless Platonic essence which hovers serenely above the normal processes of historical change. It is considerations of this sort which sometimes lead to the suspicion that "middle class values" have become a perhaps convenient but rather frayed rhetorical fiction.

But even if this is wrong and there are such things as middle class values, then it seems plain that this belief in the power of education to grant moral redemption and damnation must be one of them. There is certainly a good deal of evidence to suggest that it is one of the more pervasive faiths of the American people. In our zeal to liberate people from middle class values, perhaps we teachers have incorrectly identified those who are in need of this deliverance.

Just as we were touching upon a complicated matter when we were brought up against the relation between literature and morality, so the relation between education and morality cannot be described by over-simplified disjunctions or identifications. No one denies that the collegiate experience may have -- indeed one hopes it will have -- an ethical impact upon the students, but just as it is not true that the purpose of literature is to be morally uplifting, so it is not true that the purpose of a liberal education is to give the students moral and spiritual well-being.

Perhaps the point would be more easily granted if Cardinal Newman's Idea of a University were read as often as it is cited. The book is frequently referred to as one of the great landmarks in the theory of liberal education, but it is not easy to see that it has much influence upon educational matters today. Newman placed an extraordinarily high value upon the fruits of a liberal education, and he has given them what is perhaps their most famous

definition. A liberal education, he tells us, is meant to impart

> that true enlargement of the mind which is the power of viewing many things at once, as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence.[2]

This is the "health of the intellect" which it is the goal of liberal education to give its students. It is a great good and greatly to be prized. However, as Newman is at pains to point out, it is not a moral or spiritual virtue. There are many virtuous people who do not have it, and some of those who do have it are -- well, not notorious for their virtue.

A student's intellectual development does presuppose certain moral virtues -- honesty and integrity, for example. But there are crucial moral virtues -- humility and commitment to the common good (and perhaps even chastity) which cannot be made the aim of a liberal education. As Newman said, there is nothing in the structure of a liberal education which can prevent its students from becoming "victims of an intense self-contemplation." This self-absorption -- pride, as it used to be called -- can corrupt every moral virtue, and one may legitimately wonder whether or not a liberal education does not tend to promote this failing just about as often as it militates against it. As Newman recalled, "Basil and Julian were fellow-students at the schools of Athens; and one became the Saint and Doctor of the Church; the other her scoffing and relentless foe."[3] We may substitute whatever moral or religious or humanitarian ideal we like for Newman's Church; his point will remain untouched.

Of course, a college has a moral responsibility. Moral issues are matters of concern to the students, and the college should help the students to apprehend and discuss these concerns intelligently. But there should be no pretence about this. It will not assure, and perhaps not even noticeably further, any degree of moral commitment on anyone's part. It is simply another way in which to encourage that "health of the intellect" which this very controversy shows to be so necessary.

IV

We now come to our third and last assumption, the assumption that appears when those who defend the supposedly scandalous book do so on the grounds that it will give the student important insights into contemporary society. Lionel Trilling has already stated this assumption better than I can:

> The unargued assumption of most curriculums is that the real subject of all study is the modern world; that the

> justification of all study is its immediate and presumably practical relevance to modernity; that the true purpose of all study is to lead the person to be at home in, and in control of, the modern world.[4]

Mr. Trilling goes on to say that he knows of no way of quarreling with this assumption, but it seems to me that we need only to state the assumption in order to see its insufficiency. Surely all of us have shared Mr. Trilling's desire to occasionally find that quiet place where the student can simply know something: "in what year the Parthenon was begun, the order of battle at Trafalgar, how Linear B was deciphered"; almost anything at all which does not ring the changes on all the accepted ideas about Angst and anxiety and alienation.

The contemporary world and comtemporary culture are legitimate, important, and necessary objects of study. Our own time is quite properly of greater interest to us than another time. But while our culture looks quite disapprovingly upon provincialism in space, provincialism in time is becoming more widespread every day. All of us are learning every day to pronounce the names of exotic spots on the globe which yesterday we didn't even know existed. But that common grasp of the past which was once the shared possession of all educated men and women is every day becoming more rare.

Furthermore, we are discussing the general education of young people during their first years in college, and we must ask how we may most effectively help them toward Newman's "health of the intellect." Do we most effectively do this when we lead them into all the strident urgencies of contemporary culture? It seems possible that the breadth and balance of vision which Newman spoke of might be more easily acquired in a less over-heated arena. If we wish to liberate our freshmen from moral provinciality, perhaps we will not advance very far toward this goal by asking them to read novels which are flamboyant attacks on what are assumed to be conventional standards. Perhaps when we do this we are still within the areas of concern defined by conventional morality and our "liberation" is a rather truncated affair.

My ignorance of educational psychology is by now quite manifest, but I fear it is necessary to make the exposure even more complete. One sometimes meets with the belief that a student must have acquired a certain amount of sophistication and training before he can take an interest in the past. I do not know how to question this belief except by appealing to my own experience, but I at least have not found it to be true. On the contrary, the relatively unsophisticated students -- the freshmen and sophmores -- have, in my experience, often been readier than their upperclass colleagues to take a lively interest in past eras. The imaginative flexibility and readiness that is required in good reading is closely allied to the imaginative and intellectual flexibility

that is required in the study of the past, and just as the unsophisticated may be better and more willing readers than their elders, so they are often more willing to put aside present concerns for a moment and take an interest in the cultures of the past. Or so I have found.

I trust that the bearings of these uncertain remarks is apparent. What is important about this controversy is not the issue itself, but the fact that all of the participants to it have attributed to literature and literary education purposes which they cannot possibly sustain. It is hardly surprising these days to hear someone saying that because of the decline of traditional religion, American "education has become a kind of secular religion, and teachers a sort of lay clergy, equipping the young with whatever theology, morality, and spirituality they have."[5] Although it is not surprising, it is nonetheless disturbing. If such observations are correct, if either literature or education is becoming the religion of the future, then religion, education, and literature are in for some serious disappointments. For if, as I believe, one does a grave disservice to literature and to morality by identifying them or defining one in terms of the other, so one does a grave -- and indeed a more important -- disservice to education and morality if one slips into a similar confusion when thinking about their purposes. The chief burden of this essay, in fact, is a protest against the exaggerated moral and spiritual authority that in our time is so commonly attributed to literature and education.

Because the issues of today are in fact extreme in their intensity and because traditional religion has in fact lost so much of its authority, it is understandable that the college may be tempted to guide its students through these issues and to assume the mantle once worn by religion and the church. But to adopt these assumptions with all their spurious consequences is to take up illusory hopes and impossible expectations. Most importantly, in trying to do what we cannot do, we may easily desert the one task that we may hope to perform -- the encouragement and development of that "health of the intellect" which alone can permit our students to work creatively within our culture rather than passively accepting whatever assumptions and presuppositions it may entail. Of course, the last, vain hope is that a more modest attitude on our part might lead to a college catalogue which is something other than a work of fiction. But what's a Heaven for?

FOOTNOTES

1. "An Open Secret," New York Review of Books, June 1, 1967, p. 20.

2. The Idea of a University, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (New York, 1960), p. 103.

3. Ibid., p. 161.

4. Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning (New York, 1965), p.4.

5. Christopher Jencks, "The Future of American Education," The Radical Papers, ed. Irving Howe (New York, 1966), p. 274.

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active file

Kept by MRS. LUCILLE DUGGAN

When I hear someone say, "I haven't missed a single day of school in years," I marvel, for I am apparently beset by ills he either doesn't know anything about or rises above. I am sometimes contagious; I have even been needed. I expect these states, like death and taxes, will continue to arise and, again like death and taxes, they will probably not be convenient. My daily lesson plans (and let's discuss lesson plans some day) will not often give a substitute much help. Moreover, there are times when I don't want to hand over the work I am doing to anyone else. This means I have to have another plan ready for a substitute and it must be something that is worth doing.

Because my classes are subject to other emergencies, there are days when I need alternate plans for myself. I do not hesitate to abandon a lost cause if my best-laid preparations fall flat. Sometimes I simply don't want to teach what is on the agenda. At such times I draw upon a slim emergency file which "I would. . .were fatter."

Whether or not you have need of such a supply of alternatives, I hope you will contribute some of your ideas to those of us who do. For a start, here briefly sketched, are a few of mine:

Hand the students dittoed sheets upon which are short lists of suggested statements--topics for talks. I like funny or surprising ones. Allow one or two minutes to structure ideas before asking for less-than-a-minute talks.

Read some limericks. Complete some. Write some.