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## LITERATURE AND POLITICAL ACTION

For the past twenty years or so, the study of literature has been dominated by formal analysis. We have been told to examine carefully the structure, imagery, and tone of a literary work, so that we can see the novel or the poem as an artifact which creates its own world and is only incidentally a reflection of the world of everyday experience. As a result, many people have felt that literature is becoming removed from the moral issues we face in everyday life. Contemporary criticism has been called a mere game for aesthetes, and from time to time prominent critics and novelists issue statements advocating that literature once again be related to our moral concerns.

A recent example of such an accusation occurs in a pamphlet of the Students For a Democratic Society. In seeking to vitalize American colleges, these students make obvious suggestions as to how the social sciences can be used to bring about a better society. When it comes to the arts, they are (as we would expect the current generation of students to be) more cautious and specifically "reject the idea that the obligation of a radical artist is to produce art which serves and glorifies the movement." They are also opposed to a "philistine preoccupation with the purely political." At the same time, in its criticism of the academic disciplines, the report maintains that "formalistic analysis saps man's creative products of their social meaning and thereby, often, of their spiritual impact." (*Radical Education Project*, May, 1966.)

Although my example is taken from a radical group, the argument is not confined to them, but would reflect, without any change, the objection to the current study of literature that is voiced by conservative and, particularly, by religious groups. When a young person wants to know what he must do to be saved, or what we must all do to save our society, he finds very few guidelines in his literary study. The challenge being taken up here is therefore not confined to radicals, but is one that can rightfully be made by anyone who wants the knowledge gained in the humanities to be directly related to his moral experience. If literature is to be studied as a self-contained work of art which does

not teach us anything that is directly relevant to the world of action, can it still have any importance for our moral development?

Before offering my own answer, which is that literature does have such an impact despite its "amorality," I would like to refer very briefly to another kind of answer which will help clarify the issue. In discussing George Orwell's importance, Richard Rovere is forced to admit that Orwell is a minor novelist, definitely "of the second rank." Yet the critic argues that he gets "major satisfactions from certain minor novelists and minor satisfactions from certain major novelists. Stendhal, for example, means less to me than Butler, and Orwell more than Joyce." The context of the entire essay makes clear that Orwell "means more than Joyce" chiefly because Orwell could renew within us a feeling for the universally accessible virtues: "candor, courage, love, common sense, integrity, decency, charity."

The point of view expressed by Mr. Rovere, and shared by many intelligent readers, can be construed as one kind of answer to the charge that literary critics and teachers should bring literature closer to our moral concerns. Too sophisticated to ask that critics find moral direction in Stendhal and Joyce—instead of ambivalence and irony—critics like Mr. Rovere put these great writers into some kind of aesthetic limbo, where they can be praised without limit while at the same time "enjoyed" only for their "minor satisfactions." For their major satisfactions, these critics and readers turn to writers like Orwell in whose works courage, love, and decency are clearly distinguished from cowardice, hatred, and degeneracy.

There are, of course, many other ways of reconciling our natural impulse to find some relationship between literature and morality with the fact that critical analysis makes it increasingly difficult to find anything but ambivalence and irony in the best literature both of the past and the present. Nor is it our purpose here to prove that there is only one way to do so. But most critics who deal with the problem, even critics as diverse as F. R. Leavis, William Empson, Lionel Trilling, and Wayne Booth, assume that the moral concern to be found in literature is basically the same as the moral concern we have in ordinary experience. I want, however, to deny that assumption and to point out that the moral direction necessary in the world of action is not relevant to art. Second, and more important, I hope to show that the amorality or the "negative capability" (to use Keats's phrase) that is relevant to great literature has a "spiritual impact," but that this impact is dependent not on the answers the novel or poem may

give to us but on its power to make us question the answers we already have. It is not a moral direction that we must look for in literature, but a disturbance. Yet it is a kind of disturbance, and this will be my final point, that the moralist, of all people, needs the most.

To help clarify the first point, let me refer to a poem by Robert Frost, "The Most of It." The poem deals, in a broad and obvious sense, with the question of man's relationship to the natural forces of the universe. In his discussion of the poem's answer to this question, Randell Jarrell concludes that Frost expresses the

willingness to admit both the falseness in the cliché and the falseness in the contradiction of the cliché; if the universe never gives us a black or white answer, but only a black-and-white one that is somehow not an answer at all, still its inhuman "non-answer" exceeds any answer that we human beings would have thought of or wished for. (*Poetry and the Modern Age*, 1959, p. 50.)

For the common reader who wants the moral of the poem, who wants the critic to explain just what Frost thinks about man's kinship with the natural world, Jarrell's answer is not very helpful. Like so much of modern criticism, this interpretation doesn't help us to come to any particular conclusion but, rather, makes us aware of the impossibility of coming to any conclusion.

What is true of this short poem is true also of novels. When we get to the bottom of a contemporary interpretation of Raskolnikov or Billy Budd or Jay Gatsby, we get an answer to what the hero is really like not in terms of our own attitudes and concepts, but in terms of the particular situation depicted in the novel or the play.

It is for this reason that the critic pays so much attention to the particular images, rhythms, and tones of the work. It is not that the contextualist critic (as he is sometimes called) is indifferent to the moral issues faced by these characters, but that he wants to make sure that the issue is seen through that particular character, not in the general terms of philosophy or politics. Instead of bringing the moral significance out from the novel into our own familiar world, our familiar world is darkened and confused by being forced into the ambiguous complexity of the novel. It is not Raskolnikov who must fit into our concept of sin and repentance, or Billy Budd into the idea of injured innocence; on the contrary, it is our concepts and attitudes that must be modified, often quite drastically, to follow the unique experience presented by the novelist and poet.

As a result of such an emphasis, we are, it must be admitted, likely to receive not so much an answer as a "non-answer" to the moral ques-

tions raised in the novels, poems, and plays. We are not told what can be done or even how, in conventional terms, we should feel toward the heroes and the villains presented to us. Even in such a work as *Billy Budd*, a highly moral work in which the deepest feelings against tyranny—on the part of Melville and those of his readers—are so strongly engaged, we are still trying to see what can be said for the tyrannical captain who murders an innocent man. Does all “justice” really involve the betrayal of our natural feelings as we witness in Captain Vere? Again, as in *Frost*, we see the artist replying with a “non-answer.” As one critic has recently remarked, the story would be poor if it gave us a clear answer, if it allowed for

gross indignation as the only response. Either the tale is dynamic, in which case Vere’s position is one version of the truth, and the “rights of man” another; or the tale is static melodrama in which the villain wins the day through spurious rationalizations, and then Melville has written a tract against naval injustice. (Mark Spilka, *PAUNCH*, October 1966.)

We are not concerned here with a definitive interpretation of a story which has been read, and will continue to be read, in different ways. Nor do we maintain that in practice most readers lose their innate sympathy for the victim or their hatred for the executioner. But most critics would agree with Mr. Spilka that Melville’s artistic power reaches its highest level to the extent that it makes us go beyond the sympathies (and antipathies) that we naturally enough bring to the novel from our everyday experience. And conversely, to the extent that it merely enforces our hatred of the tyranny represented by Captain Vere, Melville’s story becomes “static melodrama” and a “tract.” If the tale is “dynamic,” as Mr. Spilka uses the term, then our feelings while reading the story are dynamic also.

If we were in the world of action, such an effect might be not only useless but immoral. The “non-answers” would, by immobilizing our sympathies, prevent us from supporting Billy Budd against Captain Vere, or even Desdemona against Iago. And for those readers who do not make a sharp distinction between art and life, such a situation is intolerable. If we are to accept the contemporary critics’ denial of moral direction, what can we say about the moral impact of these novels and poems? Is there a value, a “spiritual impact” in the artist’s telling us that there is no answer to basic questions of right and wrong, life and death? I believe that there is, and that to see it we must recognize that art separates us from the world of action.

For those to whom there is no real life outside of action, to a man who is a political animal only, this last statement is tantamount to say-

ing that art has no value. But in actual fact there are very few people who are not aware, consciously or unconsciously, of a level of experience which goes below the surface of what they do and say. When we act or say something in everyday experience, we choose, out of many possibilities, one path, or attitude, or concept. We vote for a candidate or do not vote for him, we write down one conclusion or another, or we say that there is no answer. To act is to "actualize" only one of the many possibilities that lie within us. But such a choice does not exhaust these possibilities. The other possibilities are still present in our minds. And it is in literature above all that we become aware of these possibilities.

Suppose we were to see a group of white men with shotguns approaching a newly integrated school in a Southern town, and beginning to threaten Negro children. And suppose we were on the side of the children and completely opposed to the mob. In terms of action we would do whatever possible to disperse the mob. Our knowledge of American history, psychology and sociology would, it is true, help us to understand the actions even of those who were on the wrong side. But it is only the novelist who can bring us to a level of experience where we get inside the minds of the armed mob and see them as they see themselves. Or, to put it another way, the novelist, unlike the political scientist or the psychologist, tries to "understand" the situation not in order to act more intelligently, but to bring us to a level of experience in which all action is irrelevant.

It must be emphasized that this indifference to action does not come about because the novelist is emotionally removed from the tense scene, as some aestheticians maintain. Ortega y Gasset, for example, would argue that the artist is "completely unconcerned, does nothing but keep his eyes open . . . The tragic inner meaning escapes his attention. . . ." In contrast to such concepts of emotional or aesthetic distance, I believe that the artist would be more deeply involved, in this imaginary scene between the Negro students and the white mob, than a civil rights worker. But the novelist is involved in *every* aspect of the situation, and the "depth" of his involvement brings him to a level where action is irrelevant.

Unlike the civil rights worker who wants to "know" the situation in order to prevent the mob from attacking the children, the novelist, in his capacity as novelist, is not interested in having anything happen, for good or for bad. He and his readers are consequently free to experience the scene outside of the fixed categories of perception that we ordinarily bring to any experience. For these categories, which include

ideas as to what is relevant and what is good, screen us from the immediacy, the living, ever-changing qualities of the scene. The civil rights worker, intent on driving off the white mob, is naturally enough blind to the pathos and courage that might be present in a member of that mob. And if he is to be effective, he is, or should be, oblivious to the divided feelings that may be present in his friends and even within himself. The man of action must concentrate on what is relevant for his purpose.

But such an attitude, necessary as it is for action, is disastrous in art. The artist too selects; no one, it must be granted, can see everything. But the artist who sees only what he needs to see for a political purpose, or to support a moral bias, is to that extent a poor or a lesser artist. An artist reaches his greatness not by subordinating his impressions to his moral or personal bias, but by getting out of himself. He tries to escape from his particular personality (to use T. S. Eliot's phrase), in order to give us the immediacy of the experience—the sensation that we are looking at the object or the experience for the first time.

The scene, even in a story by Kafka or Faulkner, is recognizable in terms of our everyday experience. And Wallace Stevens, who is both a poet and an aesthete, has emphasized the continuity of art and reality. He asks the poet to give us

A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,  
A tune upon the blue guitar  
Of things exactly as they are.

But the world is not presented to us as we would like it to be, or as we are accustomed to seeing it, or even as we need to see it in order to act effectively. The things should be "exactly as they are." It is their very being, not their practical uses, that the artist is trying to get. Whatever else it may be, the reality that an artist gives us is not the same as the reality that we abstract from the world around us for the purposes of doing something about it. A remark by William Faulkner will allow us to see another way in which the artist's purpose necessarily negates action: "My ambition is to put everything into one sentence—not only the present but the whole past on which it depends and which keeps overtaking the present, second by second." (*Faulkner-Cowley File*, New York, 1966.)

Such a purpose would be disastrous for a social scientist—and not only stylistically. For the social scientist and the historian learn about the past to use it. To return to our example of the integrated school,

they might want to learn about the South in 1872 so as to prevent a defeat for the Negro revolution in 1972. In the world of action, because we are interested in the future, we do not want the past to overtake the present. The opposite is true in the world of fiction. There is no future after the novel or the play comes to an end. The only motion at the end of a work of art is cyclic: If the music moves us deeply we want to listen to it again, and the ideal action at the end of a novel is to return to the first page.

Taken as a guide to action in dealing with the Negro revolution in our time, even the best works of Faulkner are useless. His novels are in fact worse than useless, even harmful, if we accept his sense of inevitable doom, of irreconcilable conflicts within society and the individual, as a political program.

But novels are not taken as guides to action, even by the novelists themselves. The novelist is not just a novelist, anymore than the reader is just a reader. And the novelist and poet is often the most vigorous political activist because he realizes this sharp difference between art and everyday experience. But if we do not ask of our novels and poems and plays what they cannot give, we may find in them something that is of value to all people, but particularly to those of us whose lives are dominated by moral imperatives. We are now ready for the answer to our final question: Just what kind of spiritual impact can we expect from art if we cannot get any moral direction?

The work of art, particularly literature, deals directly with the essential danger of any system of morality. For any idea by its very nature is prone to cut us off from the immediate experience which first produced the idea. Our "idea" of a flower can prevent us from really "seeing" the flower; and for this reason we appreciate the painter or the poet who can make us "see" the flower as if for the first time. In a more important sense, our ideas of segregation or of civil rights, or of passive resistance can prevent us from really seeing what is happening in a particular situation. (I am not, of course, even suggesting that we can live without preconceived ideas, or that it would be valuable to enter any situation with a *tabula rasa*—even if it were possible.) But it is equally obvious that our sense of what is relevant or irrelevant, right or wrong, is only one aspect of the world that surrounds us.

To be fully human we must not only have a moral imperative but an ability to go outside of that imperative and see things simply as things—outside of our own categories of right and wrong. The dusty roads (in the mob scene), the burning sun, the terror, fear, and heroism

of both friend and enemy, all have an existence aside from their role in the political struggle. And it is in art, particularly in literature, that we can become aware of this level of experience that goes beyond right and wrong. "Yet [as John Dewey has said] this indifference to praise and blame because of preoccupation with imaginative experience constitutes the heart of the moral potency of art. From it derives the liberating and uniting power of art." (*Art as Experience.*)

In the context of the argument presented here, the "liberating" power would refer to our freedom from the imperatives of our moral and political beliefs. And the "uniting power of art" would bring us (not of course in a political or social sense) as close to the man who is pointing his gun at us as it would to the innocent boy we are trying to protect. A good *reader*, as we have just seen, may be, imaginatively, as close to Captain Vere as he is to Billy Budd.

Such a description of art's relationship to morality should indicate not only its distinctive power, but also its limitations. It should be mentioned that Keats, who was perhaps the first to express the amorality of the artist in memorable form, also warned us that "poetry is not so fine a thing as philosophy—For the same reason as an eagle is not so fine a thing as truth." The spiritual impact described here may not be so fine—and is certainly not as necessary for our survival—as morality. We cannot live in a world dominated by art; or at least we cannot live and act at our best in such a world. But to live in a world without art, or in a world without the particular satisfactions offered to us by the great writers, would also be frightening—even if not as frightening as a world without morality.

It is important to vote the right way, march on the right side, and if one must use a gun, to point it in the right direction. But we are all aware of how narrow and superficial human beings can be even when their behavior is morally correct. And this narrowness and emptiness hurts society as well as themselves. For even a political victory cannot be complete if it results in men who are unable to be more than voters or marchers. And art is one of the ways in which all of us can be reminded of those levels of experience that go beyond our political and moral imperatives.