

Literary Criticism and Humanist Morality

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Although it is now over a year since the *Lady Chatterley* trial took place, the issues it raised continue to be absorbing for anyone interested in the relation between literature and morality. And only now, perhaps, when the angry dismay of those who disapproved of the verdict and the somewhat shrill jubilation of those who welcomed it have both subsided, can one look at those issues in a dispassionate spirit. So I make no apology for opening this paper with a consideration of some key aspects of the trial, before I pass on to other and more general questions. Reading through the Penguin volume, *The Trial of Lady Chatterley*, which contains a transcript of most of the proceedings, one is struck by the frequency with which the defence witnesses came into collision with the judge or prosecuting counsel over the fundamental meanings of words. Mr Richard Hoggart, for instance, puzzled and irritated the prosecuting counsel by insisting on giving to the word 'puritanical' its full historical significance; while Mrs Joan Bennett and the learned judge found themselves quite comically at cross-purposes about what they meant by 'marriage'. Another witness, Mr Raymond Williams, has since suggested that these clashes were inevitable when literary and legal minds had to meet on ground chosen by the latter; and no doubt he is right in finding them unedifying.¹ Nevertheless, certain of these disagreements are, I think, fruitful if properly considered, and this is particularly true of the profound and sustained disagreement about the significance of the word 'moral', which formed a continuous under-current to the trial, intermittently manifesting itself in the witnesses' evidence, and the speeches by counsel and the judge. This disagreement became more overt in the public controversy that followed the trial, notably in the correspondence columns of *The Times*.

The prosecution's case was the novel was immoral, since it described approvingly an adulterous relationship, with obsessive and detailed accounts of sexual behaviour; and that its publication would further undermine the crumbling standards of traditional morality. The de-

¹'The Law and Literary Merit', *Encounter*, September 1961.

fence's reply was to say that not only was the book not immoral, but that it was in fact genuinely and profoundly moral. Their attitude was put very persuasively by Mr Hoggart:

'What exactly do you mean by saying that, taken as a whole, you think the book is a moral book?'—'I mean that the overwhelming impression which comes out to me as a careful reader of it is of the enormous reverence which must be paid by one human being to another with whom he is in love and, in particular, the reverence towards one's physical relationships. Physical relationships are not matters in which we use one another like animals. A physical relationship which is not founded in a much closer personal respect is a vicious thing. This spirit seems to me to pervade *Lady Chatterley* throughout, and in this it seems that it is highly moral and not degrading of sex'. The reply of the prosecution, and the wider public which supported them, would have been, in effect if not in so many words, that Mr Hoggart's high-sounding phrases were so much hot air, since the parties were not married. How *could* an adulterous relationship be described as 'moral'? Marriage was, after all, as the judge testily exclaimed to Mrs Bennett, 'lawful wedlock, madam', and to call the book a great defence of marriage could only seem the most empty sophistry. If I were going on from this point to discuss the novel itself, I should certainly invoke Dr Ian Gregor's illuminating and, I think, accurate comment that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is not really concerned with social relationships at all, so that any talk of it being 'about' marriage or adultery is inappropriate—though, of course, such an interpretation would take one beyond the literal level of the narrative, at which the legal mind prefers to stick. But my present concern is not with the book, which has been talked about enough, but with the debate around the word 'moral' which it occasioned.

Turning back to Mr Hoggart's reasons for using the phrase 'a moral book', one can say that here is an eloquent and deeply felt statement of the post-Christian humanist attitude to marriage. It would be easy enough for a Catholic to echo the words of the prosecution and to say that Mr Hoggart was missing the point, since no amount of mutual respect and reverence can make a formally adulterous relationship into a marriage. Nor, indeed, can they. Yet if we examine Mr. Hoggart's words sympathetically we can surely find much to agree with; he is, in fact, describing a state of affairs which should exist *within* a sacramentally valid marriage, where the mutual respect and reverence, and the sense that the physical union is sacred, should indeed be evident.

Yet the essential validity of the marriage does not depend on them, though they immeasurably enrich it and are necessary for the everyday happiness of the parties. But for the contemporary humanist, the feelings and attitudes are themselves what validate the relationship; they have a quasi-sacramental authority. And, for all I know, in many cases such attitudes may quite closely approximate to what the natural law demands of the parties contracting a valid marriage. But it is clear that these attitudes, for the humanist, transcend any merely legal considerations of 'lawful wedlock'. In Lawrence's novel, according to the defence witnesses, true respect and reverence existed between Connie and Mellors (whether they in fact existed is another matter, and one on which other critics, myself included, might disagree), so their relationship was a genuine one, was, if you like, 'marriage'; whereas in the relation between Connie and Chatterley they patently did not exist, so that it ceased to be a true marriage, whatever its legal status. Now none of this is in the least degree unfamiliar. The attitude to marriage of Mr Hoggart, and many other defence witnesses, is that which prevails almost everywhere in our society, outside specifically Christian circles; we can find it expressed lucidly and honestly, or hypocritically concealed but nevertheless acted upon. A marriage is felt to be a marriage so long as it is a 'true' marriage, with the appropriate mutual feelings activating the relationship. The law, in part, acknowledges this state of affairs by permitting divorce, though it still, in this country, requires fairly stringent reasons before countenancing it. In general, however, the law of the state continues to reflect traditional Christian morality, based on the natural law, though—I must now hasten to add—in the somewhat sterile and mechanical form that inevitably results from the necessities of codification.

The very considerable interest of the *Chatterley* case arose, among other causes, because modern communications and the mass media made it clear to everyone, almost for the first time, that the existence of two distinct moralities in our society was an accomplished fact. And it was a great shock for innumerable unsophisticated people to realise that the traditional attitudes to marriage and sexual matters which they had always upheld in a more or less unthinking manner, and which were comfortably supported by the law of the land, were, in fact, rejected by many highly educated and seemingly responsible people (I am not, of course, ignoring the fact that several of the defence witnesses were Christians, who had other grounds for defending Lawrence's novel). Much of the outcry, the hysteria even, that followed the

acquittal of Penguin Books, surely arose from the violent bringing into the national consciousness of a state of affairs which had, in fact, existed for a long time. Nor can one reasonably doubt that many people who applauded the verdict were rejoicing at what looked to them a signal defeat for the traditional sexual *mores* of our culture. One need only look at some of the comments and satirical observations in the more sophisticated highbrow papers to see the truth of this. (To make my own position clear, I should perhaps say that though I think the novel poor, I also thought the decision to prosecute was a mistake, and that the verdict reached was the right one. But I deplore the clouds of emotion that befogged the issue).

I am well aware that by talking in this neat fashion about two moralities—the Christian and the liberal humanist—I am brutally simplifying a complex situation. There are many varieties of ethical attitude apparent among contemporary humanists (and it is, by the way, reluctantly, and solely for convenience, that I resign the term ‘humanist’ to the atheist or agnostic, since it is in Christianity that humanism finds its fulfilment). If one sometimes finds complete relativists, convinced that all forms of moral discourse are useless, since one man’s attitude is as good as another, one more often finds highly responsible persons whose views of ethical behaviour are demanding and rigorous. Yet all of them have in common the conviction that there can be no absolute and universally applicable moral standards governing human behaviour, and those who use the language of ethics tend, following Hume, to make their assessments in terms of feelings, desires, impulses, and so forth. In practice, humanists will judge a particular situation by making a delicate balance between one’s own good and that of others. Christian morality, on the other hand, as we are often told, is based on absolute standards. Here, I must admit, I feel a certain unease, if only because of the undesirable associations of ‘absolute’; it is easy to pass from this word to ‘absolutism’, ‘authoritarianism’, ‘repressiveness’, and all the other responses that make many people think of Christianity—particularly Catholicism—as a kind of spiritual fascism. The rigid codifications of the moral theologian and the canon lawyer, though necessary in man’s fallen state, can present a distorted image of the truths they were established to safeguard. In essentials, Christian morality is rooted in love, and in a concrete apprehension of the nature of man, of his relation to God, and of the end for which he was created. Its essence was presented in those noble words of St Augustine, ‘Love God, and do what thou wilt’.

It is also true that in many particular situations, the procedures of the Christian in determining a right course of action will be similar to those of the responsible humanist. Granted that I, as a Catholic, am obliged to attend mass on Sunday, I must still decide which mass to go to; whether to go to an early mass and receive communion, even though this means my wife must stay at home and look after the children and go herself to a later mass; or whether I shall go to the later mass, and enable her to receive communion at the early one. Here, one must take account of the relevant factors and carefully arrive at a decision: what one is not at liberty to decide about is whether or not to go to mass at all; the principle underlying this particular situation is unaffected. It is in the large issues—such as those concerning marriage—that Christian fidelity to the inescapable demands of the moral law, no matter how personally inconvenient they may be, is most sharply at variance with the humanist tendency to assess *all* situations in terms of a particular balance of motives and probable results. So though the distinction between Christian and humanist morality is less simple than my original antithesis may suggest, one must, I think, maintain that there *is* a distinction, which is constantly apparent.

As I have suggested, the public exhibition of this distinction was one of the most interesting features of the *Lady Chatterley* trial. Another aspect, equally significant, was the way in which the profession of humanist morality was shown to be intimately involved with the practice of literary criticism and the academic teaching of English literature. Mr Williams has remarked:

The most interesting thing to me was that I would have said, before the trial, that critical opinion in Britain and America on the whole concludes that literary and moral questions are separate, at the level of academic discipline. For some years I have been profoundly dissatisfied with this, believing it to be a late product of aestheticism. But then, at the trial, it seemed that many critics in fact habitually combine literary and moral judgments: not at the stupid level of whether a given character behaves well or badly, but at the level of the human importance, and value towards life, of a given novel.

Another Cambridge critic, Dr Donald Davie, has also noted this aspect, but with considerable misgivings:

Did it not surprise the lawyers, and the public at large, to find some of the defence witnesses in the *Lady Chatterley* trial impelled by

an apparently impeccable logic from deciding on 'literary merit' to deciding on the proper way for a woman to treat her lover and a husband his wife? The logic is indeed unbreakable; and the teachers of English who gave evidence were only doing what was their professional duty. Yet I regard the spectacle with misgiving. It is not good for any body of people to be required to speak with such assurance on matters so intricate and so momentous.²

Although the alignment of literary procedures and moral judgments may have surprised and bewildered the lawyers, and many members of the ordinary public, it could come as no surprise to anyone who is professionally obliged to read much contemporary literary criticism, particularly that written by those trained in the Cambridge English school. Here one finds the word 'moral' constantly used as a term of approbation, or to denote that an important stage in an argument has been reached, or simply as a sign of the critic's conviction of his own seriousness. A relevant and frequently invoked text occurs in D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, in the essay on Whitman:

The essential function of art is moral. Not aesthetic, not decorative, not pastime and recreation. But moral. The essential function of art is moral.

But a passionate implicit morality, not didactic. A morality which changes the blood, rather than the mind. Changes the blood first. The mind follows later, in the wake.

The second paragraph manifests certain familiar aspects of Lawrence's literary personality: the primitivism, the anti-intellectualism, and, in its emphasis on 'blood', something of Lawrence's proto-Nazi aspect (I realize that this way of talking about Lawrence is now unfashionable, and may seem outrageous, but I make no apologies for doing so). Yet though we have at first sight the Lawrence of the blood and the dark gods, he is also, paradoxical though it may seem, writing in a tradition of moral discourse that stems from that urbane eighteenth century gentleman, David Hume. For Hume also, morality was a matter of feelings, (which Lawrence symbolized by the 'blood'), with reason playing a very subordinate part. Though Lawrence's rhetoric may appear startling he is not saying anything very unfamiliar.

Let us now consider the crucial phrase of the first paragraph, 'the essential function of art is moral', with this in mind. I am very much aware that Lawrence was no less an artist in his essays than in his poetry

²'Literature into Life', *Spectator*, 9 December 1960.

or fiction, and that his *aperçus* are not suited to the kind of semantic probing that the formulations of a more systematic writer might usefully invite. Yet this phrase is so often invoked by critics and teachers that some analysis of its implications is, I think, desirable. I will say, without more ado, that I do not think the phrase is necessarily false; if I am told, with appropriate fervour, that 'the essential function of art is moral' I am not immediately inclined to contradict it. What I would say, however, is that this statement can mean a good deal less than its proponents imagine. In ordinary usage the word 'moral' is, I think, employed in four different senses, ranging from the all-embracing to the limited and trivial. These areas of meaning are: (1) any kind of human activity whatsoever, provided it is carried on in a minimally responsible fashion; (2) human *conduct*, as opposed to mere behaviour, particularly in our relations with other people; (3) conduct insofar as it invites specific judgments of right or wrong, good or bad, better or worse, and so on; (4) resembles (3) but has special reference to sexual behaviour; this is a vulgarized but prevalent form (cf. 'teenage morals'), which can be illustrated by a newspaper hoarding I saw the other day, emblazoned with the phrase, 'Morals: The Archbishop Speaks', from which it was not difficult to predict the subject and tenor of the Archbishop's remarks. In serious discussion, this usage can, of course, be ignored. One might perhaps doubt whether (1) is a legitimate sense of 'moral', but the fact is that recent literary and social criticism has been steadily widening the sense of this word, so that now one can readily imagine plausible contexts for such statements as the following: 'driving a locomotive is a moral activity'; 'properly considered, picking cherries falls under the heading of moral behaviour'; even 'cricket is essentially an embodiment of moral processes'.

These four meanings are all current in ordinary usage, educated or uneducated. But in the language of literary criticism—and the kind of social criticism that has affinities with it—the situation is rather different; here, I think, we have two main senses of 'moral'; the first is identical with (1), though I shall now call it A; the second contains elements of both (2) and (3), and this I shall call B. In most forms of critical discourse, 'moral' has a reassuring and basically rhetorical function, rather than a referential one. This, in itself is neither a bad thing nor particularly surprising, provided one remembers that criticism is a persuasive rather than a demonstrative activity; the language of criticism is closer to the language of literature itself than to the language of logical demonstration, and there is no reason why effectively persuasive terms

should not recur in it. But the difficulty with 'moral', as a critical term, is that it is one of those unmanageable words with both a 'loose' and a 'tight' sense. Sense A is the loose one, and, as I have suggested, it is getting looser all the time; when 'moral' merely means 'pertaining to human activity', then most statements employing it are likely to be true, but at the same time to say virtually nothing. Thus, giving sense A to 'the essential function of art is moral' (passing over the difficulties inherent in talking about the 'function' of art), we are merely saying something like 'art reflects human behaviour'.

It may be objected that this is being unfair to Lawrence, who certainly meant something more full-blooded than that. But it is not so much Lawrence I am concerned with now, as with the use of his phrase as a slogan. 'Moral', when used in sense A, despite its prevalence, and though it may have a certain soothing quality which is not to be despised, is almost useless as a critical term, since it can apply to everything; it is also dangerous, since it is often used portentously to persuade a critic, and his readers, that he is saying much more, in a specifically demonstrative way, than he in fact is. The word 'moralist' is analogous; it occurs frequently in literary criticism, generally to imply that one approves of some writer to whom it is applied. It is apt to be used in either a 'straight' or a 'paradoxical' sense; the former merely results in such unexceptional statements as 'Bunyan (or Wordsworth or George Eliot) was, of course, a great moralist'; in the latter sense, one makes a less familiar point by saying, 'Keats (or Flaubert or Swinburne) was, in a profound though paradoxical sense, a great moralist'. One's readers may not agree, but at the same time they will not immediately assume one is talking nonsense. There is, in fact, no writer of any reputation to whom the term 'moralist' could not be applied in a fairly plausible way. Some months ago I asked a class of students whether they were prepared to call Wilde a moralist; they were sceptical, and so was I, but Mr A. E. Dyson has recently published an extremely interesting article making precisely this claim.³

I must now pass to sense B, the 'tight' use of 'moral'. This is not so easily disposed of. If we apply this sense of the word to 'the essential function of art is moral', then we mean that the purpose of art is to involve us in considerations of human conduct, reflections and judgments on conduct, and to take us some way towards answering that resounding question, 'how shall I live?' One's immediate response, despite Lawrence's passionate assurance, is that this is not so, that there

³The Socialist Aesthete', *The Listener*, 24 August 1961.

are many kinds of art which do not do this, but have been regarded as valuable by past civilizations, and still are by many people. Unless, of course, one is prepared to say that they are 'moral' in some extremely oblique fashion, which takes us back towards sense A. At this point, however, one becomes aware that there is a concealed prescription in the statement; art *ought* to do this, Lawrence is saying, and if it doesn't do this then it isn't art, or at least it isn't good art.

This is not to say that art—and particularly literature—was not regarded in the past as having a moral function; it certainly was. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century art was considered to have two functions, to entertain and to instruct, with varying degrees of emphasis. In the Renaissance, Horace's formula, *dulce et utile*, was often invoked; Sidney used the phrase 'delightful teaching', and we find him speaking about poetry feigning 'notable images of virtues and vices'; the former were supposed to induce moral rectitude by showing examples to be followed, the latter by showing what must be avoided. This rather simple approach was sufficient for more than one period of high civilization, and it was comparatively undemanding; one could always suck off the sugar without swallowing the pill, or look at the pretty pictures without worrying too much about the solemn truths they stood for. But the modern world is far more sophisticated—or perhaps more in earnest—and we find Mr Raymond Williams, for example, dismissing 'the stupid level of whether a given character behaves well or badly'.

At all events, in order to use sense B of 'moral' with complete conviction, one must, I think, be a particular kind of person; one will probably be a post-Christian agnostic, a convinced upholder of one of the more responsible forms of humanist morality, temperamentally earnest, and deeply in sympathy with a certain current of utilitarian or pragmatic thinking which looks for useful ends to our actions, and which is suspicious of the contemplative virtues and the pursuit of knowledge as an end good in itself. Above all, one must be convinced, in Mr Graham Hough's witty phrase, 'that all literature would be *Middlemarch* if it could'. Personally, I am none of these things, which is why I find sense B too tight for comfort. Nevertheless, it is a usage which has a solid and respectable tradition behind it, for it inherits the nineteenth century apotheosis of morality which followed on the decline of supernatural and sacramental religion. One remembers the famous story of George Eliot telling F. W. H. Myers in the Fellows' Garden of Trinity that though God was inconceivable, and Immortality

was unbelievable, Duty remained peremptory and absolute. We find Matthew Arnold, in *Literature and Dogma*, claiming that conduct is three-fourths of life, and specifically reducing the Christian religion to morality tinged with emotion. And when one remembers that the moral assumptions of this tradition were largely those inherited from Hume, one sees the importance of having the right kind of feelings, the appropriate fineness of sensibility, in learning how to live. And imaginative literature had a unique power to impart these things; John Stuart Mill at a time of mental depression and exhaustion found in Wordsworth's poetry strength and solace, and a means to 'the true culture of the feelings'.

After this rather prolonged discussion in general terms, I shall now give an example of the way in which modern criticism concretely embodies many of these assumptions, taken from one of the best and most influential of living critics. In an essay on Henry James, Dr F. R. Leavis writes of *The Golden Bowl*:

What we are not reconciled to by any awareness of intentions is the outraging of our moral sense by the handling of the adultery theme—the triangle, or rather quadrilateral, of personal relations. We remain convinced that when an author, whatever symbolism he intends, presents a drama of men and women, he is committed to dealing in terms of men and women, and mustn't ask us to acquiesce in valuations that contradict our profoundest ethical sensibility. If, of course, he can work a revolutionary change in that sensibility, well and good, but who will contend that James's art in those late novels has that power? In *The Golden Bowl* we continue to find our moral sense outraged.⁴

I think that the particular point Dr Leavis is making about *The Golden Bowl* is wrong, but that isn't my present concern. What is significant is that he claims that James's treatment of adultery contradicts 'our profoundest ethical sensibility' (the first meaning that the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* gives for 'sensibility' is 'capacity to feel'), but nevertheless concedes that a great novelist *could* work 'a revolutionary change in that sensibility', so that after reading him we would presumably feel that adultery was not, after all, wrong; indeed, one of Dr Leavis's objections to the late James is that he lacks the power to bring about such a change. This is to make a very large claim indeed for the ethical potentialities of literature, though it follows inevitably from the assumption that morality is a question of the feelings and the sensibility,

⁴*The Common Pursuit*, 1952, p. 228.

not of the reason, and that literature has a unique power of modifying the sensibility. As a Catholic, I find this position unacceptable. One does, of course, admit the existence of a moral sensibility; the feelings can play quite an important part in our making of moral decisions, but it is necessarily a subordinate part, and they cannot determine for us the fundamental issues of right and wrong.

By now it should be apparent that many contemporary critics operate within a kind of triangle, of which the three points are Feelings-Morality-Literature, each connecting with the other two. It is in this context that Lawrence's claim 'the essential function of art is moral', must be understood. Art teaches us how to live by refining our sensibilities, improving our emotional poise, purifying the springs of morality within us. In practice, this can turn literary criticism into a kind of MacCarthyite witch-hunt for traces of emotional inadequacy in a poet or novelist. 'Maturity', a carefully achieved and extremely difficult emotional poise, is the one saving virtue; it is the critic's job to seek out its concrete embodiment in works of literature; this is likely to be rare enough, and most of the time the critic will be discovering and condemning such vices as 'immaturity', 'insincerity', 'lack of emotional control', 'self-indulgence', and so on. The equation of emotional failure, literary flaw, and moral vice, is constantly made. Now this seems to me a limited way of talking about literature, though not a totally useless one; emotional failure in a poet can produce significant failures of language or organization in the poem itself. Normal critical procedure is to trace these faults by a technical and formal analysis, and then to ascribe their cause, if we are seeking for a cause, to a flaw in the poet's sensibility (or the novelist's or dramatist's, as the case may be). But many critics move without hesitation from passing judgment on the poem to passing judgment on the poet; indeed they often seem more enthusiastic about the latter activity. As a convenient example one can quote Mr David Holbrook's remark, in the last volume of *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, that Dylan Thomas's 'verbal impotence goes with his own failure to grow up and accept potency'.⁵ This kind of thing seems to me undesirable, and to exceed the legitimate limits of the critic's function; it has been attacked with great brilliance by Mr Laurence Lerner in a valuable article that I can now do no more than mention in passing, 'Sheep and Goats' (*Critical Quarterly*, Spring 1960).

Humanist morality, as embodied in contemporary criticism, can be almost unbearably constricting; nothing is more wearisome than being

⁵*The Modern Age*, edited by Boris Ford, 1961, p. 416.

in a perpetual state of vigilance for the ogre of Immaturity. It is with a great air of relief that one turns to the larger, freer, infinitely more generous perspectives of Christian morality, where even those who are emotionally immature and lacking in control, and whose feelings are deplorably coarse, have a chance of salvation; perhaps even a larger chance than those whose sensibilities are infinitely refined, but who may also be suffering from the disabilities of arrogance and self-righteousness.

Yet it would be unfair to convict literary critics alone of these tendencies. Almost always criticism follows in the trail blazed by major creative writers, and so it has been in the present instance; the fact that the slogan, 'the essential function of literature is moral' was the work of a great novelist should provide sufficient clue. We frequently find expressed in Lawrence's own novels the conviction that to live as one should is extremely difficult, and that most people do not; hence the frequency of moral cripples in his books, characters who have a specious kind of vitality but who are spiritually dead, who are not, as the famous phrase has it, 'on the side of life'; examples come readily to mind: Skrebensky in *The Rainbow*, Loerke in *Women in Love* (whom Birkin describes as 'a gnawing little negation, gnawing at the roots of life'), and, of course, Clifford Chatterley. To be disabled in this way is something very different from being a sinner in the traditional Christian sense; to be a sinner is a question of what one *does*, and there is always the possibility of changing and being saved. But in this post-Christian dispensation to be outside the extremely small magic circle of the truly alive, not to be 'on the side of life', is to be condemned utterly for what one *is*, with no possibility of things being otherwise. The most one can hope for is liquidation, an end which Lawrence arranges for one such character in his story, 'The Fox'. A much fuller discussion of this phenomenon than I can give here, with an illuminating account of the 'life' ideology, occurs in Mr John Bayley's admirable article, 'The Novel and the Life Standard' (*London Magazine*, February 1961). One can find similar attitudes in other writers than Lawrence. Consider, for example, the following passage from a novel by that infinitely gentle humanist, Mr E. M. Forster; it comes from *The Longest Journey*, when Rickie Elliot is reflecting on his brother-in-law, Herbert Pembroke (the attitudes seem to be endorsed by the author):

What was amiss with Herbert? He had known that something was amiss, and had entered into partnership with open eyes. The man was kind and unselfish; more than that, he was truly charitable, and it

was a real pleasure to him to give pleasure to others. Certainly he might talk too much about it afterwards; but it was the doing, not the talking, that he really valued, and benefactors of this sort are not too common. He was, moreover, diligent and conscientious: his heart was in his work, and his adherence to the Church of England no mere matter of form. He was capable of affection: he was usually courteous and tolerant. Then what was amiss? Why, in spite of all these qualities, should Rickie feel that there was something wrong with him—nay, that he was wrong as a whole, and that if the Spirit of Humanity should ever hold a judgment he would assuredly be classed among the goats? The answer at first sight appeared a graceless one—it was that Herbert was stupid. Not stupid in the ordinary sense—he had a business-like brain, and acquired knowledge easily—but stupid in the important sense: his whole life was coloured by a contempt of the intellect. That he had a tolerable intellect of his own was not the point: it is in what we value, not in what we have, that the test of us resides.

Rickie's judgment on Herbert—who is admittedly an unattractive figure—is somewhat different from that of Lawrence on many of his characters; nevertheless, the core of the judgment, *he was wrong as a whole*, can, it seems to me, be taken as typifying the essential inhumanity of post-Christian humanism in some of its literary manifestations. I shall do no more than allude to the connection, remote though it may be, between deciding that a single fictional character is 'wrong as a whole' and the assumption that racial groups or social classes may be 'wrong as a whole', and so ripe for liquidation.

Moving towards my conclusion, I will say, by way of summary, that a good deal of contemporary criticism seems to me to be ideologically loaded in a way that is unacceptable to Christians, and that its frequent invocations of the word 'moral', where they mean anything, presuppose a morality at variance in a number of important respects from that upheld by most Christians, and certainly by Catholics.

Am I concluding, then, that literature has nothing to do with life and the way we live our lives; has, in a word, no serious 'moral' aspects at all? Certainly not; literature does embody some of the profoundest truths about human nature, and contains a unique power of making our own experience clear to us, and so helping us in the desirable task of knowing and understanding ourselves a little better. If our understanding of human nature, and in particular of our own, has been deepened by an appreciation of major literature, we may well become

better Christians, replacing a narrow legalism with a genuine understanding of what it means to be human. But that literature, by itself, can contain the truths and the guidance of religion is something one must deny.

And, again, when one admits that literature can make one's own experience more ordered and comprehensible, one is assuming that one has had the experience first. To re-read in one's thirties works which one first read in one's teens is to discover that they have become, in certain important respects, different books. And the way in which books can be personally illuminating is oddly unpredictable, and cannot be prescribed. I would conclude from this, to come to my final point, that in the academic study of literature—which is something rather different from simply reading literature—it is extremely undesirable to make the *direct* aim of study the acquiring of greater 'moral' or, as I would prefer to say, human understanding; just as it is foolish to make the pursuit of happiness the aim of human life. It may well come, and one hopes it will, but it is more likely to come when one is attending to something else. And for students of eighteen or twenty, humbler tasks are likely to be more rewarding; they are better employed, I think, in acquainting themselves with as many kinds of literature as possible, in acquiring knowledge, engaging in formal and rhetorical analysis, and historical placing; these are things which they can do and do well, and which can be taught; rather than in using works of literature as a springboard for resounding judgments about 'life'—of which they have so far had, most of them, rather limited experience. Similarly, the teacher is better employed in talking about literature itself, even in quite a narrow way, than in pretending that the nature of his subject gives him special claims to moral wisdom lacked by his colleagues in other disciplines: the doubts expressed by Dr Davie, in the passage I have already quoted, about teachers of literature presenting themselves as *ex officio* guides to conduct, seem to me amply justified. The humanist attempt to give the study of literature a quasi-religious status, though doubtless admirable in intention, is, I am convinced, a mistake, and its results are unfortunate and even, at times, positively vicious.