The Im Thurn Lecture* 1983

The Concept of Literary Culture

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There is a long history of literary men who have been concerned with the general problems of culture and society—two terms which admit of wide definitions indeed. To take only famous British names we may recall Burke, Scott, Coleridge, Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Morris, T. S. Eliot, while in recent years there have been notable and influential studies by contemporary critics such as F. R. Leavis, Professor Raymond Williams, Professor Richard Hoggart. There has been outstanding work done in Europe and America.

Although such men have produced primarily literary studies, they have been connected with and much influenced by the remarkable growth of anthropological studies in conjunction with other powerfully accelerating concepts, of scientific study of contemporary society, of the consciousness of the primitive, of the relativity of social custom, eventually of the relativity of values.

The history of anthropological thought begins perhaps with Montesquieu and in the nineteenth century was of European dimensions, but it is gratifying to be able to note, when experiencing the honour of delivering the Im Thurn Lecture for 1983, what an important part was played by Scottish thought. Evans-Pritchard (1983: 17) refers to that 'eighteenth century Edinburgh circle which was profoundly interested in the development of social institutions and whose members certainly had great influence on the development of social anthropological thought'. Lord Kames (1696-1782) was one of the most important of these but they included also Ferguson (1723-1816), Millar (1735-1801, though he was mainly a Glasgow man), McLennan (1827-1881), Robertson-Smith (1846-1894, though he was mainly an Aberdonian), and most notably here Sir Everard Im Thurn himself (1852-1932). Sir James Frazer (1854-1941), who came to Cambridge, should also be mentioned. Some other names of those not primarily or not only scholars should be added. Sir Walter Scott I have already mentioned, Andrew Lang is another. Out of the work of these and others

* Annual lecture given in memory of Sir Everard im Thurn (1852-1932) KCMG, KBE, CB, MA, LL.D, anthropologist, explorer and mountaineer, past president of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland and a founder and past President of the Scottish Anthropological and Folk Lore Society. When the Scottish Society ceased, the endowment for the annual lecture succeeded to the School of Scottish Studies.

came also the developing interest in folklore which is carried on fortunately with such vigour and success in Edinburgh today by the School of Scottish Studies. Although folklore studies will often be focussed on oral culture, their attitudes and methods offer a valuable model for understanding many aspects of literary culture, and they have been unduly neglected in England. It is a standing reproach to English intellectual life that, although the Folklore Society in London was the first in the world, there is still no Professor of Folklore or folklife or similar studies in any British university, although we have some distinguished scholars and institutions, especially in Leeds and Sheffield.

We may see in European culture generally throughout the last three centuries developing interests in the nature of society as an organism. Not surprisingly these interests have led in a bewildering variety of directions. A powerful leading interest has been that in the 'primitive', arising from the recognition of the difference which European society has progressively established between itself and what came to be known as 'primitive society'. This led further to the recognition in the nineteenth century that such 'primitive society' persisted in Europe and in Britain itself in the form of peasant social groupings. Study and understanding of these have more recently extended to the recognition that such primitive societies, though their technology may be weak, have rich structures of feeling and attitude. This in turn has led to the further recognition that our own society, or societies, are susceptible of the same kind of study as primitive societies, even though modern European societies, because of their technological power, have different structures and complications. Whatever the society and its complexities, however, there is always a distinguishable verbal element which, though obviously inevitable in constituting human society, and therefore intrinsic to all society, can also be in part isolated as having special functions and its own internal history, conventions and structures.

What exactly may be the components of the verbal 'para-culture' which is so intimately linked with the general culture (in the anthropological sense) of society as a whole gives rise to a whole set of problems ranging from the purely or remotely critical to the most immediate moral and legal. It will be enough here to assume that such a partially isolatable verbal culture has sufficient identity to be able to be studied in itself and in its relations with the general culture and with all our concepts of truth, imagination, knowledge, *etc.*

At any given time much of the verbal culture will be oral, but equally at any time there is a desire to commit some matters of special value to the greater permanence of writing or print, while it is obvious that for most of our intimate sense of the past we depend on such verbal documentation. The closest example in our own culture, and of the kinds of study it calls for, is the medieval period, when a significant 'literary culture' began to develop, built upon the ruins of classical civilisation.

I am a literary historian. My primary data, and primary interest, are in the corpus of literary texts in English. But my present argument involves anthropological interests

since I have been primarily, though not solely, concerned with English literary culture in the medieval stage. The medieval period in certain respects may be said to resemble primitive societies, though in others it is the crucible in which modern European societies have been formed. In the study of medieval literature and society we connect with that great nineteenth-century discovery of the 'pastness of the past'—the sense that our ancestors of the same flesh and blood as ourselves nevertheless felt extraordinarily different from us over many matters close to our own business and bosoms. Much of my own study has been spent in elucidating the nature of these attitudes, so different from ours, which earlier English people had to sexual love, religion, war, class and so forth, in so far as they have been reflected in major and minor works of literature. To study and evaluate such differences one is inevitably concerned with the history of sentiments. Sentiments interact with social structures and are evidenced in many different ways throughout the whole of a society's activities in art, religion, manners, even crime. There are classic studies in this field, as the great works of Burckhardt, Huizinga and more recently Elias. All this leads to the concept of 'cultural history' recently discussed in a valuable essay by my colleague Peter Burke (*The Cambridge Review* CIV, 18 November 1983, pp. 206-8).

From the point of view of the historian of English literature and sentiments, and of the implicit and explicit attitudes which are now perhaps more fashionably called 'mentality' in the French sense of that word, it would be reasonable in a more extended discussion of 'culture and society' to start with earlier twentieth-century opinions which, as it happens, have frequently emanated from the University of Cambridge. A concern with the wider culture of the country has always been a marked concern of English literary studies as illustrated by the work of I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis, though they themselves obviously reflect many influences from outside Cambridge, most notably T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence, who can hardly be adopted as Cambridge men. Perhaps I should hasten to add here that I am not myself a Cambridge man, either by origin or nowadays as representative, and I escaped all these influences. Cambridge is a village where after twenty years one may still feel a stranger.

I can best focus the beginnings of a discussion of culture and society in order to lead to the idea of literary culture by some brief remarks on the book by Professor Raymond Williams entitled *Culture and Society* (1958) which in a peculiarly Cambridge way has both focussed much of the previous social interest from the point of view of literary studies in the matter of culture and has been influential over much other work. I read *Culture and Society* with admiration when it first appeared. It has aspects and underlying implications with which I cannot agree but re-reading it twenty-five years later for the purposes of this lecture my admiration for its penetration and generosity of judgement has increased. Williams's work is a valuable partial history of the concept of culture in the nineteenth century in which he develops the notion, which T. S. Eliot had also propounded, both of them influenced

by anthropological thought, of 'culture' as the 'sense of the common life' of a whole society. Though now common this idea was less so a quarter of a century ago. It is still not always well understood. This is partly because Williams, like Eliot, but much less like the anthropologists, insists that culture must be 'qualitatively assessed' (p. 295). There are a number of complexities or ambiguities, perhaps sometimes self-contradictions in this developing notion of the common life which must be accepted yet also valued and judged. If culture is a description of the common life, then no group can be without it, though Eliot himself inadvertently suggests that some groups may. And it must contain both good and bad, often inter-related. Clearly the problem here originates in accepting culture as an intrinsic element and also, and inconsistently, assessing 'culture' as something particularly valuable, as chiefly what we now often call 'high culture': art, religion, intellectual concepts and so forth. But everybody now agrees that culture must consist in more than these higher elements. There is another point. Both Eliot and Williams also insist that there is an element of culture which is both unconscious on the part of those who share it and incapable of being planned. Williams insists on the importance of freedom: 'the word culture cannot automatically be pressed into service as any kind of social or personal directive' (p. 295). Culture draws from the whole of our experience and is therefore never fully self-conscious (p. 334).

On the other hand, Eliot, to some extent by implication, and Williams quite explicitly, both reiterate the older concept of culture as 'cultivation', 'the tending of natural growth' (Williams, p. 335). Williams uses this sense of the word as a justification for guiding and controlling cultural growth, meaning the encouragement of some aspects of culture and the discouragement of others (pp. 337–8). Where then is freedom?

There is a fundamental dichotomy therefore in this concept of culture. It is both general and therefore a phenomenon we have to accept: yet it has to be judged, evaluated, controlled and directed. Are the values by which it is judged and directed themselves part of the culture, or have they some external absolute quality? This dichotomy and uncertainty are inevitable from the point of view of one's own culture. It is a valuable example of the real possibility of having one's cake and eating it. That is to say, of being outside the culture in terms of scientific analysis and yet of being inside it. To put it in terms of the metaphor, of having the culture inside oneself organically and in part unselfconsciously, yet feeding on it and changing it.

A further element in the analyses by Eliot and Williams, and, more by implication, Richard Hoggart in his classic work *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), is the concept of what Eliot calls levels of culture, or, as anthropologists now might call them, of sub-cultures. That is to say, there are sections within the total culture which have a certain autonomy of their own. There is nothing difficult in this concept. Every larger totality contains smaller units within it which, when looked at so to speak from above, are components but which, when looked at so to speak from below, are units themselves

with a certain autonomy, possessing further, sub-units within themselves. Social life is full of such structures. Schools and universities within the educational system, or colleges within a university, or year-classes, or sets, or streams, within schools, all have this characteristic. We see it everywhere in all institutions: in business, in the Armed Forces, in the churches, the Civil Service. The essentially pyramidal structure of institutions is normally beneficial but it can lead to difficulties. Williams considers that those elements which develop high culture are unduly dominant. Some of the studies inspired by Williams see the sub-set of 'working-class culture' as not merely more valuable than it has sometimes been thought to be in the past, but as a model which should dominate the rest of society. It is in this direction, which seems implicit in the work of Williams and Hoggart, that the concept of culture becomes most obviously political. Leavis's notion of 'minority culture', usually to be identified with a rather idiosyncratic notion of 'high culture', easily leads to political implications of various kinds. The relationship which education has to culture at all levels, and which has so much concerned literary men from Arnold onwards, is clearly another example. Against this background, I wish to make two main points.

First, any study of our own culture must be, so to speak, two-faced; that is, both scientific in the sense of detached, and on the other hand, participatory in the sense of operative or functional. If we are studying a culture as foreign anthropologists, whatever degree of empathy we may attain, we are always outside that culture. We are not among its generals nor privates, its chiefs nor Indians, nor are we voting citizens. As anthropologists we bear no responsibility for that society. We ought to be similarly detached when studying our own culture. We need to look at it in as impartial a way as possible. Nevertheless, we cannot in the nature of things achieve full detachment. We cannot opt out. We cannot avoid some degree of responsibility because we are inevitably a part of our own culture and moreover participating to some degree unconsciously. Many of the axioms which we work with must in the nature of the case be unconscious axioms. In studying our own culture we are committed to value judgements and we cannot avoid approving of some things and disapproving of others. We are therefore both inside and out.

This leads to my second point, that in the end our preferences, evaluations and prejudices cannot avoid having in the largest sense political implications. I do not mean that they must carry party labels. As it happens, party political attitudes to culture, especially as they relate to education, have had serious disadvantages for education. The politicisation, in this sense, of education in the last thirty years is most unfortunate. Education is itself in large part a product not a creator of the general culture, and is thus a weak instrument for social engineering. It is a tool which may turn or break in the hands of those who wish to use it for that purpose, producing results unforeseen and not always desirable. Culture controls education rather more strongly than education controls culture. Nevertheless the sub-culture of education by that principle of duality that I have already mentioned, forcing us to participate, to

approve or disapprove, act or not act, does affect the total culture, as we all know from our personal experience. An interesting example is offered by the careers of distinguished men like Williams and Hoggart and many others. Twentieth-century Cambridge offers many instances in many subjects. (Some classic examples are offered by E. E. Phare (1982: 144-9); Sir Fred Hoyle (1984: 65-72). They came from that grey area of the upper working-class/lower middle-class, inter-war scholarship boys and girls proceeding by their wits from elementary school by scholarship to grammar school by scholarship to university. The mixture of diversity and similarity in the views of such people is a fascinating example of the variety of possible attitudes and opinions allowable within a society like ours depending on basic political principles of freedom and justice. The general political implications of views about culture, if not culture itself, therefore, cannot be disputed, though they certainly differ greatly.

The general concept of culture, in order to be manageable, must now be broken down into smaller sections to be discussed. This leads us straight to the 'para-culture' of language which has already been presupposed. It is nowadays well accepted by anthropologists that fieldwork must be done in a strange culture within the language of that culture. We can intensify this concept nowadays because the understanding of language itself has been greatly enriched. In particular we can attack many problems through the very nature of language itself, either in its general structures or in its specific semantic content. It is notable, for example, that Raymond Williams in a number of his books takes as his starting point the varying uses of particular key words such as 'culture' itself. Norbert Elias (1978) begins with an analysis of the differing interpretations placed by the German, French and English languages on the native versions of the words 'culture' and 'civilisation'. We know that language itself is an index of the culture we are studying, whether our own or others, although it will be equally clear that if we were to be making a study of gesture or ritual or cooking or burial or wedding or agricultural practices there would be other matters beside language to consider. As far as language is concerned, it is self-evident to all but a few that language has major reference to the world outside itself and that the relationship of language to the world of non-language is extraordinarily variable and complex in itself. Yet the current interest in language as a self-enclosed entity is valuable for many insights. It establishes language as in itself a sub-culture, with its own internal rules and requirements, and not merely a mechanism to serve other interests. There have been a number of famous studies, mostly American, which have used the nature of a language to illustrate the nature of the culture of which it is part. To take a very general example, it seems highly likely that the characteristic of most European languages of clearly differentiating between the subject, the verb and the object indicates a general view of man's relation to the world which sets man clearly apart from the natural world. Europeans see themselves from very early on as distinguished from and operating upon the world. Subject acts on object, and the two are very different. Something of this derives from the early narrative in Genesis where Adam

names the objects in the world, especially the animals. His capacity to name them expresses a natural sense of superiority over and distinction from the natural world which it seems highly unlikely that those cultures can experience which do not make the same distinction between subject and object, between the doer, the doing and the object of what is done. More specific studies of structure and lexis are likely to be extremely illuminating of the fundamental assumptions and attitudes which are built into any given language and which may be studied in their own right. They will then of course cast much light on the general culture of which the language may then be seen as a constitutive part.

The history of culture can be particularly well served by such studies of the language, and it is to be regretted that English literary historians have not followed more assiduously this line of study.

The essential point is that language is a system of symbols. It might be argued that for the anthropologist almost everything in a culture is a system of symbols. The nature of social anthropology has been to look below the surface activity to discover deeper symbolic meanings and perhaps laws, or at least patterns. In this respect not only ritual and gesture but many purely utilitarian acts such as lighting a fire or eating, drinking and so forth, in the way that they are done, may be regarded as languages, as symbolic illustrations of how the culture works, and what it means. Everything is what it is; but everything also has a further meaning or significance as part of a larger system of meanings. Language naturally lends itself peculiarly well to this kind of interpretation because language is *primarily* symbolic. It has its own reality but it is always pointing to something deeper within the mind or pointing to actions and responses, social relationships and so forth in the world of non-language.

Language being itself a system of systems it is possible to isolate particular sub-systems within language and one of those is of a particularly general and interesting kind. That is the system comprised of those sections of discourse which are deliberately cut off from immediate correspondence with the external world, and are self-confessed systems, whether sacred or secular. In other words, we come at last to literature, and thus to the concept of literary culture.

Here we have to be careful because the nature of language is such that its close relationship to the world of non-language is always fluid and doubtful; language itself is always, that is to say, to some extent fictional. One may say that the passage of time renders all language fictional. A laundry list is not a fiction while you are checking your shirts, or at least you hope it is not, but as soon as the washing is over the laundry list remains as a fictional symbolic document. The anthropologist will be able to look at it and detect within it a certain structure, a certain pattern; Mary Douglas will be able to make profound remarks about purity, impurity and danger reflected from the laundry list (not an example to be found in her remarkable book, *Purity and Danger* [1966]). It is a document, once the laundry is done, pregnant with cultural meanings and not simply a list of the clothes you have or have not sent away

or received. For the literary historian, that fictional aspect of historical language is extremely important because it brings into his purvey all the documents that once were purely practical, utilitarian, instructional and so forth, and allows him legitimately to treat them as fictions. That however is not a point I need to emphasise here. All I want to do is to establish that there is a large section of language in any culture, whether it was designed to be fictional or not, which is in fact fictional. That is to say it is not now important for its direct relationship to what it may have referred to outside itself, as a description of what actually happened, nor a logical argument, a command, a persuasion, a cry of pain or an expectation of the satisfaction of desire in any immediate sense requiring action, belief or refutation, though it may pretend to be any of these things. It is now, and may always have been, part of the play of mind. The fictions in the language comprise the literary culture.

In most cultures a good many designedly fictional passages of language are easily recognised for what they are and set in a special category whereby they are removed from the sphere of direct action. They are those words with which you do *not* do things. They are fictions, there for imaginative contemplation. This is not to deny them ultimate effect, but it is to deny them practicality of use. The nature of language is such that we will have many impure examples of fiction; examples where imaginative contemplation is mingled with some desire to improve, alter, change, command, persuade and so forth. But we can all recognise the intrinsic interest and the deep attraction of purely imaginative fictional language in many poems, stories, riddles, *etc.*, as well as powerful elements of fiction in those less pure forms such as prayers, proverbs, love-songs and so forth. The essence of my argument about literary culture is that one can put together at least an historical core of unquestioned fictions and see that they hang together in a large sub-system determined historically and in other ways. Very simple examples of such sub-systems would be the series of poems, plays and novels which are most people's notion of what English literature consists. Poems, plays, novels are each of them symbolic verbal constructs, each also a system in itself. It is very clear that these symbolic verbal constructs are quite susceptible of analysis and explanation in much the same way as any other aspect of culture. Having regard to the vast quantity of literary comment it may be thought that I am stating the obvious, but in fact what I am saying is not quite consonant with the practice of literary study and criticism as found in most universities or indeed in most people's minds. What is much more important to most people, and indeed to most critics, is whether they like or approve of these various symbolic verbal constructs. The expression of liking or approval, or their opposite, is what is called literary criticism and it has been closely associated with the English Faculty at Cambridge. It is an outstanding example of participation within the culture. It has immense advantages. Yet it has great disadvantages in the way of intellectual discipline or even of special understanding and for that very reason on the extent to which the verbal artefact merely pleases or attracts the reader. Do not think that I am objecting to people being

interested in and pleased by the novel or a poem or a play, and saying so, or even being displeased and saying so. Such personal response is the very heart of the matter. But it is not a philosophical or intellectual response. It depends upon quirks of taste, accidents of mood, of temperament and personal history. Its strength, effectiveness and the number of people who share it at any time depend hardly at all on whether you really understand the piece of work correctly or not. The work has given pleasure or interest or pleasurable pain or whatever you are seeking, and that is good enough. Many best-sellers are built upon this principle. And on this principle most people do not read literature written long ago and they rightly throw away books that they find boring, even if other people find them intensely interesting. But that is not a properly intellectual way to approach the study of literature as a sub-system of the total culture. An anthropologist does not ask himself whether he likes the way a particular tribe lights its fires, conducts its marriages, buries its dead or whatever. The anthropologist sets himself impartially to understand both what is actually done and its underlying pattern and significance.

If we are concerned with serious, intellectually responsible study, we might well set up an anthropological model for the understanding of literature. This would be, at any rate in the beginning, independent of personal likes or dislikes. We would then investigate major works of literature within their context in order to see how they work and in order to find the implications of their presence.

We would therefore begin with either a particular work or a series of works; for example, we might begin with the series of lyrics that appeared in a given period on a given subject. Or we might take other systems, such as all the novels by one man. With certain major writers we should rapidly find that even a single work was itself a major system with a configuration of sub-systems, as it were of sub-cultures, within itself. Although it is part of the general culture, a major work of literature is one of those sub-systems which is a complex unity containing many other sub-systems within itself. We would begin by regarding the individual verbal work of art, or some series of such works, as a set of symbols, first of all to be understood in themselves. This has already been done with major success by Lévi-Strauss in his discussion of myth and it is possible to extend that further in the discussion of stories. One may consider stories as systems which contain sub-systems. One such sub-system is the favourite world-wide story of the individual growing up, coming into conflict with his parents and resolving these conflicts in various ways, which I have called 'the family drama' and have described in *Symbolic Stories* (1980). In a study of these works we should then proceed as the anthropologist proceeds by investigating their premises, particularly the premises of sentiment and attitude. This is often not done. An outstanding example recently has been the very successful and interesting book by Terry Jones, *Chaucer's Knight* (1982), in which he claims to show that Chaucer's Knight is a mercenary brutal thug. He does this by disregarding the face-value of what Chaucer actually writes and all the premises which are built into Chaucer's poetry describing

the Knight and other aspects of knighthood. He also disregards the very large amount of corroborative evidence provided from many sources about the natural premises, suppositions and attitudes of Christian knights in the fourteenth century in Europe. He argues that what Chaucer writes is to be taken ironically, and by thus licensing himself to apply anachronistic modern liberal pacifist humanist premises to a particular ancient symbolic text he totally changes it. When we do this, instead of learning, as an anthropologist would, what the premises are, what are the correct meanings of the words and the systems, semantic and otherwise, which the original words express, so that we may learn what the intelligent native informant, the ancient poet himself, says to us, we substitute our own value judgements. They may well be superior to those of Chaucer, but they are unquestionably different. I take Mr Jones's book as an obvious example, but the history of literary criticism is littered with these examples, not only from the medieval period but right up to the beginning or indeed the middle of the twentieth century.

Besides the premises of sentiment, of manners and attitudes which need to be explored, we must also follow out the actual structures of the work, which operate both on the immediate verbal level, and at a deeper implicit level of pattern, such as the patterns of relationship of children to parent, or indeed parent to child, the relationships between social groups and so forth which the work itself reveals. Such structures will undoubtedly have relation to what actually took place in the non-verbal world but we should beware of taking them as strict transcripts. That is not a stage which we have yet reached in our investigation.

As we follow through structures so we shall naturally begin to discover what the anthropologists describe as the rules of a society. I quote the remarks by Mr Peter Burke in the article already mentioned of the value to cultural historians of the work of certain anthropologists, but they apply equally to the examination of literature. He finds that the value of the anthropologists has been 'their articulation of a language or conceptual apparatus for interpreting the norms, categories and assumptions of men and women in different cultures as revealed in typical forms of behaviour. They discuss how to eat, dress, ask for a drink, be silent, walk, form rituals or even fall ill' amongst various tribes. 'Thanks to their work it is easier for historians to describe how to die in fifteenth century France . . . or how to be a seventeenth century Venetian patrician, or a Counter-Reformation Saint.' This 'involves an understanding of the rules explicit or implicit governing behaviour of a particular social group' (1983: 207). In that last phrase the historian speaks of his own legitimate interests. The literary historian goes either further or not quite so far. He must first say this is the rule for this particular work. He can then compare it with other works. Mr Burke notes that earlier historians suggested psychological explanations and moralised about earlier behaviour but remarks that if we want to understand these types of behaviour it seems more useful to follow the example of the anthropologists and to ask about the rules, and the rhetoric. The rhetoric is too important to be left to the literary critics. Who

tells who wept, and how, in what circumstances? Who could fall in love with whom, and how? How do people die? What are the emotions, if any, attributed to people? What are the characteristic sequences of events? If we ask what the rules are, we can begin to understand what the work of art is saying both about itself and to us. Along with rules we will naturally in literature classify verbal categories, so that we will know what word, or class of word is used in what circumstances. At the very lowest level this is a matter of ordinary vocabulary and grammar, but it very soon becomes a matter of style which demands choice and yet choice within limited opportunities. Style itself is one of the subtlest and most potent of literary phenomena. We need to know potential and actual registers of style. Only at the end will we, as literary historians, come to the examination of verbal correspondences with the external non-verbal world, though we shall have been implicitly playing with the possibilities of them all the way along. The consequence of these series of investigations, which are by no means necessarily so systematic or in such regular sequence as I have suggested, is that we shall come to a sense of the work of art's intrinsic original meaning in its original context. Then we proceed to what may be called in the widest sense, translation. We apply the meaning of the work as understood in its own nature, to our own selves, our own lives, in such a way that we can understand how what at first may well seem strange or absurd, corresponds to a deep human need in ourselves. Here literature takes on its own special quality as art. It will only be at this stage that the concept of criticism is really useful. We shall then be able to say to what extent such symbolic verbal constructs as the work or works of art which we have been examining have significant meaning. The more readily and completely the full meaning, in context, of a work of art, can be seized and absorbed, the greater it will be. Herein lies some responsibility with the reader. An uninformed or unintelligent reader will be the less able to find the meaning. Here we benefit from those critics and literary historians who by their learning and insight reveal what might otherwise have been undiscovered meanings in the work of art, while in so far as a work leads a whole series of readers or hearers to find further riches within it, it will be the greater work of art.

I have now come to the final element, which is the aesthetic quality of the work of art itself. Here we enter the other side of the duality of cultural study which I mentioned earlier. We have to participate in, to lend ourselves uncritically to the work of art, to use all our sympathy. No knowledge is purely objective, and in knowing works of art the sympathetic participation of the reader or hearer is of peculiar importance. A work of art, of whatever kind, even if so solid and external as a statue, lives in the minds of those who contemplate it as much as in the mind of the originator. It is for this reason that works of art are peculiarly human and humane. Works of art have a profound though indirect relationship to our lives through the exercise of our own imaginations, in conjunction with that of the artist. They express and create visions of life that combine the personal and the general; the individual, and society as a whole. Those visions may not correspond with present everyday

actuality. On the contrary, many of the most profound works are, on the surface, wildly implausible fantasies. So much the greater is our need to understand them, because they help to create the colours and significances that give meaning to our human lives. It will be in this way that literary culture interlocks with general culture, just as the individual must himself interlock with the general culture.

Here we begin to find that general political implication of the culture that we study by participating in it ourselves. We must first try to understand the work of art, independent of our own values and preferences. We must allow the historical actuality to speak to us before we can interpret and evaluate. But evaluation in the end cannot be avoided, though it comes at the end. Especially, however, we judge what is happening now, and especially we need to judge what we want to happen in the future. It is in creating the future that we become fully political.

Judgement is important even with works of art created many centuries ago, but it is perhaps especially important, as it is especially difficult, with works produced in the present, because that also influences what works will be attempted to be produced in the future. Our participation, or refusal to participate, in contemporary work, affects what is actually produced, and our judgement thus takes on a special responsibility and what is in the fullest sense a political dimension.

We will see the political dimension at all levels. At the very lowest (not in value, but as a basis), we may be concerned with the simple inheritance of the traditional language on our own tribe; in other words with imparting to the young all the skills, verbal and otherwise, which society needs in order to survive and to flourish. How to impart those skills and to whom and in what degree cannot but be political judgements, though one would hope that all people of good will can come to a reasonable consensus upon them. There are larger issues as well. One must recognise that literature both reflects and reacts against many aspects of contemporary general culture and this raises great problems of an interest far beyond the scope of my lecture here. It raises problems of censorship for example. There are various kinds of censorship at work in the country at present; for example, the Race Relations Act and the Sexual Discrimination Act. Yet we also have the strange notion embodied in the Obscene Publications Act that no work of literature can of itself be depraving. We define literature as by definition not depraving. That is highly questionable and opens a wide arena of argument. More generally still, the literary culture nowadays, as supported by many professional literary people, is deliberately hostile to the received standards and norms of the rest of society. This again is a very wide topic which can only be touched on here. It is by no means necessarily an undesirable situation since it preserves the flexibility of the human spirit which we all need for self-realisation. Nevertheless, it is a situation which poses some problems for a well-ordered society. At what stage does the order which every society presupposes become a tyranny? Literature can be dangerous. Dictatorships recognise this and take literature much more seriously than we do in the free Western democracies, though this is

paradoxically bad both for literature and society. In this sense literature can be taken too seriously. Most generally we may say that the kind of things that a society wants and does not want will be reflected in the sub-culture of works of art, and freedom of expression is vital to the human spirit. Here one can broaden the concept of literary sub-culture to include other modes of communication, including today the television sub-culture. To what extent, we may ask ourselves, are video 'nasties' a particular sub-culture? They themselves call for analysis in an impartial and scientific way, I have no doubt, though many of us will feel that a purely impartial attitude is both impossible and undesirable. But we shall need to act upon knowledge of what really happens and how it really works in order appropriately to invoke our value judgements. The Williams report on obscenity made exactly this attempt, and recognised the importance of the anthropological approach to these matters. Yet in the end what we do about such matters depends upon what we want to be, both as individuals and as individuals in groups, which are not quite the same thing.

It is clear that there is much work to be done in all these questions of literary study, from the most modest examination of historical sequences, of reiterated commonplaces of attitudes and ideas, to the largest and most difficult questions of human life and purpose. Very little of this work has been attempted in the literary departments in our universities. We have relied far too long on those personal responses which are indeed at the beginning and end of our acquaintance with literature and art but of which the middle has to be filled with a major intellectual effort. As I look around the general tone of studies in literature in the universities, or more widely in those few general publications which are interested in literature, I see far too much choosiness, far too little of the kind of impartial intellectual energy and deep devotion to the subject which is so apparent in the Sciences, and which has made scientific study so successful. Literature is of course entertainment, and much of it is trivial, but as a whole it matters a great deal, and entertainment is at heart contemplative, not active. Contemplation in the end moulds the mind, and the mind moulds what we think and feel and eventually do. It changes us and of course we change it. Finally even the nature of contemplation is in the most general sense a political issue. So I conclude by reiterating my two apparently incompatible requirements: first, that we should study literature and works of art systematically, with all due detachment. This is the essence of the concept of literary culture; second, that true understanding requires a sympathetic participation from within that culture. Only by maintaining this duality shall we both understand and benefit from the great inheritance and the continuing power of literary culture, which is so important a part of our general culture, and therefore of the quality of our lives as a whole.

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