

# Moral and Social Inquiry

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In the middle 1970's I returned to Cambridge from New Mexico, where I'd been living in order to work with Indian and Spanish-speaking children. I had finished over 15 years of "field work," an overall effort to understand how various Americans live: Southerners of both races, caught up in a region's particular social conflict; the people of Appalachia; migrant farm families; the Eskimos of Alaska; and the above-mentioned families of our Southwest. As I did my research, I began to realize that my training as a child psychiatrist, for all its worth, was not proving to be the mainstay of my work.

To be sure, I was having conversations with many children, and through the spoken word as well as their various artistic productions, learning a good deal about their worries, fears, hopes. But I was not working as a clinician, to whom families in psychological distress had come in search of clarifications, if not consolation. I was an observer who was trying to learn how lives are lived--how ordinary men, women, children make do, year in and year out. I required a language of irony, of ambiguity, of paradox, of inconsistency, and yes, of mystery--because the individuals I was meeting did not readily lend themselves (in the character of their everyday actions) to the categorical approximations of the social sciences. The apparently strong turned out, often enough, captives of their very strength--unable to mobilize a necessary sense of vulnerability or alarm that preceded changes of mind and heart, and not least, deed. The quite obviously hurt and downtrodden sometimes showed astonishing guile--moments and longer of candor and personal resourcefulness. Again and again I recalled George Eliot's

Middlemarch: the novel as a whole, and as a convenience to my mental life, the astonishing three-paragraph "prelude," with its references to "blundering lives," and the "inconvenient indefiniteness" in which the author characterizes not only "the natures of women," but all of us, whose "limits of variation," she lets us know, "are really much wider" than we are commonly inclined to believe, no matter outward appearances, or for that matter, the results of these inward (psychological) probes we of this century hold to be so significant and revealing.

I was asked, in 1976, to consider teaching an undergraduate course at Harvard. I'd helped Erik H. Erikson do so, off and on, in the 1960's, while I worked in one of Boston's ghettos and in a nearby working-class community. I'd also taught a freshman seminar--using James Agee's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and George Orwell's Road to Wigan Pier, two books which, in my experience, provoke a persistently thoughtful response to the moral confusions and hurdles generated by social inquiry. Now I had to choose enough books to make up a reading list for a semester-long course, and so doing, figure out why I expected those particular books would work, and what order to ask the students to read them. In a sense, I began to realize, I was not only engaging in an abstract or intellectual effort. Teachers are performers, with all the attendant risks of exploitative narcissism--in George Eliot's unforgettable phrase, "unreflecting egoism." Teachers are also inclined, through their reading lists, to make a strong personal statement: what they value enough to want to press upon others. Put differently, there is a strong subjective side even to the most objective elements in a professor's working life. As my wife (also a

teacher) observed, watching me struggle with the matter of this novel against that one: "We are parading ourselves with those reading lists; inevitably, we are showing off!" The sin of pride is, she and I assume, not merely a familiar phrase of the Bible, or The Book of Common Prayer, but something terribly near at hand for all of us; and so one hopes that the books in a course brazenly dedicated to "moral inquiry" will not let that intimacy go unnoticed--by a teacher, never mind his or her students.

One therefore girds oneself before a somewhat Augustinian conscience, and plunges on. The first section of the course I teach at Harvard College, titled "Moral and Social Inquiry," is called "Direct Social Documentation: The Literary and Journalistic Tradition." Its essence is twofold: Agee's account of a personal pilgrimage to Alabama--a piece of lyrical prose that is, quite simply, sui generis; and Orwell's remarkable evocation of the mining life in 1930's England. A biographical film by Ross Spears titled Agee, and the well-known Harlan County USA, by Barbara Kopple, spell out visually some of the issues the reading explores--in sum, the complex personal and moral issues at stake when a relatively well-off outsider (full of that mixture of curiosity and ambition which prompt so much of our work) crosses various social and economic barriers in order to try to learn about a given "them." The psychological hazards are as real as the more objective ones. Both Agee and Orwell let us know what to expect: distrust from others, yes, but plenty of self-doubt, no little amount of frustration or gloom, and not least, a kind of bitterness that, not rarely, finds an outlet in an animus directed at one's own kind, hence the pages of searing scorn Agee and Orwell direct at various intellectuals.

Our next segment is called "Ordinary Americans, So-called Working-class Men and Women: Several Angles of Vision." The major "angle" is that of William Carlos Williams: his long poem, Paterson (Parts One and Two), and the novel White

Mule, the first in a series known as the Stecher Trilogy. Williams' continuing attempt to learn America's 20th century language at the knees of his patients and dear friends, the occupants of Paterson's tenement buildings, serves to jolt our students--confuse and inspire them both. He reminds many of us of our social origins, remote or immediate--what we tend to want to forget (go to college to forget!). He is merciless with snobbery and academic pomposity, and merciless with his own kind of arrogance, the hauteur that a busy doctor, a successful writer, can mask with a self-justifying apologia, a sly, disarming veneer of humility. He rouses the students, awakens their senses--eyes and ears, but their moral sense, too. So does Tillie Olsen, whose four stories which make up Tell Me A Riddle are a high point for many young men and women, trying as they are to figure out (as Tillie Olsen still, wonderfully, is trying) what to do in this life, under which moon or sun. A final, marvelous pair in this section: John Baskin's New Burlington, a gem of an American memoir (the rural, Midwestern life of the early 20th century) and the first volume in the well-known series "Foxfire Books," wherein the simple (and very elegant and precarious) dignity and intelligence of a certain kind of farm and small town Southern life is finely sketched through anecdotal reportage, "oral histories," essays. Two films done by James Agee and Helen Levitt help out here: "The Quiet One" and "In the Street."

Next comes "Ways of Seeing Race," borne by two major American novelists: Ralph Ellison, whose Invisible Man is the occasion of much discussion, indeed; and Flannery O'Connor, whose stories "The Artificial Nigger" and "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and "The Displaced Person" offer quite another view of "race," perhaps one best (certainly most briefly!) described as sub specie aeternitatis. The film Nothing But a Man works quite well with Invisible Man, and a sensitive version of "The Displaced Person," by Glenn Jordan, helps bring that short story closer to many students.

We then move on to "Intellectuals and the

Religious Search," with Georges Bernanos' The Diary of a Country Priest (we show the Bresson film of that novel), Dorothy Day's autobiographical The Long Loneliness, and selections from the writings of Kierkegaard and Simone Weil. The last two are thorny, if not cranky, essayists--self-appointed outcasts from conventional Christianity. Dorothy Day, whom I loved so much, and whose work and writing have meant a lot to me, tells what an American woman could end up doing--being. The Bernanos novel has been one of my favorites for years; I scarcely could imagine teaching any course without it! These writers, together, bring all the revolutionary fire of Christ's life and example right to our front door--His passionate embrace of "the lame, the halt, the blind," the poor, the "rebuked and scorned," the terribly odd and the outlawed, and His unnerving admonition that He came to unsettle us, to challenge us ethically in every possible way, hence the absurdity of so much contemporary religion: an hour on Sunday in a nice building!

How do we live our lives? To what moral (yes, spiritual) purpose? In "An American Kind of Existentialism," the writing of Walker Percy serves as a means of such inquiry, such introspection: his novel The Moviegoer, and his startling, suggestive essays that comprise The Message in The Bottle. The film Five Easy Pieces, warts and all, fits well with Percy's kind of dramatic, searching examination

of late 20th century bourgeois American life. I use slides of the Gauguin triptych, titled (in translation) "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going," and find that, so doing, a French painter's Tahiti artistic triumph, connected to his urgent, end-of-life philosophical ruminations, activate mightily any number of youthful seekers--those whose journey, unlike that of Gauguin, is just starting.

And finally, with a somewhat portentous title of "Historical Change: Moral, Psychological and Social Complexities," we approach three great Victorian novels: Eliot's Middlemarch; Hardy's Jude the Obscure; and Dickens' Hard Times. Why these three? Oh, because they are so strong and persuasive, so wise, so full of moral energy, so hard, once read, to forget--and so preferable in their "way of seeing" to that of today's jargon-cluttered, flashy, imperious, overwrought and ultimately banal social science texts. Lord, if by the end of this course a few American young men and women (and with them some older graduate student "section people," and a middle-aged teacher) end up spiritual kin of George Eliot's--willing to settle for her restrained yet vibrant good sense, her mix of passionate concern for others and ironic detachment about our natural limitations as human beings--then one dares say that a particular college course will have done, as it is put down South, "right well."