Criticism and Theology

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(i)

The special excitement that a layman like myself, untrained in the disciplines of theology, may find in the proposed seminar is inseparable from special difficulties and dangers. It is not merely that the task of thinking about such a course presses uncomfortably upon one's own equipment, but that there is here so little experience to draw on for nourishment or correction.

A complementary problem arises from the side of the secular discipline upon which this course is to be based. As Fr Bright indicates in his proposals,[1] a number of disciplines, such as philosophy and sociology, are likely to take their turn, alongside the literary texts, as the basis of the seminar; and we may expect a lively resistance from within each discipline to anything that might seem to threaten a theological take-over bid. This of course is all to the good—including the good of theology; but it can be so difficult to maintain a proper autonomy, and to engage in mutually beneficial commerce, that a discipline may come to regard such interchanges with undue anxiety—reinforced, where relations with theology are concerned, by more special, radical suspicions. Such is certainly the case in contemporary literary studies; so that the committed Christian, concerned with literature, is often conditioned to keep his critical and theological interests safely apart, or at least to keep the latter well in the background.

That such a procedure can have important advantages is not in question. It certainly helps to keep imaginative writing in proper focus—to stress its peculiar integration of thought and feeling, of social and personal resources, its styles of linguistic embodiment, its elusive powers to nourish or debilitate—and to educate the literature student in appropriate modes of response. This is the basic dimension of literary-critical activity, and the task of defending and promoting these aims remains as vital as when Leavis and *Scrutiny* were first struggling to assert them. But whilst each generation has, we all know, in a sense to start again

[1] *Theology and the University*, ed. John Coulson, ch. 11. The present paper is the fifth of those read at the Leicester Conference about this book, and described in the June issue.

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from the beginning, Leavis and his colleagues have now largely consolidated these aims. And it is for this very reason that we can now pertinently ask whether a literary criticism with these emphases may not, after all, be only a part—though of course always a central one—of critical assimilation; whether the assimilation of imaginative works does not finally require procedures beyond the 'analysis' and 'judgment'—the 'placing' within some order of creative importance—of individual works and writers. How far are these 'evaluating' activities, decisive as they are, designed (or intended) to grapple with those ultimate questions which can hardly be excluded from any fully serious encounter with imaginative visions—which may, or may not, be complementary, which may in fact be in radical tension with each other, and which may, or may not, cohere with our own prior beliefs and attitudes? Unless we are content to leave the deepest creative thinking of Hopkins and Yeats, Lawrence and Eliot, suspended as unco-ordinated forces within 'tradition', or in our own minds, we must put our trust in procedures, however hazardous, designed to bring them into dialectical relation. Assuming that *King Lear*, *Three Sisters* and *Waiting for Godot* all have some claim on our attention (however we assess their relative weight) may it not be profoundly relevant to question their visions, as partly converging, partly conflicting responses to tragic facts? And how, in the end, can we avoid the task of exposing our social, or philosophical, or theological concerns to what we thus find ourselves addressed by, from the 'creative centre'?

Such dialectical tasks are, no doubt, quite especially hard to discipline—they are so dauntingly vast and open-ended—but since they cannot be disclaimed (only side-stepped) would it not be as well to come to terms with the problems and risks inherent in their acceptance? And it is, after all, possible to proceed in this way whilst being constantly on one's guard against the external imposition of *a priori* theories and the reduction of works of art to illustrative conveniences. The aim must be to refocus the relations between imaginative works in terms of their own, fully respected integrity—and weight—i.e., a genuine dialectical process, springing from genuine imaginative engagement. Accordingly, the underlying discipline remains that of textual analysis—and it is at this level that 'verification' must ultimately be sought; though there should be a growing interplay between unique imaginative forms and generic structures of feeling, between vision and vision, between intuitive and discursive modes of understanding. However careful we are, whatever precautions we take, the pitfalls will remain enormous. But, conscious

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of its legitimate dialectical tasks, criticism should thus feel free to point back, without apology, to the common experience and questions in which even works of genius are grounded—confronting their findings with each other, seeing our questions in theirs, putting our questions to their 'answers'.

I am stressing the needs within criticism for procedures we may call 'dialectical', both because these seem to me primary growing-points for criticism itself and because it is at these points that theology can most relevantly seek contact with it. It is most encouraging, from this point of view, to note how frontally Professor L. C. Knights' paper stresses the *cognitive* functions of art and insists that—whatever the special characteristics of imaginative creativeness—there can finally be no essential discontinuity between art and other cognitive pursuits. 'Art matters', he says, 'not (certainly) because it indulges our feelings, not simply because it gives pleasure, but because it offers a form of knowledge'.[2] I cannot say how far Professor Knights would wish to subscribe to the conclusions I myself am drawing from this same basic conviction, how far a programme of 'dialectical criticism' would seem to him feasible. But that he would at any rate have some sympathy with the idea, seems evident from his whole approach—and the conviction that 'the imagination is not a special faculty, but simply life coming to consciousness'.[3] And at one point, where he defends his own treatment of Shakespeare's plays, and especially of *King Lear*, against charges of 'killing the poetry in pursuit of an abstraction', his words could, without violence, be transposed into a foreword to the sort of critical procedures we are considering:

> It seems that I must state the obvious and say that I do indeed regard *King Lear* as a great work of art, a highly wrought formal structure that engages our attention no less for the minutest parts than for the whole; no less for the precise way in which things are said and presented than for what we may call the substance. But what we call formal structure is not an end in itself; it is a means of simplifying, concentrating, enriching. When we attend to the play's 'organization as a work of art'—whether to such devices as the parallel plots and the juxtaposition of scenes or to the power and complexity of the spoken poetry—we find, inevitably, that we are dealing with *meanings* related one to another in a continually widening context. These meanings of course are not definable units in a common currency (as when we

[2] *op. cit.*, p. 208.
[3] *ibid.*, p. 217.

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speak of 'the dictionary meaning of a word'), they are thoughts, perceptions, feelings, evaluations that only exist for us in so far as, our minds and imaginations fully alert, we actively apprehend them, bring them home to such knowledge of ourselves and the world as we may already possess. If we do not so bring them home we may have some powerful feelings—whether about the harshness of the world or the grandeur and misery of man—but we are not exactly reading Shakespeare.[4]

Is it not evident that these finely distilled observations can be applied not only to a single work, but to a writer's entire creative career—and beyond this, to 'a continually widening context' of meanings, embracing all that is really meaningful to us? Inevitably, one thinks here of *Tradition and the Individual Talent:* 'No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone'. But whereas for Eliot, when he wrote this, literature had more to do with emotion and 'the emotional equivalent of thought' than with any actual cognitive process, Professor Knights, seeing literature as 'a form of knowledge', insists that these related meanings 'only exist for us so far as, our minds and imaginations fully alert, we actively apprehend them, *bring them home to such knowlege of ourselves and the world as we may already possess*'. If even the 'reading' of a single work necessarily demands such a cognitive bringing home, how much more must be required from us as an indefinite multiplicity of—allied or rival—structures of meaning present themselves for assimilation. The individual work of art, however inexhaustibly rich in resolved or unresolved problems or tensions, at any rate consumes its own multiplicity in the unity of its form—i.e., it is itself a dialectical structure; and so, perhaps, it only needs to be re-created within ourselves to come properly home to us. Similarly, in some cases—Shakespeare's, certainly, but also, for instance, Ibsen's or Yeats', or, for that matter, Eliot's own—a writer's entire development may form a dialectical unity that only awaits our appropriation. But how are we to 'bring home' *as knowledge*, to such knowledge as we may already possess, the unorganized and indefinite, 'continually widening context' of meanings among works and artists perhaps creatively conscious of each other, perhaps mutually unaware, but in any case partners, be it as allies or rivals, within the unity of our own awareness?

The answer, for the reader or critic, can only be either: 'Don't bother' or: 'Do it yourself'. And, as I see it, this dialectical task is anything but an optional extra to other steps towards bringing home the meaning of

[4]*ibid.*, pp. 213–214.

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the meanings we confront. Either we 'actively apprehend them' so that they really become part of ourselves, a part of *our* knowledge; or we may have some powerful feelings—whether about the harshness of the world or the grandeur and misery of man—but we are not exactly bringing home our reading to such knowledge of ourselves and the world as we may already possess. A mere jungle of meanings cannot take possession of the mind—except precisely *as* a jungle, where meaning preys upon meaning without our even noticing, or where the 'continually widening context' of meanings comes, in effect, to mean a progressive, and perhaps ultimate, defeat of any meaningful orientation at all. The individual artist is engaged in an endless, 'intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings', to assert, or reassert, control over the jungle's endless encroachments:

> And so each venture
> Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
> With shabby equipment always deteriorating
> In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
> Undisciplined squads of emotion.

The individual reader or critic, just because he himself lacks the equipment (however shabby) to raid the inarticulate, has to employ more indirect—and often more abstract—modes of assimilating the meanings the great raiders, each for himself, have thus sought to establish or reclaim. Both the artist and the critic are, it is true, nurtured and sustained by vast racial and cultural resources (without which there would, of course, not even be a jungle of meanings but only, literally, the jungle). Yet, finally, each man has to see, and hear, and answer for himself. He is answerable for the meanings he brings, or fails to bring, home. Thus it is only a measure of the seriousness with which we enter into imaginative writing to recognize that, finally, the kind of attention and questioning, the kind of readiness to live with, and live by, the meanings we are thus able to bring home, belongs most typically to faith—or the search for a faith; even though we may in fact be contemplating the resonances of 'panic and emptiness' or the celebration of a purely human glory. For at this depth of seriousness we can only aim at a homecoming from which no serious captured meanings are excluded; and although some of these meanings will, no doubt, organize themselves spontaneously around centres of insight below the discursive intelligence, whilst, conversely, one may simply be unable to fuse, or analyse, others into coherence, the *struggle towards* coherence, at every level of the mind, is crucial to the commitment to bring our captive meanings home. And although it is

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of course possible to be thus led to deny the final validity of theological significances, one could not, on these terms, skip urbanely over their 'hints and guesses'—

> echoed ecstasy
> Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony
> of death and birth

any more than one could stop one's ears to the echoing insinuations of Forster's Marabar Caves. At this depth, we must at least struggle towards a meaningful interaction between meaning and meaning, between awareness and awareness, between images announcing

> Thou hast one daughter
> Who redeems nature from the general curse
> Which twain have brought her to

and the tale told by the idiot, Lucky, in *Waiting for Godot*

> that man in short that man in brief in spite of the progress of alimentation and defecation wastes and pines wastes and pines . . .

Only in such a struggle towards coherence amongst visions and fragments shored against our ruin can criticism strive to bring home the emergent implications of rival or complementary 'criticisms of life'.

(ii)

I have emphasized dialectical questioning as a discipline set in motion within the disciplines of the imagination itself, since it is on this plane that criticism inclines most insistently towards theological questions. Of course it is not only towards theology that the dialectics of the imagination are inclined; they may lead us anywhere where 'life coming to consciousness' may in fact tend. But at any rate it should be evident that theological forms of consciousness need not be external to critical activity, but may be struggling towards a foothold within the heart of literary experience itself. From this point of view, the activities of theology actually owe their relevance and urgency to our struggle towards consciousness amidst the facts and visions confronting the imagination.

Conversely, from the point of view of theology, literature represents the world of human existence—and the human commitment to self-understanding—to which 'the self-disclosure of God in Christ' is addressed '*as a present reality*'.[5] Literature is especially well equipped to represent man's historical experience to the theologian since, as Fr

[5]Charles Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

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Charles Davis notes, 'imaginative literature presents man in his changing situation, and it is man in the concrete who is the object of salvation'. Literature—so far as it indeed springs from 'the creative centre'—is needed by theology in the same sense in which Fr Davis speaks of theology needing the university. 'Notice', he says, 'that my plea is that theology needs the university, not that the university needs theology. As a matter of fact the second statement is also true . . . But I am more concerned with the fact that theology itself needs the university. It needs the university so that it will ask the right questions, the questions that keep it at the growing points of human knowledge and within the consciousness of contemporary man'.[6]

But whilst it is vital to stress in this way theology's frequent, disabling failure to address the consciousness of contemporary man, to ask the right questions (or to ask them at a sufficient human depth)—so that literature must, in the first place, be allowed to probe the theologian's humanity, rather than be probed by his theological apparatus—it is no less pertinent that theological resources should be brought into play so far as literary experience may itself be reaching out towards some sort of theological awareness. In any case, judgment in literary matters is essentially a two-way process: a bringing home, and a going forth. He who responds is always (potentially at least) judged by what he responds to: that which claims our response always invites our judgment, precisely because it offers to judge us. What we are to bring home can, as we have seen, only be brought by way of the sort of imaginative dialectic that derives its impetus from the confrontation of meanings in tension. And what goes forth, to meet these interacting meanings, can only shed a relevant light in so far as it is directed precisely towards this dialectic. It is thus that literature may be said to need theology, no less than that theology needs literature: not to queen it over human darknesses and joys, but to enter divinely into them; not to prescribe from positions of prefabricated strength, but as a probably rather suspect partner in the common pursuit; seeking to place—not to displace—the irreducible tensions and unanswerable questions that will continue to probe us, far beyond our knowledge or ease.

In the context of a seminar for theology students we should, I believe, aim equally at educing this, potentially highly creative—and in any case indispensable—unease, and at leading the way towards pertinent forms of co-operation with secular criticism. The reaction, voiced with such force in *Theology and the University*, against the 'defensive-offens-

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 114.

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ive' approach to the Christian apostolate should, we may hope, take some of the shrillness out of the secular-Christian dispute. It should—at any rate on the Christian side—lead to something resembling the new climate that has been achieved in inter-Christian discussions. And, as in these ecumenical contexts, the most pressing need is for a deepening understanding of each other's vital commitments and more and more real awareness of whatever is deficient in one's own. But it does not, of course, follow that theology should now simply retire to the receiving end. It remains, and cannot avoid remaining, a voice crying in the wilderness, as well as an eye seeing only as in a glass, and an ear attentive to neighbouring voices. And in this sense the Christian reader or critic cannot avoid being a theologian. Simply as a critic (I've argued) he should in any case be concerned to engage the meanings he enters in a dialectical inquisition, so that they may truly enter into him. As a Christian, he cannot avoid penetrating this dialectic with his faith—and so also, if appropriately responsive, exposing his faith to this dialectic. Thus, for the Christian student, literature studied in the context of theology should basically be just literature—met as a Christian, responding from within his faith, might anyway be expected to meet it, though perhaps with a more articulate theological emphasis. It should probe him, and probe his faith, as he probes—and seeks to place—*its* epiphanies. Anything more specifically 'theological' should, in this context, be secondary, or at any rate flow from this central activity.[7]

[7]Cf. Fr Herbert McCabe's account of the U.C.S. discussion booklet, *University Life:* 'Our method . . . is the exact opposite of the conventional "Gospel Enquiry". This commonly begins with a reading from scripture, which is then analysed and applied to our ordinary experience, the final result being some practical conclusion. We have reversed this procedure. We begin with an examination of some aspect of university life—not at all with a view to "judging" it, or seeing how we can apply Christian standards to it, but with a view simply to understanding it so that we can more fully enter into it. The second movement is to see the Christian revelation as a depth within this human experience.' (*Op. cit.*, p. 44.)
The analogy with the suggested approach to literary studies is close; though, if I am right, 'understanding', 'entering into' and 'judging' are *inherently complementary* aspects of literary experience—so that Fr McCabe's 'second movement' of seeing 'the Christian revelation as a depth within this human experience' is here not additional to the original experience and response but *simply the Christian's specific mode of dialectical engagement.*

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(iii)

A seminar on these lines could of course take many different forms. It might examine a range of writing from a chosen historical period; or seek to trace continuities and changes as between two (or several) periods —as Brian Wicker's paper suggests; or it might seek its focus directly in a cross-section of contemporary culture. Each of these patterns (and perhaps others) would have special advantages and might in fact be successively adopted; and each is, clearly, open to many variations. It is to be hoped that there will be a good deal of experimenting with different combinations and emphases.

I imagine, however, that—following from what has been said—there would be a deliberate effort to assimilate not only each text in its own right but their interrelations—with perhaps occasional pointers outwards, towards areas not directly represented among them. Secondly, as a corollary, the number of primary texts would need to be limited so as to facilitate real confrontation in depth, and so that students may be drawn in as increasingly active participants in the seminar's work. And, whilst it is vital to have some well-defined aims in directing discussions, a certain amount of improvisation might well be in place—even to the point of perhaps inserting an additional text here or there, as discussions proceed. The seminar, as I understand it, is above all meant to arouse and cultivate certain habits of mind—habits at once 'academic' and deeply personal—and the tutor must feel his way—with *this* group, in *these* circumstances—as the seminar begins to take shape. In what follows I can only give some very sketchy indications of the kind of thing one might do.

My own choice for a first experiment would be a course offering a cross-section of contemporary culture. Bearing in mind the need to achieve a maximum representation of the directive forces at work, in terms of a minimum number of texts, I'd propose something like the following juxtapositions:

Lawrence: *The Rainbow* and *The Fox*
Beckett: *Waiting for Godot*
Brecht: *The Good Woman of Setzuan*
Eliot: *Poems* and *The Cocktail Party*.

Lawrence would obviously have to be there, very much in the centre of any such course. And since *The Rainbow* (anyway one of his most important works) presents a picture of three generations, so as to arrive at its own diagnosis of modern culture in some historical depth, this seems

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a very suitable starting-point. As it happens, the novel offers some profound, direct challenges to Christian perspectives—or at least to what Lawrence, rightly or wrongly, takes to be Christianity's actual contribution to our culture. How far, we should inevitably find ourselves asking, are for instance Lydia Lensky's recurrent temptation to 'seek satisfaction in dread, to enter a nunnery, to satisfy the instincts of dread in her, through service of a dark religion', or Anna Brangwen's reflections, amidst the magnificences of Lincoln Cathedral, that 'God burned no more in that bush . . . She had always a sense of being roofed in'—how far are such passages merely relative to the characters concerned, how far do they express Lawrence's own sense of things; and—if the latter—how exactly are we to bring their implications home? What lies behind them? What do they mean to *us*? (Here one might well refer to *Women in Love*, and especially the chapter called 'The Industrial Magnate', which poses the most deeply searching questions about the relations between natural human values and charity, and between Christian ideals of service and a destructive social activism.) Harder still, both because of its massive inherent complexities and because of the gaps and confusions in our own theological inheritance in these matters, how are we to respond to Lawrence's sex ethic? I'm not here thinking so much of the *Lady Chatterley* type of problem, which lies relatively near the surface, but of the multititude of elusive problems concerning the place of sex in maturely human lives, which Lawrence's art so largely exists to define. The more one reads a novel like *The Rainbow*, simply as a novel, the more one is likely to appreciate both the splendour and the deficient deployment of our theology of marriage. At the same time, the more we have to learn from him, the more we have to be on our guard: only the deepest questioning can begin to disentangle what is finally valid for one, in Lawrence's embodied values, from what calls for qualification or resistance. Thus it is obviously impossible for a Christian to read Lawrence as he deserves to be read, without at the same time radically reconsidering not only the whole theology of sex but the place of sacrifice in human relations, and the place of natural fulfilment in the life of grace. This is why Lawrence is as indispensable to the professional theologian—even (perhaps especially) to the celibate moralist—as to the layman. True, Lawrence does not think in terms of primary and secondary purposes, or actually offer instruction on family-spacing dilemmas, but—though we must always keep him distinct from the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, and not confuse *The Rainbow* with manuals *De Castitate et Luxuria*—much of his work does, as a matter of

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fact, have bearings, maybe decisive bearings, even upon how these vexed dilemmas ought to be approached.

Samuel Beckett is, in many ways, the exact antipode of Lawrence; and, although his standing is less assured, he is at least equally representative of the forces shaping the contemporary consciousness. Lawrence himself would, I suppose, have dismissed him in a contemptuous aside. He would *not* have appreciated the endlessly clowning cosmic bellyaches in *Waiting for Godot*, the self-conscious, cerebral equivocations and puzzles, Estragon's disconsolate question, 'What do we do now, now that we are happy?' Yet Beckett is on to something authentic; authentic, and no less humanly important than Lawrence's realized maps of fulfilment. Lawrence can show us, as only a very few can, how to fill temporal possibility to the brim. But because his demands on nature—nature as an ultimate saving dimension—are absolute, as if men must regain Paradise by sheer purity of desire, he often seems to demand from human beings richnesses and strengths, and powers to fulfil each other, such as no man can, by taking thought, add to his stature (nor even by surrendering thought to the disciplines of the *solar plexus*). What is to be done with the unfulfilled and unfulfilling—a Skrebensky, or a Banford, or a Clifford Chatterley? Lawrence has little interest in this problem. More and more he seems simply to choose to take more and more literally Ursula's remark to her lover, Skrebensky: 'It seems to me . . . as if you weren't anybody—as if there weren't anybody there, where you are. Are you anybody, really? You seem like nothing to me.' And people who are literally nothing can be literally written off; for Lawrence they really are ultimately not there—least of all as objects of compassion. Unfortunately, the world (including Lawrence's world) is, in this sense, full of people who seem like nothing. They turn up again in Beckett. Indeed, Beckett's world is a world made safe for people who seem like nothing. They may, like Estragon, ask: 'What do we do now, now that we are happy?'; or boast: 'We don't manage too badly, eh, Didi, between the two of us? . . . We always find something, eh, Didi, to give us the impression that we exist?'; or they may surpass each other in shouting:

> ESTRAGON (*brandishing his fists, at the top of his voice*): God have pity on me!
>
> VLADIMIR (*vexed*): And me?
>
> ESTRAGON (*as before*): On me! On me! Pity! On me!

Yet they do have a claim on our pity—and may even be implicating us more directly—for all their ludicrous sub-existence. Even Pozzo,

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appallingly and grotesquely revolting though he is—monstrous even in his Second Act state of near-paralysis and blindness—finally (pressed to say since when Lucky had been dumb) is allowed the dignity of protesting:

> Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time? It's abominable. When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other day, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we'll die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (*Calmer*) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.

'That passed the time', Vladimir comments, as soon as Pozzo and Lucky have gone; but if we should be tempted to agree with Vladimir when he remarks elsewhere (obviously with one eye on the audience): 'This is becoming really insignificant', we need only turn back to Lawrence—his treatment of Clifford Chatterley, or, to a lesser extent, of Skrebensky, or his evident complicity in Banford's subconscious assassination, in *The Fox*—to recognize that Lawrence and Beckett are complementary, and that 'insignificance' has its own, profound significance in human affairs.

Lawrence and Beckett, then, are complementary, and each speaks to us with urgency; yet in the last resort they are incompatible. It is here that the task of distinguishing, and bringing home, those elements from each vision we finally wish to make our own becomes most pressing and exacting. Thus we are driven to ask how far Lawrence's demands for a purely natural self-fulfilment or even re-birth—particularly in the union of the sexes—can finally be assimilated to a faith grounded in the transcendence (as well as the immanence) of God, and in the doctrines of the fall and resurrection; or how far, on the other hand, Beckett's obsessive preoccupation with human inadequacy can serve as a valid corrective to Lawrence's tendency to confuse immanence and transcendence.

Perhaps it will help to bring these questions into focus to recall two or three key passages from *The Rainbow*, the first of which, though very well known, I should like to quote at some length:

> Several letters, and then he was coming. It was Friday afternoon he appointed. She worked over her microscope with feverish activity, able to give only half her attention, yet working closely and rapidly. She had on her slide some special stuff come up from London that day, and the professor was fussy and excited about it. At the same time,

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as she focused the light on her field, and saw the plant-animal lying shadowy in a boundless light, she was fretting over a conversation she had had a few days ago with Dr Frankstone, who was a women doctor of physics in the college.

'No, really,' Dr Frankstone had said, 'I don't see why we should attribute some special mystery to life—do you? We don't understand it as we understand electricity, even, but that doesn't warrant our saying it is something special, something different in kind and distinct from everything else in the universe—do you think it does? May it not be that life consists in a complexity of physical and chemical activities, of the same order as the activities we already know in science? I don't see, really, why we should imagine there is a special order of life, and life alone—'

The conversation had ended on a note of uncertainty, indefinite, wistful. But the purpose, what was the purpose? Electricity had no soul, light and heat had no soul. Was she herself an impersonal force, or conjunction of forces, like one of these? She looked still at the unicellular shadow that lay within the field of light, under her microscope. It was alive. She saw it move—she saw the bright mist of its ciliary activity, she saw the gleam of its nucleus, as it slid across the plane of light. What then was its will? If it was a conjunction of forces, physical and chemical, what held these forces unified, and for what purpose were they unified?

For what purpose were the incalculable physical and chemical activities nodalised in this shadowy, moving speck under her microscope? What was the will which nodalised them and created the one thing she saw? What was its intention? To be itself? Was its purpose just mechanical and limited to itself?

It intended to be itself. But what self? Suddenly in her mind the world gleamed strangely, with an intense light, like the nucleus of the creature under the microscope. Suddenly she had passed away into an intensely-gleaming light of knowledge. She could not understand what it all was. She only knew that it was not limited mechanical energy, nor mere purpose of self-preservation and self-assertion. It was a consummation, a being infinite. She was a oneness with the infinite. To be oneself was a supreme, gleaming triumph of infinity.

Here we have one of the vital keys to Lawrence's vision: his hostility to a conventional rationalism; the intent seriousness of concern with ultimate meanings that, in itself, gives his writing a religious dimension; and the explicit (and in *The Rainbow* insistent) preoccupation with what

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he calls 'the infinite'—or, as he has it elsewhere, 'the eternal'. 'To be oneself was a supreme, gleaming triumph of infinity'; and the sex-relation is, essentially, 'the doorway' to infinite otherness, to 'oneness with the infinite'. In this sense, self-fulfilment is not a liberty but a duty—perhaps the only absolute duty Lawrence recognizes—sharply contrasted with 'mechanical energy' and the 'mere purpose of self-preservation and self-assertion'.

Ursula's experience over the microscope, as she awaits Skrebensky's arrival, is a sort of Transfiguration. Everything else in the novel takes its bearings from here: 'Suddenly she had passed away into an intensely-gleaming light of knowledge. She could not understand what it all was . . . Self was a oneness with the infinite'. It is Lawrence's commitment to this 'gleaming light of knowledge'—the depth and intensity, and richly dramatized exploration of this commitment—that raises his art to the unique position it holds in modern writing. But it is a commitment that has two corollaries which, it seems to me, finally compel us to put a limit to our endorsement. For, first, in spite of its emphatic distinction between the self as consummated into 'a being infinite' and the self as mere 'mechanical energy' and 'self-assertion', this self is, in both cases, merely the natural self—with the consequence that it can, at best, only transform mechanical self-assertion into a sort of sacred ethical egoism. And, secondly, this self is only capable of love and human compassion so far as the other person—by being himself (or herself) a natural conductor of 'infinity'—can consummate this sacred egoism. The passage we have been considering immediately continues:

> Ursula sat abstracted over her microscope, in suspense. Her soul was busy, infinitely busy, in the new world. In the new world, Skrebensky was waiting for her—he would be waiting for her.

But Skrebensky fails as a natural conductor of 'infinity'; and, before long, he is cast out of her life—not with the sort of author's malice with which Lawrence was eventually to pursue Clifford Chatterley, or with which Banford is exterminated in *The Fox*[8]—but he does seem pretty well 'like nothing' when he disappears, anonymously married off, leaving Ursula reflecting:

> Did he belong so utterly to the cast-off past? She repudiated him. He was as he was. It was good he was as he was. Who was she to have

[8]Cf. Ian Gregor's re-directing analysis, '*The Fox*, A Caveat' (*Essays in Criticism*, January 1959); also Bernard Bergonzi's 'Literary Criticism and Humanist Morality' (*Blackfriars*, January 1962), which, very tellingly, indicates the significance of Lawrence's 'moral cripples'.

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> a man according to her own desire? It was not for her to create, but to recognise a man created by God. The man should come from the Infinite and she should hail him . . . The man would come out of Eternity to which she herself belonged.

The other passage I should like to recall is the description, early in the novel, of Lydia Lensky's slow and agonizing re-awakening to life, following a catastrophic past. It is a superb realization, in a kind of prose-poem, some nine or ten pages long, of a much-resisted resurrection of consciousness amidst the rhythms of the seasons and the demand for relationship by a stranger, Tom Brangwen—come out of Eternity, to which she herself no longer belonged. The whole passage should be closely examined, but here we can only note one or two of its connexions with the self-and-infinity theme. Lydia's arousal from the death of which she fears to let go is paralleled by Tom's own, hard struggle back towards positive life from the chaos and unbeing that her lapses 'into a sort of sombre exclusion' produce in him:

> He felt like a broken arch sickeningly out from support. For her response was gone, he thrust at nothing. *And he remained himself, he saved himself from crashing down into nothingness,* from being squandered into fragments, by sheer tension, sheer backward resistance. [Italics added.]

The triumph, in Tom and Lydia, of renewed life, as they consummate each other's being with each other's destined 'infinity' is symbolically summed up in the giving way of the 'broken end of the arch' to the rainbow image and a new peace, overflowing towards Lydia's child:

> She was no longer called upon to uphold with her childish might the broken end of the arch. Her father and mother now met to the span of the heavens, and she, the child, was free to play in the space beneath, between.

All this is magnificently done; and it will be evident how it bears upon Ursula's revelation when she looks through the microscope. And just as the 'infinity' Ursula is to learn to live for merges into an essentially *natural* self-fulfilment, so Lydia's and Tom's complementary rebirth is essentially natural. Indeed, Lawrence emphatically distinguishes this rebirth from anything that might be taken as a rebirth into *another* kind of life; and yet he goes out of his way to stress the Christian parallel, actually talking about a 'baptism to another life', 'the complete confirmation', and so on. Evidently he is concerned to offer this sort of natural resurrection as an alternative to the religion in whose bush God no longer burns for him. It is in the course of these passages that Lydia is

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shown as insidiously tempted 'to relapse into the darkness of the convent, where Satan and the devils raged round the walls, and Christ was white on the cross of victory'.

Lawrence, then, at one and the same time, sets out to affirm the sacredness and 'oneness with the infinite' of the properly realized self and to deny the transcendence of the 'Eternal'; and similarly, to affirm an absolute need for a 'baptism to another life' and to deny both its sacrificial source and infinite *otherness*. It is as if Hopkins' *Windhover* were to be revised, so that 'brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume . . . ' became the inmost subject of the poem, and the 'blue-bleak embers' which, 'ah, my dear, / Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion'—charged with a sacrificial glory, and foreshadowing a new creation—were to be ingeniously edited out, as a burnt out anachronism.

But suppose now that a man or a woman struck down by some radical grief is unable to rise again in natural joy. Or suppose that they simply lack the natural gifts of joy. Or that the circumstances of their lives exact some crucial sacrifice. (Such suppositions are hardly eccentric.) What does Lawrence have to say to—or about—such lives? By the time he came to write *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Lawrence expressed his awareness of this problem not merely by way of Clifford Chatterley's paralysed legs but, explicitly, in Connie's reflection:

> And dimly she realized one of the great laws of the human soul: that when the emotional soul receives a wounding shock, which does not kill the body, the soul seems to recover as the body recovers. But this is only appearance. It is really only the mechanism of the re-assumed habit. Slowly, slowly, the wound to the soul begins to make itself felt, like a bruise, which only slowly deepens its terrible ache, till it fills all the psyche.

And Lawrence's response? It is all there in the novel's first sentence: 'Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically'. In other words, Connie is to find resurrection with her game-keeper; whilst Clifford's 'terrible ache' is simply taken less and less seriously as the novel progresses. For such as him there is no hope of resurrection: only the contempt of the risen.

It is here—in Lawrence's inability to cope with incurable wounds and aches—and still more in his refusal to take them tragically—that his vision seems most gravely out of focus. The resulting disabilities range from moral to metaphysical distortions. It is hard to say whether his refusal of tragic compassion is the cause or the consequence of his refusal of tragic transcendence, whether his naturalistic reduction of the con-

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cepts of resurrection and salvation is the cause or the consequence of finding that 'God burned no more in that bush'. Either way, we are driven back to Beckett's counterpoise.

Here I must leave any further working out of the Lawrence-Beckett dialectic. There are of course vast ranges of material we have not begun to look into. Nor can I attempt to outline the ways in which discussions of Brecht and Eliot might impinge upon the problems we have raised. But I should like to remove a possible misapprehension.

Obviously there is a sense in which both Brecht and the later Eliot deliberately set out to offer 'solutions' to these problems. But we are dealing with works of art, not political or theological tracts. The proposed inclusion of *The Good Woman of Setzuan* in the seminar is, admittedly, in part connected with Brecht's ideological representativeness; just as Eliot, and especially *Four Quartets* and *The Cocktail Party*, so to speak, represent theology itself in the forum of secular culture. But the perspectives of Brecht's play reach out far beyond any such emphasis, impinging especially upon many aspects of Beckett (in relation to whom he seems almost as direct an antipode as Beckett, in turn, is to Lawrence). And Eliot, of course, has in any case an importance comparable to Lawrence's and could hardly be kept out of such a course. In his case, I'd just like to stress that there should be no question of bringing him in as a sort of One-Eyed Riley, to dispose of all outstanding complications and problems. On the contrary, his inclusion should help to subject his own, theological imagination to the various counter-pulls of our other texts; and, as a matter of fact, I believe that *The Cocktail Party* is open to important critical and theological objections.[9] Suffice it to say that Dr Leavis, evidently picking his words for maximum economy, once said that there are two reviews of *The Cocktail Party* he would have been interested to see: one by D. H. Lawrence, and the other by Albert Schweitzer. We should, at any rate, be doing the next best thing in confronting *The Cocktail Party* with *The Rainbow* and *Four Quartets*.

[9] I have sought to formulate these in 'After the Cocktails', *Essays in Criticism*, January 1953.

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