Recalling the Moral Force of Literature in Education

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In light of the continuing challenges which schools and libraries face from those who would restrict on moral grounds the literary fare of the young, I thought it helpful to recall the original arguments in public education for making literature a mainstay, arguments which hinged on literature's ability to form the soul, to restore a lost community, and to foster the state. Rather than treat these as simply antiquated, I argue that there are elements within the work of Mathew Arnold, F.R. Leavis and Louise Rosenblatt which can form the basis of a renewed defence of the moral and educational value of literature in both its aesthetic and testimonial aspects.

Aujourd'hui comme déjà au 19e siècle, les écoles et les bibliothèques publiques doivent faire face à l'opposition de ceux qui, à partir d'arguments d'ordre moral, voudraient qu'en éducation, on restreigne l'accès à certaines oeuvres littéraires. J'ai donc jugé opportun de rappeler les considérations qui, au tout début de l'éducation publique, ont fait de l'étude de la littérature, l'un des éléments de base de l'éducation. On reconnaît alors à la littérature la capacité de former l'âme, de reconstituer une communauté disloquée et de promouvoir le bien de l'Etat. Si telles sont les possibilités de l'étude de la littérature, il est difficile de considérer qu'elle aurait perdu son importance. Je suggère que certains éléments d'oeuvres telles que celles d'Arnold, de Leavis et de Rosenblatt peuvent illustrer l'importance de la littérature en éducation, tant du point de vue esthétique que du point de vue de la formation morale.

If I ever take an active part in the world, it will be as a thinker and a demoralizer.

Gustave Flaubert wrote these words to a friend at the age of eighteen. He was to find his calling as both thinker and demoralizer in the development of the modern novel with *Madame Bovary* which he began in 1851. I point out the year because of its importance not only for the birth of literary modernity but for the origins of public education. It was also the year Matthew Arnold was appointed Inspector of Schools by Lord Landsdowne, a posting through which Arnold launched literature as the great moralizing technology of public education: "Good poetry does undoubtedly form the soul and character," he assured the government in his *Reports on Elementary Schools* (1908, p. 60). The legacy of these two coinciding

Note: The material on F. R. Leavis in this paper has appeared in a different and expanded context in Willinsky (1988).

events in one sense effectively describes the poles of literature's moral situation, between Arnoldian didacticism and Flaubertian subversiveness. These two elements were to have considerable institutional play during the next hundred years in advancing literature's moral place, beginning with Arnold's *Reports* to Her Majesty's Government and *Madame Bovary*'s court appearances for "offences against morality."[1]

With a certain degree of complacency, however, we now tend to regard both aspects of this moral fervor as behind us. The British Obscene Publications Act, also a product of the 1850s, finally faltered with the acquittal of Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover* in 1960. Equally so, that initial Victorian enthusiasm for literature's didactic force has faded from the lips of most school inspectors, as educators have taken up the development of critical reading skills in some cases and personal response to literature in others. Yet this torch of moral concern has not been not allowed to fall, and in recent times a number of individuals and organizations have reactivated the debate on the morality of literature in order to protect the young from the subversive and corrupting forces of the literary work. In this paper, I wish to remind educators of the original arguments for including literature in public education through the instances of Matthew Arnold, F. R. Leavis, and Louise Rosenblatt. This return to an earlier form of curricular reasoning about literature's place in the classroom is intended to recall where, and perhaps why, we have lost sight of this thread of the moral force of literature. In the course of this review I would also suggest a few instances in which we may wish to pick up this strand again to meet the current challenge to literature.

The scale of this current threat is difficult to gauge, but certain basic measurements have been made. In Canada, the Book and Periodical Development Council has issued a list of 81 titles — from *The Handmaid's Tale* to *Huckleberry Finn* — which have been challenged in schools, bookstores, and libraries since 1974 (BPDC, 1988). There were 130 incidents of attempted censorship in 44 of the American states during the school year of 1985-86. Perhaps more discouraging is the fact that in the United States the number of these attempts at censorship increased by 35 percent for the 1985-86 school year and have doubled since 1982. There has also been a rise in the success rate of these challenges which increased from 23 to 39 percent in the four years (*Attacks on Freedom To Learn*, 1986). In terms of the immediate future, legislation introduced in the Canadian Parliament in 1987 to curtail pornography could, in its draconian measures, prevent the teaching of *Romeo and Juliet* and the poetry of John Donne (Bill C-54, 1987; Atwood, 1988).

In return, the professional associations of librarians, teachers, and administrators, as well as civil liberties unions, have taken action against these efforts at censorship with advertising campaigns, anti-censorship curriculum materials, and the funding of legal action.[2] They have responded with a number of timely strategies for fighting what they understand as an assault on individual rights and professional responsibilities. Yet I am disturbed by an element in their counter-measures. In reviewing their policy recommendations for handling challenges to specific texts,

two elements stand out (Doyle, 1988; Haiman, 1987). First, as I read these recommendations, every effort is made to "cool out" the objections and objectors through a good number of formalized procedural moves which can amount to a bureaucratic run-around. Brian Doyle (1988, p. V-9), for example, begins his advice to teachers on parent complaints with "wait till they call a second time." The second element of defence appears to entail taking a stand over something on the order of "basic principles of educational integrity" which are often not specified and therefore amount to an indecisive defence (Haiman, 1987, p. 336).

While aspects of this professionalism may be admirable, there is something oddly missing from this defence of the literary work and its place in the classroom. We seem to have relinquished the language of moral fervor, the sense that literature can influence moral sensibilities, can shape views of the world, or that it can educate emotions, as if literature might reach us in the manner which we are more likely to ascribe to films at this point. In overlooking this potential within literature, we leave the rhetorical force of this moralizing language to those who would use it to restrict our choice of books from which to teach. The fact is that in the face of these local skirmishes, whether over *Catcher in the Rye* or *The Merchant of Venice*, the thoroughly modern educator often blusters and reaches for a handy procedure, having lost ear and tongue for the forceful discourse of morality within both educational and aesthetic domains.

To revive the language of moral force for concerned educators, I thought it would be helpful to review its original champions. I have selected three lively moralizers of literature who made much of its educational force during the first half-century of public education. They saw literature as engaged in influencing "the beliefs about how life should be lived, what men and women should be and do," to borrow Isaiah Berlin's definition of the moral domain (1988, p. 11). The traces of their concerns remain in the curriculum, their source and inspiration often forgotten. First, there is Matthew Arnold's substitution of literature for the faltering state of religion in refining the rude urges of the young and the poor. In the schools of this century, F. R. Leavis was to deploy literature against the modern decline in an organic English society. And as a third moral option, Louise Rosenblatt sought to unite the literary project in the schools with the individualism of the democratic ideal for American education at about the same time as Leavis. It seems to me that we need to recall the moral possibilities and difficulties which underwrote literature's place in the curriculum; we must reconsider whether we can afford to abandon this aspect of literature because of its earlier inadequacies as curricular theory.

But to distinguish my discussion from a revival of patronizing and didactic attitudes toward art, I am also concerned to retain the daring side of literature which Flaubert bespoke —"in this world of fictions everything is freedom; all appetites are appeased, there everything is possible." On both sides of this moral force, the didactic and subversive, there remains a power which we may have discounted too quickly in making an academic trade out of the study of literature during the last hundred years. This process of rationalization which has significantly

depleted this forcefulness of the text in favor of its susceptibility to critical analysis and intellectual production. Or as John Crowe Ransome (1968, p. 329) set the project in 1938, "what we need is Criticism, Inc., or Criticism Ltd." and this is, as it turned out, very much what New Criticism produced (Graff, 1987). A second point in recalling this moral force is that we clearly need to move beyond the sort of faith in the formative powers of good poetry which Arnold dared to proffer in his *Reports*. The fact is that Arnold did hold out another, explicit, moral function for literature in which he claimed that the highest function of poetry was to constitute "a criticism of life." It is a moral principle that would stand well with Flaubert, though Arnold may have feared to put it forward as suitable for the schooling of those he was sent to inspect.

I

But before considering what Arnold kept from the schools, let us consider his principal legacy to the subliminal curriculum of a literary education. Over the course of his thirty years and as many annual *Reports*, Arnold repeatedly returned to the didactic function of literature for the schools; its powers — "a discipline that works deeper than any other discipline" — ensured the enculturation of the considerable number of children in his charge: "During the school year more than 25,000 children passed under my inspection" (1973, pp. 59, 51). In 1861, after a decade on the road inspecting the state-subsidized schools for the poor, Arnold had become convinced of the force of recited literature: "All but for the rudest natures would be insensibly nourished by that which [was] stored in them, and their taste would be formed by it" (1908, p. 88). On the basis of this faith, he eventually devised a literature syllabus for the schools: "1st year: One hundred lines of poetry got by heart, with knowledge of meanings and allusions. Writing a letter on a simple subject" (cited by Connell, 1950, p. 185). As far as Arnold's contribution to actual instructional techniques, recitation amounted to his one pedagogical contribution, and it has persisted as a curricular standard at least down to my own school days when, as I recall with little pleasure, the call was for two hundred lines in grade eight.

But Arnold's important curricular discovery was the potential which literature offered as the very tool of constraint and sensibility, of moral probity. In one *Report* (1908, p. 142), he called it "the greatest power available in education" and he succeeded in lodging it in the new curriculum for public education which was beginning to take shape in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Yet from the very beginning, Arnold (1895, p. 17) realized the importance of this moral application as a political concern, or as he put it in a letter to his wife during his first year:

> I think that I shall get interested in the schools after a little time; their effects on the children are so immense, and their future effects in civilizing the next generation of the lower classes, who, as things are going, will have most of the political power of the country in their hands, may be important. (1985, p. 17)

And it was true that the period of his inspectorate was troubled by trade union militancy, Fenian terrorism and the Murphy Riots in Birmingham and Manchester. As Inspector of Schools, he clearly felt that he had some part of the solution to this unrest at hand: "Undoubtedly no refining influence is more powerful than that of literary culture" (1908, p. 250).

In marshalling this literary force through public education, the selection of the instructional materials became, for Arnold a question of the first order: "The choice of passages to be learnt is of utmost importance" (1908, p. 60). To consider one example, Arnold favored the shorter pieces of Mrs. Herman over the poems of Oliver Goldsmith because, he explained, they had "real merits of expression and sentiment, merits such as the children can feel" (1908, p. 61). Although Goldsmith survived this effrontery, Arnold's identification of the crucial ingredients for the didactic text — its selectiveness, its sentimental hook meant to drive the point home — was to set the direction for the school anthology which was to eventually spawn an entire publishing industry aimed at this meeting of proper "sentiment" and what "children can feel." In essence, Arnold identified the educational value of literature in the classical terms of instruction and delight. Yet he added the Victorian touch of sentiment and discrimination, while also suggesting that literature might rather painlessly form the soul and character of those in need of civilizing. It was as if literature might stem what he and many others of the time strongly felt was the subsiding tide of a Sea of Faith. "The masses are losing," Arnold noted in *Literature and Dogma*, "the Bible and its religion" (1924, p. 290). In his *Report* of 1871, he based his claim for a greater utilization of literature directly on its replacement value, a value which he chastized the government for failing to recognize: "The whole use that the Government, now that its religious instruction is abandoned, makes of the mighty engine of literature in the education of the working classes amounts to little more, even when successful, than giving them the power to read the newspaper" (1908, p. 143).

But there remained another, less sublime moral force which Arnold realized was to be found in studying great poetry, one that might better serve current discussions of the curricular function of literature. During his time as Inspector of Schools, Arnold was also appointed Professor of Poetry at Oxford. His literary criticism for this educated community took a different course than his schoolwork. Most notably, he declared that "the high destinies of poetry" include its "criticism of life," which "will be of power in proportion as the poetry conveying it is excellent rather than inferior, sound rather than unsound or half-sound, true rather than half-true" (1960, p. 3). He reiterated the importance of this high destiny in his essay on Wordsworth: "Poetry is at bottom a criticism of life," with its pressing question — "How to live?" (1960, p. 85). Not surprisingly, this criticism of life, which he held so highly, was not about to be conferred on such critical acts as the Hyde Park riots of 1866 which sparked, in part, his concerned social commentary *Culture and Anarchy*, nor was it to be applied to the course of studies in the state-sponsored schools where the children of those

rioters attended. In this critical omission to transfer his literary theory, Arnold perpetuated a double literary standard: poetry is to serve the schools in one fashion — "to form the soul and character" — and to a certain elite set of readers at Oxford and elsewhere — "a criticism of life." Given an opportunity today to merge these standards the educator has to consider whether this higher moral function has been undone by the modern literary curriculum, and whether within the forum of the classroom, as I will explore in the final section of this paper, there is not reason to consider once again how literature can function on such a moral plane.

II

The second instance in recalling the moral force of literature comes from the work of F. R. Leavis whose influence might be more directly felt in contemporary English curriculum guides as they would foster discerning readers suspicious of the language of commerce. Although still working within the spirit of Arnold, Leavis moved to a far more explicit deployment of the forces of literature. Literature's powers were not to be unconsciously infused by having students memorize Arnoldian touchstones. Leavis promoted an active study of selected literary works which might provide a connection with, if not actually restore, the lost organic community of craft and self which he projected into times and places essentially pre-industrial. Literature, in Leavis' able hands, becomes a brick to hurl at a culture marked not so much by the anarchy which Arnold feared, but a sorry complacency fostered by the consumption patterns of rampant commercialism.

At Downing College, Cambridge, Leavis conducted his campaign for the restoration of culture and community through literary study, and many of his students went on to be prominent school teachers. He also made his case directly to the schools in writing with one of those students, Denys Thompson, the textbook, *Culture and Environment* (1933). The book broke new ground in media studies even as it borrowed its tone from Arnold: "We cannot, as we might in a healthy state of culture, leave the citizen to be formed unconsciously by his environment; if anything like a worthy idea of satisfactory living is to be saved, he must be trained to discriminate and to resist" (Leavis and Thompson, 1933, p. 5). Yet the unhealthy dangers this work takes up are not those that Arnold pursued, as each chapter deals with another affliction of twentieth century life — "Advertising," "Mass Production," "Standardization," and so on. For Leavis and Thompson, a literary education is the necessary form of protection, and is yet itself a substitute for a time gone by, for "folk-songs, folk dances, Cotswold cottages and handicraft products" that mark the lost organic community which the book begins by noting (1933, p. 1).

In setting out the virtues of this literary education, Leavis was not about to leave the students to the formative powers of the text; the benefits lay in rigorous and critical study. Leavis took this moral potential of literary studies to be one that merged intelligence with integrity:

> [It] trains, in a way no other discipline can, intelligence and sensibility together, cultivating a sensitiveness and precision of response and a delicate integrity of intelligence — intelligence that integrates as well as analyses and must have pertinacity and staying power. (1943, p. 34)

While this delicate marshalling of intelligence has its own moral imperative or value system about it, Leavis went on some years later to elevate what I am terming the moral force in the study of literature to the point of a "living principle:" "The nature of livingness in human life is manifest in language — manifest to those whose thought about language *is*, inseparably, thought about literary creation" (1977, p. 44, original emphasis). Not even Arnold was so daring as to place literature and the study of literature at the center of our humanity, our "livingness."

This moral force of literature was brought most vividly to mind for Leavis by the works of D. H. Lawrence, which he successfully championed in his critical work. It was Lawrence who poignantly captured for Leavis the degree of human loss that marked the early twentieth-century British countryside: "What could possibly become of such a people," Leavis cites from Lawrence at one point, "a people in whom the living intuitive faculty was dead as nails, and only queer mechanical yells and uncanny will-power remain?" (Leavis, 1977, pp. 14-15). Literature and especially "thought about literary creation" is posited as a restorative, as something of a literary, if not a literal, live-saver. This was no less than Lawrence would have it: "Turn truly, honorably to the novel, and see wherein you are man alive, and wherein you are a dead man in life" (1973, p. 34).

Leavis was taking the moral imperative of teaching as an act of resistance against the declining, mechanized society that had, through mass production and advertising, corrupted craft and language. To return to our original touchstones for this essay, Arnold and Flaubert, we again see that in fact both sides, the didactic as subversive and the moralizer as demoralizer, meet in this celebration of the powers of the literary text to undo the damage accomplished by the dissipated culture. Perhaps the most blatant expression of the moral task Leavis set for the schools and the study of literature was provided by George Sampson's remark, from that same time and tradition, when he claimed that education was "not to prepare children for their occupations, but to prepare children against their occupations" (1952, p. 11).

Yet what also needs to be considered in Leavis' forceful situating of literature in the modern curriculum are those things which he had little time for in the classroom. Lionel Trilling pointed out in his study of Leavis, that while the "energy of his protestantism" and his "marked moral intensity" are notable features, something is lost in this forceful approach to literature: "The art that delights — and enlightens — by the intentional relaxation of moral awareness . . . . nor does he take any account of the impulse of sheer *performance*" (Trilling, 1956, p. 112). This aesthetic delight is missing too from Arnold's perception of literature both in school and out, as he favored its didactic and critical functions in the play of moralities and ideas. Although sensitive enough in his criticism to the elements of art in the text, Leavis failed in his educational plans to capitalize

on the aesthetic power of the text (if somewhat impulsive). With the literary work in hand, Leavis is engaged in a critical assault, after the fashion of Arnold, on modern life. In that sense, he misses out on Flaubert's project of artistically transcending bourgeois apprehensions with the linked concerns of propriety and property. Flaubert was willing to trust his art as its own moral statement, its own moral energy: "What is beautiful is moral, that is all there is to it."[3] This Romantic side to Flaubert's realism was to ripen during the nineteenth century into the "art for art's sake" movement which becomes, interestingly enough, the starting point for Louise Rosenblatt's work in building a socially responsible approach to the literature curriculum.

III

A contemporary of Leavis, Louise Rosenblatt completed her dissertation, *L'Idee de l'art pour l'art dans la literature anglais*, at the Sorbonne, and returned to America with a strong concern for the role which art might play for democracy's sake. She soon became involved with the Progressive Education Association and her first book, *Literature as Exploration* (1938), was sponsored by the PEA's Commission on Human Relations. In this work, Rosenblatt added considerably to the importance of the individual and the individual's interaction with literature in an American tradition first celebrated by Emerson in such works as *The Conduct of Life*: "Away with this hurrah of masses, and let us have the considered vote of single men spoken on their honour and their conscience" (cited by Warren, 1975, p. 5). Rosenblatt advanced the case for the literary work's formative role in the making of a democratic individual which she found missing from the annals of American public education. The twin moral obligations of the democracy were recapitulated in her initial theory of literary experience. It began with an affirmation of the sovereignty of the individual: "The reading of any work of literature is, of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of some particular reader" (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 32). And it was extended to the individual's awareness of others as literature brought to light their minds and emotions: "Books are the means of getting outside the particular limited cultural group in which the individual was born" (1938, p. 228). Having felt the impress of the lives of others and realizing the necessary uniqueness of their own, readers cannot help but take on a new outlook, to enter the world in a more liberal frame of mind.

As Rosenblatt's work developed over the decades, however, the focus shifted from the social function of this moral force — in vicariously informing the democratic citizen of the experience of fellow citizens — to an aesthetic concern closer to the art for art's sake movement which she had originally written against. In *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of Literary Work* (1978), her second major theoretical statement, she repudiated the vicariousness of reading in favor of the reader's virtual and aesthetic experience of the text. This later work emphasized the individual's contribution to the making of a poem

in the face of an essentially incomplete text. Schools were failing to realize, as she saw it, how the reader and the text worked together in creating the poem. She was affirming the right and duty of readers to participate constructively in the literary culture, a participation which still spoke to the singularity or uniqueness of the reader's experience as an essential tool for proper reading. She did in this fashion remain true, in a sense, to her original intentions of setting the ideals of an individual in dialogue with a text and apart from the authoritative interpretations of the (dictatorial) teacher. Literary study retained its relationship to the political morality that governed the democratic state, although it is clearly a diminished and increasingly unspoken role.

The attention paid to Rosenblatt's work was also to encourage this focus on the subjective and engaging relationship with the student-reader which her work promised. This element in her transactional theory of literature was absorbed within an emergent reader-response theory which has taken as its imperative a realization of the individual's experience in reading (Tompkins, 1980). The literary text served in this instance as more of a Rorschach inkblot than the vehicle for meeting our our obligation to the needs of others. Lost in this development within her work of a more subjective stance was the element of optimism which underlay Rosenblatt's faith in the value of a literary education. The text's original contribution to the polis was ultimately diminished: "Literature can compensate, thus, for the limitations of time and place and class and nation; compensate too, perhaps, for the limitations and sorrows of the human condition" (1978, p. 1977). Certainly, the consolation of literature in this form can still be cast as a moral force, yet it is a less hopeful sense of the active part literature can play in shaping the democratic spirit of a nation. This sense of literature's loss can be heard in voices other than Rosenblatt's as Robert Penn Warren, for example, gave a desperate, though still thoroughly American, sense to poetry's place in his *Democracy and Poetry*: "I am trying to indicate how, in the end, in the face of increasingly disintegrative forces in our society, poetry may affirm and reinforce the notion of self" (1975, p. 42). Warren retained Rosenblatt's original interest in fostering a democratic state of individuality, which he then combined with a concern worthy of Flaubert or Leavis over the increasingly disintegrative forces in this society.

This discounting of literature's active, political role in the life of the republic has its roots in modern trends within both curricular and literary theory. The disassociation is driven on the one hand by school programs in English which are driven by the language of skills and competencies, a language which has come under attack, it is worth noting, from both sides of the ideological spectrum for its failure to realize the educational obligations — both cultural and political — of a democracy (Hirsch, 1987; Aronowitz and Giroux, 1986). On the other hand, this de-moralization of literature has also been supported by developments in literary theory which have neatly removed themselves from the world, as noted with acuity by Edward Said:

> It is not too much to say American and European literary theory now explicitly accepts the principle of non-interference, and that its peculiar mode of appropriating its subject matter (to use Althusser's formula) is *not* to appropriate anything that is worldly, circumstantial, or socially contaminated. (1983, p. 3)

Although Said overlooks in these comments the worldly and profoundly moral critical project of feminist literary criticism, he does accurately identify the isolation of the literary work within a world of inter-textuality as a triumph of the ethic of professionalism within the temper of these conservative times. Feminist critics are but one sign of growing resistance to the particular sense of the profession which he identified. The recently formed English Coalition in the United States, which links school and college English teachers, has reaffirmed the role language and literature might play in the state with their official slogan, "Democracy Through Language," a role that extends beyond the republic of letters and returns to Rosenblatt's original concerns with the moral and political force of the literary work (Heller, 1987).

IV

In assessing what Arnold, Leavis, and Rosenblatt would make of literature in the schools, perhaps it should first be acknowledged that their faith in its subliminal and salutary influence seems overstated and naive. But more than a Victorian keepsake, this subliminal curriculum continues to be singled out as a force to be reckoned with in the schools. Over the last two decades, for example, "the hidden curriculum" has been vilified (more often than its impact has been successfully measured) by libertarian, Marxist, and feminist critics of the schools (Friedenberg, 1965; Apple, 1979; Davies, 1984). Henry Giroux, for example, couches his critique of the schools in terms that turn on Arnold's best hopes: "Literacy becomes the ideological vehicle through which to legitimate schooling as a site for character development" (1988, p. 61). Others have named literature's secret agenda with a certain vehemence: "Literature, with its faithful amanuensis 'criticism,' undoubtedly embodies and transmits the social-aesthetic values of white male bourgeois society, values whose protestation of purity and disinterestedness have scarcely bothered to conceal the ugliness and exploitation that lie close at hand" (Batsleer, Davies, O'Rourke, and Wheedon, 1985, p. 37). At least for some observers of the schools, there remains to this day little doubt about literature's moral force in the classroom.

But consider as well that whatever the actual powers of this "mighty engine," the sense that the book might form the soul has motivated such diverse groups as the Interracial Books for Children organization, as well as those leading in community censorship drives such as the Eagle Forum and Renaissance Canada. That this aspect of moral force has become the tool of the school critics from such a wide range of perspectives, when it no longer figures in the educational rationale for the study of the literary work, suggests something askew in curriculum planning for the English program. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper

to propose a renewed language arts curriculum based on the moral possibilities of the text, reintroducing the debate on a historical basis may re-establish the curricular legitimacy of this moral question in a program dominated more often by the language of cognitive psychology.

The question that lurks beneath this examination of literature's moral force is to what extent a literary work can shape the soul or affect behavior. The evidence on the effects of pornography, for example, remains highly contentious (McCormack, 1988); the literary inclinations of concentration camp officiers during World War II continues to trouble the literary critic (Steiner, 1967); and there remain quirky, disturbed cases such as the stock put in *Catcher in the Rye* by John Lennon's assassin, Mark Chapman (Anderson, 1988). The "evidence," such as it is, provides little solace for the literature teacher. As it so often is with moral questions, we are left to our own resources in thinking, in this case, about our reading and whether we have been moved in a moral fashion by it. The temptation is to say yes, as in this recent autobiographical statement by Isaiah Berlin:

> When I was young I read *War and Peace* by Tolstoy, much too early. The real impact on me of this great novel came later, together with that of other Russian writers, both novelists and social thinkers, of the mid-nineteenth century. These writers did much to shape my outlook. It seemed to me, and still does, that the purpose of these writers was not principally to give realistic accounts of the lives and relationships to one another of individuals or social groups or classes, not psychological or social analysis for its own sake — although, of course, the best of them achieved precisely this, incomparably. Their approach seemed to me essentially moral: they were concerned most deeply with what was responsible for injustice, oppression, falsity in human relations, imprisonment whether stone walls or conformism — unprotesting submission to man-made yokes — moral blunders, egoism, cruelty, humiliation, servility, poverty, helplessness, bitter indignation, despair, on the part of so many.(1988, p. 11)

Yet in discussing the impact of the literary work on the young, even if seemingly too young at times, the question of literature's impact is further complicated by the fact that the book in a school is mediated in its meaning for the students. The context in which a book is set and the manner in which it is taught, frame, if not dictate, the nature of its moral force. "Bad" aspects of certain books can be turned to "good" ends by the teacher, which has been the underlying principle of such works of feminist criticism as Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader* (1978), and much the reverse can happen when, for example, Shakespeare is subjected to multiple-choice examinations. Yet another aspect of the classroom's role in this moral education can be found in the lessons taught by the different academic levels or streams in the high school, as, for example, the academic English class decides on the culpability of kings with *Macbeth*, while the students in the non-academic class dwell on the inadequacies of their own language (Willinsky, 1984). The immediacy of the teacher in the classroom and the supporting structure of the curriculum, from support materials to examinations, would seem to constitute the first order of power and meaning in the students' work with assigned literature.

Thus, in seeking to reintroduce the moral force of literature into the educator's vocabulary, the first step may be to work with the way in which the teacher plays

a mediating role between the discipline and the public. That is, teachers need to explore the balance of responsibilities to text and community, to student and citizen. This means reviewing why the literary text is worth defending in the education of the young and to what ends it is being employed in the schools — with regard, for example, to questions of gender and academic streaming — as this constitutes the element of educational leadership which the professional takes on behalf of the community. The second step will be to ensure that community sentiments are not completely removed from the literature program, which will fulfill some part of public education's democratic responsibility to represent and serve, as well as further educate students about the nature of that community.

Based on the principles drawn from the work reviewed here, an explanation to the community of the moral force underlying the study of the literary text might run something like this: The teacher believes that the students will profit by work with what might be thought of as the underlying morality of the aesthetic and the testimonial features which a work of literature contains. The first principle of that morality is that art presses against convention in order to create its tension and moments of startling originality; this might also be defended as the source of inventive thinking in many fields of human endeavor besides literature. Richard Poirier, for one, has tried to turn this aesthetic concept into a critical posture which governs all literature:

> There is scarcely a work of literature in English written anywhere at any time which can be said to favor 'pre-established codes of decision,' whether in a character or a style or the progress of a narrative. (1987, p. 37)

Poirier originally intended to link Emerson and Wordsworth with these reflections, but in the process captured the meeting of intellectual, aesthetic, and moral elements that I wish to suggest connects author and educator, poet and critic, especially as I have introduced it thus far through the instances of Flaubert, Arnold, and Leavis. However, I would not leave Rosenblatt out of this formulation of literature's moral place in education.

It is the related ability of literature to introduce an effective criticism of life which comes closest to linking the work of those figures under consideration in this paper. In the classroom, the teacher's responsibility becomes one of discovering the criticism that arises out of the testimony that literature offers, testimony to the lives of others in the original spirit of Rosenblatt and as Berlin refers to it above, but also in the sense that Czeslaw Milosz captures in *The Witness of Poetry* (1983) and Robert Pinsky describes as bearing a moral commitment that moves beyond advocacy:

> The strange truth about witness is that though it may include advocacy and judgement, it includes more than them, as well. If political and moral advocacy were all we]as poets[had to answer for, that would be almost easy. Witness goes further, I think, because it involves the challenge of not flinching from the evidence. It proceeds from judgement to testimony. (1987, p. 425)

Among educators, Ken Donelson has turned this sense of vision into part of his outspoken defence of literature's place in the classroom: "By moral, we mean that writers of books strive to accurately reflect the reality of human experience, and that assumes that writers have the freedom to poke into dark corners of our thoughts and actions" (1987, p. 214). The responsibility to testify is the corresponding aspect of the freedom-to-read spirit which is indeed the primary moral principle underlying the fight against the book banners. It is a freedom to bear witness, to explore the difficult questions of what is not easily judged nor advocated. The educator owes the community and the students, all of the students, the benefit of that witness, as well as the insight which the aesthetic tension of the literary work provides. But the educator, in all fairness, would also appear to owe the community something more than literature's twin aspects, aesthetic and testimonial.

As teachers are usually in control of how a text is set in a class, they are also in a position to represent the range of community views of the text, of how its tension functions, of what it attempts to draw on, to accomplish, in its testimony. What this might be like can be seen from a final and all-too-real example of the need for the greater representation. In 1986, students in a Waterloo County high school in Ontario objected to the teaching of *The Merchant of Venice* for the effect it was having on their lives in the school. Some students after studying the play were reported to have thrown money at a number of Jewish students (Bowen, 1986; Plaut, 1986). Yet in recognizing the power of literature to serve as witness — both in what it portrays and in what it fails to take up — one challenge to the educator would seem to be to address the topic of anti-Semitism in studying this play. This might prove a more effective way of dealing with the problem in that one community than simply suspending the teaching of the play and then moving it to a later grade, which was the Board of Education's response.

I don't for a moment imagine this revival of the moral force of literature to be easy task for the English teacher nor one that I have more than begun to explore in this context, but I do think that to consider the morality at the root of the literary mission in the schools is the first step in regaining our bearings. With this initial consideration of the topic in place, my next task is clearly to develop, within this proposed framework, specific teaching practices for work with some of the literary works which have been repeatedly challenged. It will have been sufficient with this paper to have recalled the moral force of literature as a valuable part of what we would do with literary texts in schools and lives.

Notes

1. This is by no means the beginning of the link between education and sedition in the fate of literature's moral force; it dates back at least to the beginning of the printed book, as Charlton (1987) has recorded in his work on Christian educators' fear of "false fonde bookes, ballades and rimes" at the time of the Reformation. However, my concern is with the modern situation for both literature and the schools, as when Rolph (1969, p. 45) points out the boost public education provided for certain less than moral forms of literature: "So it was pornography . . . that took an immense modern impetus from secondary education that was made statutory in England in 1902."
2. In Canada, these organizations include the Canadian Council of Teachers of English, the Canadian Libraries Association, as well as the Canadian Rights and Liberties Federation and the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, with similar positions taken up by the comparable associations in the United States.
3. This sentiment, especially dear perhaps to French literature, has been sustained by Roland Barthes — "The pleasure of the text: like Bacon's simulator, it can say: *never apologize, never explain*" (1975, p. 3, original emphasis) — and in a rather different form by the latter-day demoralizer Georges Bataille (1973, Preface): "Literature is either essential or it is nothing. I believe that the Evil — an acute form of Evil — which it expresses, has a sovereign value for us. But this concept does not exclude morality: on the contrary, it demands a 'hypermorality.'"

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