Miss Goddard's Grave

Thank you for inviting me to speak here in this distinguished series of lectures. Quite what prompted you to ask me to talk about religious education I can't immediately see; you must have been desperate. As I'm not an academic, nor a member of the clergy, nor a teacher, whatever I say about the subject will be the observations of an amateur with no standing in the field. Furthermore, given that I've voiced some criticisms of religion in the past, and that various Christian groups have expressed their criticisms of me, it might be that whatever I said on the subject would be hostile in any case.

Well, I hope it won't be that. But we shall see. It's worth being thankful that we live in a country and at a time when one can express criticism of religion, or religious practice, without being punished. That may soon change, if the government has its way. The proposed Serious and Organised Crime and Police Bill will make it possible for anyone to claim that they've been exposed to hatred by having their religion criticised, and for anyone who voices such criticism to be prosecuted and possibly imprisoned.

I'll say a little more about this later on, but I'll begin by taking you to the churchyard of St Peter Mancroft overlooking the market place in Norwich. Not far from the door of this church there's a tomb – a finely carved family sort of tomb, one of those big box-shaped ones. At one end there is an oval cartouche, and inside it the inscription:

This Stone is dedicated to the Talents and Virtues of Sophia Ann Goddard, who died 25 March 1801 aged 25. The Former shone with superior Lustre and Effect in the great School of Morals, the THEATRE, while the Latter inform'd the private Circle of Life with Sentiment, Taste, and Manners that still live in the Memory of Friendship and Affection.

[photograph of tomb]

I've been fond of that tomb, and this inscription, and by extension of Miss Goddard herself, for most of my life. I know nothing about her; if I had the time I'd spend a few hours in the county archives to

see if there was any record of an actress called Sophia Goddard in Norwich at the end of the eighteenth century. Clearly she was greatly loved and widely admired. There must have been a portrait made at some stage; people have always liked looking at pictures of young actresses; they still do. Perhaps it's still hanging in a house somewhere in the city, or at the back of an antique shop, with the title "Unknown young woman, late 18th century". There's a story there; in fact there are several.

But what I'm concerned about tonight is the relevance of her epitaph to the theme of my lecture. I don't profess any religion; I don't think it's possible that there is a God; I have the greatest difficulty in understanding what is meant by the words "spiritual", or "spirituality"; but I think I can say something about moral education, and I think it has something to do with the way we understand stories, which is why I've begun with Miss Goddard's grave.

"The great school of morals, the theatre" – it was possible in 1801 to use a phrase like that and not be misunderstood, not be suspected of irony. The people who patronised Miss Goddard's performances would really have believed that the theatre was indeed a place to which we might go and find instruction or enlightenment about matters of morality.

So when the monumental mason cut the words "the great School of Morals, the THEATRE" on Miss Goddard's tombstone, there would not have been a scandal. Few people would have disagreed with the idea that the theatre could teach us about moral questions. You might not go to see a play specifically in order to become a more moral person; the latest Harlequinade or pantomime might be stronger on farcical slapstick and transformation scenes than on ethical instruction; but taking it by and large, the audiences would have felt that the experience over a season's or a life's theatre-going of seeing many different stories, some full of sentimental pathos, others bristling with martial bravado, some tragic, some comic – that wide mixed experience would tend to give the audience a moral education. That was the assumption. People would come to see that some kinds of behaviour, such as generosity and forgiveness, led to happy outcomes, and were praiseworthy; other kinds of behaviour, such as greed or deceitfulness, led to unhappy outcomes, and were disapproved of; yet other kinds of behaviour, such as renunciation

or noble self-sacrifice, led to sad outcomes in the short run, but were highly praised, because they led to happy outcomes for others in the long run. There would be degrees of subtlety, of course; both a violent melodrama and *Macbeth* would tell the audience that murder was not a good thing, but the Scottish play would do it by showing the effect Duncan's murder has on the murderer himself. We learn from Macbeth's fate that killing is horrible for the killer as well as the victim. And these things were all felt to be part of an education in the great school of morals.

But it wasn't only the theatre that was felt to have this educative effect. At around the same time, Jane Austen was writing these famous words in *Northanger Abbey*:

'Oh! It is only a novel! ... Only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;' or, in short, only some work in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.

And Jane Austen's own novels, of course, do exactly that. Think what happens in *Emma*, especially in the passage where Emma is thoughtlessly rude to poor elderly Miss Bates, and especially this exchange that follows it. Mr Knightley is older than Emma, and she admires him without knowing yet that the feeling that's growing in her is love. She is quite profoundly taken aback when he says this:

"Were she your equal in situation – but, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case. She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed! You, whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honour, to have you now, in thoughtless spirits, and the pride of the moment, laugh at her, humble her – and before her niece, too – and before others, many of whom (certainly *some*) would be entirely guided by *your* treatment of her. This is not pleasant to you, Emma, and it is very far from pleasant to me; but I must, I will, tell you truths while I can, satisfied with proving myself your friend by very

faithful counsel, and trusting that you will some time or other do me more justice than you can now."

While they talked, they were advancing towards the carriage; it was ready; and before she could speak again, he had handed her in. He had misinterpreted the feelings which had kept her face averted, and her tongue motionless. They were combined only of anger against herself, mortification, and deep concern. She had not been able to speak; and, on entering the carriage, sunk back for a moment overcome – then reproaching herself for taking no leave, making no acknowledgement, parting in apparent sullenness, she looked out with voice and hand eager to show a difference; but it was just too late. He had turned away, and the horses were in motion. She continued to look back, but in vain; and soon, with what appeared unusual speed, they were half way down the hill, and every thing left far behind. She was vexed beyond what could have been expressed – almost beyond what she could conceal. Never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life. She was most forcibly struck. The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates! How could she have exposed herself to such ill opinion in any one she valued! And how suffer him to leave her without saying one word of gratitude, of concurrence, of common kindness!"

I read that passage in full because we need to see the whole progress of her shame and mortification and grief, grief that she has done wrong, mixed, to be sure, with grief that it has been noticed by someone whose good opinion she especially values; but genuine sorrow, too, that she has hurt someone thoughtlessly. The movement of the passage from Mr Knightley's reproof to Emma's self-reproach, her regret for appearing to be sullen, and not speaking to him, when in fact she was deeply ashamed, is the school of morals fully at work. Emma is being educated all right, and so are we.

You won't be surprised to hear, then, that I endorse this 'school of morals' view wholeheartedly. I think we can learn what's good and what's bad, what's generous and unselfish, what's cruel and mean, from fiction. In one way, this is so obvious that it's hardly worth saying; except that I think that from time to time it needs re-stating,

or stating in terms that take account of the currents that have flowed through cultural life, through public discourse, since it was last stated. And I think that there are two such currents that have been flowing strongly in recent years, and I'll look at each of them in turn.

One is "theory", and the whole project of theory, including post-structuralism, post-colonialism, post-modernism, and so on. As it affects this argument, it takes the form of saying that the connection between literary texts and the rest of life is characterised by contradictions and fractures and disjunctions and subversions and an endlessly regressive series of dialectical readings. A text is not, as we had innocently thought, a transparent window through which ideas or things or events or characters are visible with perfect clarity. As a matter of fact it's problematical to talk as if there were a difference between texts and the rest of life in any case, because "*il n'y a pas dehors-texte*", there is nothing outside the text. When I asked a leading practitioner of post-structuralism what that actually meant, she said "Ah, but Derrida didn't mean it in that sense," which confirmed what I thought when I asked the question, namely that this was a mystery too profound for my feeble understanding to plumb.

This intellectual endeavour, or if you prefer mystery-cult, is a source of great fascination and enormous fun and considerable professional advantage to those who know how to play it. But to the non-academic reader it does seem to undercut a certain moral idea, namely responsibility. You seem to be able to say things without consequences, because whatever you say will automatically deny and subvert its own claims to truth. When 'theory' was at its height, the idea that novels or plays reflected more or less faithfully what human life was like and taught us how to behave by showing what happened when you did this or that seemed ridiculously old-fashioned and out of touch. In fact, some things that traditional readers and writers took for granted, like the thing Jane Austen called human nature, were scoffed at, and their very existence denied.

I'll come back to theory later in this lecture, because first of all I want to look at the other cultural force bearing on the school of morals, which is quite different. I suppose you could call it theocratic absolutism. I've written about it before, but I think what I

said bears re-stating. Theocratic absolutism has been around for longer than theory, and its effects have been far more deadly. But first I'll have to clarify what I mean by theocratic, because I don't think you need to believe in God to have a theocracy; some theocracies are atheist. I mean a system that has these characteristics:

There is a holy book, a scripture whose word is inerrant and may not be doubted, which has such absolute authority that it trumps every other. Everything, even the discoveries of science, has to be judged against what the scripture says, and if there is a contradiction, the scripture wins. This scripture might be the Bible, it might be the Koran, it might be the works of Karl Marx.

There are doctors of the church, who interpret the holy book and pronounce on its meaning: it might be St Augustine, it might be the Ayatollahs, it might be Lenin.

There is a priesthood with special powers and privileges, which can confer blessings on the laity, or withdraw them. Entry into the priesthood is an honour; it's not for everyone; and the authority of the priesthood tends to concentrate in the hands of elderly men: as it might be, the Vatican, or the politburo in the Kremlin.

There is close control of the news media, and ferocious censorship of books. It was the Catholic Church of the Counter-Reformation that invented the word propaganda, and the Soviet Union that took it up with enthusiasm and incorporated it into their term *agitprop*.

And there are many more characteristics of this sort of system, which we can find parallels for in both religious and atheist forms of totalitarianism:

There is the concept of heresy and its punishment.

There is the concept of apostasy.

There is an Inquisition with the powers of a secret police force, or a secret police force with the powers of an Inquisition.

There is a complex procedural apparatus of betrayal, denunciation, confession, trial and execution.

There is a teleological view of history, according to which human society is moving inexorably towards a millennial fulfilment in a golden age.

There is a fear and hatred of external unbelievers.

There is a fear and hatred of internal demons and witches.

There is the notion of pilgrimage to sacred places and holy relics – the Turin Shroud, Red Square, the birthplace of Chairman Mao.

And so on, ad nauseam. In fact, as far as the way they behaved in practice is concerned, there are remarkable similarities between the Spain of Philip II, the Iran of Ayatollah Khomeini, and the Soviet Union under Stalin. We might see some parallels with the United States in the time of McCarthy. We might even see some resemblances to the present time.

So when I say 'theocracy' in the context of what I'm saying tonight, I'm not limiting the term to those states that base their authority on the existence of a supernatural creator. What I'm talking about is the tendency of human beings to gather power to themselves in the name of something that may not be questioned, and to justify what they do in terms of absolutes: absolute truth; absolute goodness; absolute evil; absolute hatred; if you're not with us, you're against us.

Now, remembering where we began, with the idea that stories can offer a moral education, I want to look briefly at how theocracies regard literature – how they read stories and poems and plays.

The first thing is that people with this cast of mind have low expectations of literature. They think that literature has only one purpose, which is ideological, and so its worth can be judged by how well it fulfils that ideological purpose. There's a very good description of this cast of mind at work in a recent book called "Reading Lolita in Tehran", by the professor of literature Azar Nafisi. She recounts how difficult it became to teach the sort of books she most wanted to teach – namely the subtle, the complex, the ambiguous – in the atmosphere in Iran after the Khomeini revolution. She says:

"Unable to decipher or understand complications or irregularities, … the officials were forced to impose their simple formulas on fiction as they did on life. Just as they censored the colours and tones of reality to suit their black-and-white world, they censored any form of interiority in fiction; ironically, for them as for their ideological opponents, works of imagination that did not carry a political

message were deemed dangerous. Thus, in a writer such as [Jane] Austen, for example, whether they knew it or not, they found a natural adversary."

So the Muslim activists had that view of fiction, but so did their opponents, the activists on the left. Unlike the people in charge, the leftists felt – and I quote Azar Nafisi's words again – they felt that "we needed to read fiction like 'The Great Gatsby' because we needed to know about the immorality of American culture. They felt we should read more revolutionary material, but we should read books like this as well, to understand the enemy."

The theocratic cast of mind is always reductive whether it's in power or not. Another example – a famous one – from an atheist theocracy is the criticism of the poetry of Anna Akhmatova by the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party in 1946:

"Akhmatova is a typical exponent of empty, frivolous poetry that is alien to our people. Permeated by the scent of pessimism and decay, redolent of old-fashioned salon poetry, frozen in the positions of bourgeois-aristocratic aestheticism and decadence – 'art for art's sake' – not wanting to progress forward with our people, her verses cause damage to the upbringing of our youth and cannot be tolerated in Soviet literature."

So reading one sort of stuff will damage; reading another sort of stuff will improve. And we shall decide which is which.

Well, needless to say, I think there's a vast difference between that view and the view I'm proposing tonight. And a large part of the difference lies not only in *what* theocratic or totalitarian societies choose to read, but in the *way* they read. A word that's emblematic of this attitude is the word *correct*. We've become used to it in the cliché *politically correct*, which is a right-wing caricature of a left-wing tendency to emphasise one approved kind of language we should use, one single attitude we should to adopt to social questions, one approved way we should behave in every situation, and so on. *Correct* is a word you find again and again in works of communist apologetics, such as a book I've just been looking at about the Cultural Revolution in China. "The fundamental question has been and always will be whether the correct line is being followed or not … Education must promote revolutionary aims in the spirit of Mao Tsetung Thought … Then, with victory for the correct line, things right themselves again", and so on.

This is really a form of fundamentalism. Karen Armstrong, in her book "The Battle for God", explains the nature of fundamentalism very well. She sets out the difference between 'mythos' and 'logos', different ways of apprehending the reality of the world. Mythos deals with meaning, with the timeless and constant, with the intuitive, with what can only be fully expressed in art or music or ritual. Logos, by contrast, is the rational, the scientific, the practical; that which is susceptible to logical explanation.

Her argument is that in modern times, because of the astonishing progress of science and technology, people in the Western world "began to think that logos was the only means to truth, and began to discount mythos as false and superstitious." This resulted in the phenomenon of fundamentalism, which, despite its own claims to be a return to the old true ways of understanding the holy book, is not a return of any kind, but something entirely new: "Protestant fundamentalists read the Bible in a literal, rational way that is quite different from the more mystical, allegorical approach of premodern spirituality."

This way of reading, in which everything is taken literally, doesn't allow for ambiguity, or mystery, or subtlety, or what Azar Nafisi called interiority of any kind. Everything is black or white, true or false, good or bad, right or wrong. There is no scope for interpretation, except the kind which is taught in the official schools, and approved by the authorities. There is one way of reading and understanding a text, and only one: the correct way.

Now then: I said a few minutes ago that this way, the 'correct', the 'fundamentalist' style of reading that characterises theocratic absolutism, was one of the currents that had been swirling around the old-fashioned idea of the 'school of morals' in recent times. Has it had any effect? Does it place the school of morals in any danger? Is it a threat, or something we can ignore?

Well, this nation isn't yet a theocracy. There is still a certain amount of democratic back-and-forthness at work. But I'm worried by a couple of straws in the wind. I'm worried, firstly, by this government's willingness to endorse and support schools that teach so-called creationism. I'm thinking of the city academies that they put up for sale: if you're a rich person and you can afford £2 million, you can start a school and the government will fund the rest of it with ten times that amount of money, and give you control of the

curriculum: if you want to teach the children in science lessons that Darwin was wrong and that God created the world in six days, you are allowed to. This is an extraordinary development, and the government ought to be called to account for it. Science isn't a body of knowledge: science is a method of inquiry. And this closes down inquiry by stating in advance what is to be discovered. Our government is colluding in this, and it's wrong.

The second straw in the wind is the increasing tendency among people to describe their primary identity not in terms of ethnic or geographical origin, but in terms of the religion they profess. They don't say "I'm Asian," or "I'm British Bangladeshi," they say "I'm a Muslim." Now of course people are surely allowed to describe themselves in any way they like, and for those of us who are British it's a fluid kind of thing anyway, because we constantly find ourselves shifting between British and English, or British and Scottish, or British and Afro-Caribbean, depending which part of our identity is salient at any moment. During the Ryder Cup golf tournament, many of us discover that we're European.

But this way of labelling ourselves by our religion is a new thing, and it worries me because it ties in with the third straw in the wind, which is the Serious and Organised Crime and Police Bill. This is the "incitement to religious hatred" law. It's intended to protect people from being exposed to hatred or contempt because of their religion. The ostensible cause for it was the practice of loathsome people such as the British National Party to avoid being criticised for making racist statements, which are illegal, by making religious ones instead: they don't say "Kick out the filthy Asians," they say "Islam is an evil religion," and their horrible followers know they mean "Kick out the filthy Asians."

As I say, that was the ostensible cause. A cynic might say that the real cause was the Labour Party's desire to regain the Muslim vote, which they used to be able to rely on, but which has been leaking away alarmingly.

But whatever the cause, the result will be that people who identify themselves by their religion will be able to claim that anyone who criticises their beliefs is exposing them personally to hatred and contempt, because their religion is their identity.

This Bill has been widely and strongly criticised by those who care about freedom of speech. The Prime Minister has said that actually

it won't be any threat to free speech, because in practice every complaint will come before the Crown Prosecution Service, and in most cases they won't prosecute. In fact, that will just make things worse. People will be invited to feel aggrieved by the invention of an offence that didn't exist before, and then denied the likelihood of satisfaction through the courts. Are the zealots going to say "Oh, well, fair enough, we tried"? Are they hell.

So to ward off trouble before it begins, theatres and publishers will turn more and more to lawyers. A local authority that licenses and subsidises a theatre will insist on a legal opinion before they let a new play go on; a publisher with a risky novel will have it read by my learned friends; and of course they will advise against the risk, because – as the Home Office minister Hazel Blears has said – if such a case comes to court, "It is difficult for me to say what a court would decide in those circumstances." They won't take the risk; and books or plays that question or criticise religious belief will quietly vanish from sight.

And in case anyone thinks I'm exclusively criticising Muslims here, there's a new group called Christian Voice of which you might have heard. They were the people who demonstrated against the broadcast of "Jerry Springer, the Opera" on BBC, and disseminated the private phone numbers and addresses of BBC staff so they could be harassed at home. Only last week these champions of Christian virtue triumphantly announced that they had bullied a cancer charity into turning down the money raised during a benefit performance of that show, because it was "tainted". Well, of course they have the right to be heard; but when this law comes in, obnoxiously superstitious and self-righteous people like them will have the right to stop opinions they don't like from being heard.

So the cultural current I've called theocratic absolutism is alive and well and beginning to stir, and if we're not careful it could easily sweep away a basic and priceless freedom. And we would be very foolish to think that this couldn't happen here: it has happened here. Only a hundred and fifty years before Miss Goddard exhibited her lustre and effect on the stage of the great school of morals, the Puritan revolution closed the theatres down entirely.

Before I go on, and before we lose sight of what I mean by the school of morals, just to re-state it: it's the assumption that stories, in whatever form they come – drama, the novel, fairy tales, films –

show us human beings like ourselves acting in recognisably human ways, and they affect our emotions and our intelligence as life itself affects us; that the stories we call the greatest are great because they are most like life, and the ones we think not so good are correspondingly less so – the characters in one are rich and complex and unpredictable, like real people, those in the other are two-dimensional and cardboard-like, stereotypes – that sort of thing. And our moral understanding is deepened and enriched by the awakening of our imaginative sympathy. I gave the example of Macbeth and murder earlier on: there's no need to list the great works that draw us in, imaginatively, into the experience of jealousy, or sexual obsession, or the lifelong consequences of a moment of thoughtless cowardice, or the folly of putting high-minded principle before human affection – and so on, and so on, and so on.

Now I can't *prove* this numerically. I can't show you statistics to demonstrate a 23% increase in moral awareness among 12-14 year olds who have been exposed to fiction as opposed to those who have been kept without it; I can't point to studies demonstrating that murderers who have read Dostoevsky go about their business more thoughtfully than murderers who haven't; I can't quote official reports on the decline in adultery among reading groups discussing *Anna Karenina*. I don't think that's the way it works. I think the moral education that stories provide is a more subtle, fluid, all-pervasive thing, without a precise one-to-one correspondence in any place, and that it often works most effectively when it doesn't seem to be taking place at all.

As I say, there is no one-to-one correspondence. But here is an account by a Welsh miner called Robert Morgan about two friends of his, a collier and an engine driver, who, having educated themselves, did their best to awaken their friends to the delights of literature and music:

"At such times we did not feel we were colliers doing menial and dangerous jobs in the bowels of the earth, but privileged human beings doing something extraordinary. Most of us were badly or barely educated, but such young men as Ted and Jeff who, alone and without encouragement, educated themselves … seemed to glow with pride. The work they were engaged in, lowly as it was, never depressed them. They neither grumbled about the work they

did, nor did they envy others in better positions on the surface of the pit. These characteristics I noticed about men such as Ted and Jeff, and from the examples of such men I was able to develop my own pride, my own search for knowledge … These two characters, their attitudes, their personalities, their cheerfulness, their honesty and their kindness, I am sure made the rest of us feel that culture had done much to make them better men."

That was quoted in Jonathan Rose's extraordinary work 'The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes' (2001), which I recommend without reservation. Perhaps the only evidence for the existence of the 'school of morals' is anecdotal, but it's powerful, and there's a lot of it.

However, if you remember, I said earlier on that before I finished I'd come back to theory. I showed it out of the door, but here it is seeping up through the floorboards.

Because haven't I made a basic *mistake* early on in this approach? Isn't what I've been talking about not so much a school of morals as a school of manners? Robert Morgan's account of Ted and Jeff seems to be a description of good behaviour as much as of goodness; and as for Emma's cruelty to Miss Bates – wasn't that just a failure of politeness? Is this morality I've been talking about really little more than a matter of etiquette? And isn't that in turn a means of reinforcing the dominance of one social class, which knows how to behave, over another that doesn't?

Let's go back to Miss Goddard for a moment, and consider the audience in the great School of Morals, the Theatre. The sort of moral views that might be inculcated or polished there would be those that everyone *who could pay for a ticket*, everyone with a stake in society, the local clergy, the local gentry, the Lord Mayor and the prosperous citizens of Norwich would share and approve of. Any moral views at variance with the inevitably conservative consensus wouldn't be allowed on the stage, full stop.

Then there's the fact that moral views change with time: they aren't eternal. If Miss Goddard's audiences could see our society today, they would be shocked at some things that we take for granted: the acceptability of sexual freedom, for example, and the frequency with which, these days, people bear and bring up children outside marriage without social disapproval. And the patrons of the Theatre Royal in 1801 would have viewed with incredulity the fervour – the

moral fervour – that characterised the recent debate about fox-hunting. To spend 250 hours of Parliamentary time on this subject would have seemed to them insane; they would have thought our society was morally deranged.

Then there's the difference between this culture, ours, the Western liberal humane culture that has created all the literature I've mentioned so far, and the other cultures that exist in the world today. What does the world of the secular European intellectual have in common with the world of the mullahs and the ayatollahs? Are the moral teachings of one kind of literature universally valid, or are they contingent on culture? What do the novels of Thomas Hardy, what does the world of a poor shepherd in Dorset have in common with that of a poor black youth in Detroit? Does the word 'poor' mean anything like the same thing in both contexts?

And as for the implication that Jane Austen's novels did not carry a political message – well, theory has helped us see that her work is saturated in political meanings and assumptions. Take the most famous example, *Mansfield Park*. Where does Sir Thomas Bertram's money come from? What is the source of the wealth that underpins the leisured way of life of these people who are so high-minded that they can fall into agonies of doubt and guilt over whether it's OK to indulge in amateur theatricals during their father's absence? The answer involves slavery. Sir Thomas is away in Antigua inspecting his plantations. And that fact, never questioned or examined in the novel, throws a different sort of light on the exquisite moral refinement of the protagonists.

So I don't think the discoveries of literary theory are easily dismissed. There are things it tells us that are true and helpful, and others that are discouraging and deceptive, and we need to tell the difference.

To sum up the argument, then, between what I've called the school of morals and theocratic absolutism: that tendency in cultural life says that meanings are fixed and simple and determined by authority, whereas the school of morals sees them as ambiguous, complex, subject to development, and arrived at by experience and by imaginative sympathy.

As for the argument that the school of morals has with "theory": theory says that truth is provisional and there is no such thing as human nature, that meanings shift and are contingent, whereas the

school of morals says that there are some truths that endure long enough to be as good as permanent, and that human nature is certainly constant enough to be worth talking about; that even if we and the people of 1801 disagree about whether fox-hunting is good or bad, we would certainly agree that there *are* good things and bad things, that generosity is good and meanness is bad, that children should be looked after, that there is such a thing as empathy, that there are ways of dealing with conflict and disagreement – and so on, and so on. Furthermore, the "theory" line on language, that it's constitutive and not transparent, not only undercuts the responsibility of the writer, it contradicts the experience of the reader. That's just not what it feels like when we read. We feel fond of this character, we feel exasperated with that one; we feel pity for their predicaments, we cheer when they overcome them. *Of course* George Orwell was right when he wanted his prose to be a window through which we see and not a surface on which meanings contradict themselves in an endlessly playful dialectic.

But it's time I said something about how I think the school of morals actually works.

Well, the reading we do in the school of morals isn't like taking notes in a lesson, learning the correct line and parroting it back: it's like a conversation. There's a democracy about it. The book proposes, the reader questions; the book responds, the reader considers. We bring our own preconceptions and expectations, our own intellectual qualities, and our limitations, too, our own previous experiences of reading, our own temperament to the encounter.

And we are active about the process. The school of morals doesn't force us to read in a way determined by someone else – even by the author. We can skim, or we can read it slowly; we can read every word, or we can skip long passages; we can read it in the order in which it presents itself, or we can read it in any order we please; we can put the book down and reflect, or we can go to the library and check what it claims to be fact against another authority; we can assent, or we can disagree.

But when we disagree, or when we think we've caught the text disagreeing with itself, we don't lose faith altogether in the possibility of meaning. We know that our understanding of this meaning might be superseded by another in due course, but while it

lasts, the school of morals encourages us to take it as being solid ground, and see how we get on. As Jane Eyre said to her cold-hearted guardian Mrs Reed, "You think I have no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love or kindness; but I cannot live so." As we might say to a post-structuralist who scoffs at the idea of certainty and delights in exposing contradictions and discontinuities and inconsistencies, "You think we can live without meaning, but we cannot live so."

And, little by little, as we grow up in the school of morals, we become better readers: we learn different ways to read. We learn to distinguish degrees of irony or implication; we pick up references and allusions we might have missed before; we learn to judge the most fruitful way to read this text (as myth, perhaps) or that (as factual record); we become familiar with the strengths and duplicities of metaphor, we know a joke when we see one, we can tell poetry from political history, we can suspend our certainties and learn to tolerate the vertigo of difference.

So the relationship with books and plays and stories we develop in the school of morals is a profoundly, intensely, essentially democratic one, and it's characterised by mutual responsibility. It places demands on the reader, because that is the nature of a democracy: citizens have to play their part. If we don't bring our own best qualities to the encounter, we will take little away. Furthermore, it isn't static: there is no final, unquestionable, unchanging authority. It's dynamic. It changes and develops as our understanding grows, as our experience of reading – and of life itself – increases. Books we once thought great come to seem shallow and meretricious; books we once thought boring reveal their subtle treasures of wit, their unsuspected shafts of wisdom. And this progress *is* real progress; it's not the endless regression of shifting sand underfoot and the shimmering falsity of a mirage endlessly retreating ahead, it's solid stepping stones, and clear understanding.

And it's *voluntary*.

Because this is the thing I really want to get across: the school of morals works best when it doesn't work like a school. The way real reading happens, the way in to the school of morals, goes through the gateway of delight.

Let me quote a little from Dickens to show the sort of thing I mean. This is from *Bleak House.* The Smallweed family are moneylenders;

they have a strong and profound understanding of Compound Interest, and of very little else. “The house of Smallweed, always early to go out and late to marry, has strengthened itself in its practical character, has discarded all amusements, discountenanced all story-books, fairy tales, fictions and fables, and banished all levities whatsoever. Hence the gratifying fact, that it has had no child born to it, and that the complete little men and women whom it has produced, have been observed to bear a likeness to old monkeys with something depressing on their minds.”

There is a pair of young twins, and this is what they’re like:

“Judy never owned a doll, never heard of Cinderella, never played at any game. She once or twice fell into children’s company when she was about ten years old, but the children couldn’t get on with Judy, and Judy couldn’t get on with them. She seemed like an animal of another species, and there was instinctive repugnance on both sides. It is very doubtful whether Judy knows how to laugh. She has so rarely seen the thing done, that the probabilities are strong the other way … Such is Judy.

“And her twin brother couldn’t wind up a top for his life. He knows no more of Jack the Giant Killer, or of Sinbad the Sailor, than he knows of the people in the stars. He could as soon play at leap-frog, or at cricket, as change into a cricket or a frog himself.”

What he’s talking about, what the Smallweeds have never known, is joy. Pleasure. The almost sensual bliss, the intoxicating blend of excitement and surrender we feel when someone says “Once upon a time …”

Any education that neglects this dimension of experience will be a dry and tasteless diet with no nourishment in it. People – children especially – *need* this experience of delight. It isn’t something you give them as a reward, it’s something they will perish if they don’t have. Some part of them will perish. Just look at a flower dying for lack of water, and then water it; it’s like that. Look at children’s faces as you tell them a story, or as they sit in the theatre. Look at the rapt flushed expression on the face of a child involved, lost, in a well-loved book.

That’s the look of someone entering the school of morals.

Now I’m going to close by saying something that might sound strange, given what’s come before, which is this: I think this is a

theme that is possibly tragic. It's a very fine balance; it's 51/49; perhaps it's the other way.

Because I haven't by any means listed all the forces bearing on the school of morals, this little shaded pool of delight, beside which goodness and, in the thoughts of Emma weeping in her carriage, "gratitude, concurrence, and common kindness" take root and blossom.

I've talked in detail about two of these forces, but I haven't mentioned, for example, the sheer relentless *busyness* of modern life, the *crowdedness*, the incessant thumping music and braying voices, the near impossibility of finding solitude and silence and time to reflect.

I haven't mentioned the commercial pressures, the forces urging us to buy and discard and buy again. When everything in public life has a logo attached to it, when every public space is disfigured with advertisements, when nothing of public value and importance can take place without commercial sponsorship, when schools and hospitals have to act as if their guiding principle were market forces rather than human need, when adults and children alike are tempted to wear T-shirts with obscene words on them by the smirking little device of spelling the words wrongly, when citizens become consumers and clients, patients, guests, students and passengers are all flattened into customers, what price the school of morals? The answer is, what it would fetch in the market, and not a penny more.

I haven't mentioned the obsession with targets and testing and league tables, the management-driven and politics-corrupted and jargon-clotted rubbish that so deforms the true work of schools.

I haven't mentioned something that might seem trivial; but I think its importance is profound and barely understood. That's the difference between reading a story in a book, and watching a story on a screen. It's a psychological difference, not just a technical one. We need to take account of it, and we're not doing it, and I fear the school of morals is suffering as a result.

I haven't mentioned simple human wickedness. Or laziness, or greed, or fear, or the strongest regiment of all in the army of darkness: stupidity. Any of those can bring down the school of morals in a day.

I haven't mentioned death. I haven't mentioned hazard, or the environmental recklessness that will do for us all if we don't change our way of life.

These are mighty forces, and I think they will defeat the school of morals, in the end. But that doesn't mean we should give up and surrender. Nor does it mean we should turn the school of morals into a fortress, and surround it with rules and systems and procedures, and look out over the ramparts with suspicion and hostility. That would be a different kind of surrender.

I think we should act *as if*.

I think we should read books, and tell children stories, and take them to the theatre, and learn poems, and play music, as if it would make a difference.

I think that while believing that the school of morals is probably doomed, we should act as if it were not. We should act as if the universe were listening to us and responding; we should act as if life were going to win. We should act as if we were celebrating a wedding: we should act as if we were attending the marriage of responsibility and delight.

That's what I think they do, in the school of morals. And Miss Goddard's portrait hangs on the classroom wall.

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