

## THE MORALITY OF SCHOLARSHIP

*This is a lightly edited transcript of the text of a lecture delivered at the Modern Language Association in 1966. No attempt has been made to bring it to a fully publishable form, but this version is posted here for the convenience of scholars.*

I HAVE READ Professor Northrop Frye's short but highly suggestive paper with great interest and admiration. I have no counter-thesis to offer, only some scattered observations on the points that he makes, and by no means all of these. Before doing this, I should like to summarise what I understand him to be saying – at least on the issues that I should like to discuss – so as to be sure that I have not misunderstood him.

He begins by saying that the eighteenth century was confident that no new discoveries would be made in morality. I do not think that this is quite right: but that is only a historical point, and if I have time I shall merely record my disagreement in a footnote. He goes on to say that veneration for scientific method – detachment, objectivity, impartiality, disciplined sanity, courage in facing results that may deny or contradict everything one had hoped to achieve – that this affected the treatment of religion and the arts, too; that it led to a cult of impersonality in criticism, of which the ideal was self-obliteration. This, in its turn, was criticised because it was regarded – he does not quite tell us whether he thinks rightly or not – as aloofness, irresponsibility, escape into ivory towers – something that led to the culpable unconcern of, say, psychologists with the [ ]<sup>1</sup> or commercial uses of their discoveries, and duly led to concern with concern, with the position of the artist in society – especially, in our day, either to a temptation to commit oneself to an 'effective' force, for example, the Communist Party or the Roman Church, because of the futility of individual effort, or to resistance on the part of minorities, whether secular or those which are loyal to some invisible world, some ideal of the future or supernatural society, with the result that excessive attachment to

<sup>1</sup> ['military'? 'industrial'? (An empty pair of square brackets indicates an omission by the typist of an inaudible word.)]

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an existing society and its values against something which seems incompatible with it – the demands of a larger human society, or of an as yet unrealised future that would upset it – turns into anxiety, which is the vice of concern, or alternatively into attachment to the ideal and lack of sufficient concern for one's neighbours and one's own society, which turns into the chilly detachment of which excessively objective thinkers and artists are accused.

Anxiety can take the form of chauvinism or superstitious clinging to this or that orthodoxy – sexual morality or the preservation of existing property relationships – with a consequent attack on these objects of loyalty on the part of the opposition – Marxists, or the champions of hip or beat, and so on – with the result that while such attacks on scholarly detachment may be a corrective if directed at pure scholarship, they can go too far when concern turns into anxiety, and persecution of the search for the truth occurs, as has happened when clerical, or Marxist, or right-wing groups in the USA (and, one may add, elsewhere) have interfered with the autonomous activities of scientists, and still more with non-scientific activities aspiring after some degree of objectivity – the humane studies, history, criticism and the like – following whether consciously or unconsciously the thesis first formulated, I think, by Friedrich Schiller in what seems to me almost the best and deepest of all essays on the matter – that on naïve and sentimental poetry, published in 1796.

Professor Frye speaks of contemporary literature as liable to be either ironic or romantic – that is, either a comment on the absurdity of a society in which there is too much isolation, in which the gap between nature and what Schiller called the individual human being is too wide, and insulted nature responds by generating a bitterly satirical art; or romantic, that is, idyllic, the elegiac construction of lost worlds in which these wounds, created by self-consciousness, by the sense of the unbridgeable chasm between what men seek and the destructive results of the way in which they live, were not yet present. It is immaterial whether this golden world ever existed or could exist, or whether it is a consciously adopted myth, generated by and consciously or unconsciously intended to convey the alienation of individuals or groups – the broken harmony – of actual life.

What is Professor Frye's conclusion? That both objectivity and concern are acquired; that objectivity is more difficult in non-

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scientific activities – such studies as history or criticism or philosophy – and of course even more in the arts; that a reconciliation between the claims of these apparently opposed values is possible and desirable; that men can be bound together (he uses the old etymology of the word ‘religio’ to [ ]<sup>2</sup> this); that men are bound by something – intellect, love, charity, imagination – and that they are neighbours, ‘that the ideal society is one in which men are what they offer to others’; that this includes scholars; that we are parts of one another; that the morality of scholarship is in effect the contribution to this non-alienated, harmonious society of creative individuals. At least this is what I take him to say.

I do not quarrel with his analysis. I think he is absolutely right when he says that anxiety is the neurosis of concern. But Marx and Freud have sufficiently impregnated us with the conviction that objectivity can be – indeed for Marx, I suppose, always is – a mask for acceptance of the status quo, an escape from, or even active opposition to, the transforming and revolutionary factors in society, the revolt on the part of the oppressed sections of it for a more human life, and a more universal society, which automatically endangers the establishment to which the scientist or scholar who averts his gaze is, whether he knows it or not, attached, and which his pseudo-objective activity in fact – ‘objectively’ – supports and promotes. The thesis is that to think is to act: to pretend that thought is separable from action, and can occur in a vacuum, is itself a kind of action, hostile to change; that non-commitment is an illusion which is itself an unconscious form of commitment to an illusory social order, and so on. I do not wish to discuss this great issue as such, only to offer a few isolated observations on it.

Professor Frye says that natural science is further from social commitment than history, philosophy and so on; that in the latter – including the social sciences – detachment and concern struggle like Jacob and the Angel. This is very well said. Nevertheless, I ask, is this really so? How much detachment can we really ask of a critic or a historian? And how much concern of a philologist or a palaeographer? Is there not a line to be drawn between those who deal with human activity, to which motives, goals, choices, feelings are intrinsic, and those to whom they are of very much less concern? No doubt there is no clear borderline

<sup>2</sup> [‘support?’]

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between the two; but the characteristic examples are surely different enough? Despite all the grounds for a ‘value-free’ <sup>3</sup> and the ideal of a natural science, concerned with hard, objective facts, indifferent to the moral or social implications of those facts, is the choice of material for treatment by historians really separable from their social concern as men? And – this is a fearful platitude, but is it not desirable to mention it again? – even if Marxists go too far in representing all efforts at objectivity as self-deception, is the notion of a wholly socially unconcerned critic of any human endeavour, or sociologist or historian, even thinkable? And yet do we not, nevertheless, distinguish between partiality and impartiality, objective and subjective scholars, despite this? If I say that Thucydides is a far more objective historian – a far better historian – than Livy, or that Halévy and Michelet are better historians than Treitschke or Pokrovsky or some party hack who has prostituted his gifts to a party or a sect or a nation, am I merely saying that their technical accomplishments are greater, that they show greater skill as historical detectives, that they have read more, their memories are better, their styles are clearer? Or that they are less concerned, that their political and moral convictions are less discernible? And by a parity of reasoning, do I expect or ask for <sup>4</sup> of concern – without which, what kind of understanding of human beings, whether individuals or groups, or even ‘social forces’ can there be? – on the part of palaeographers or textual critics? Understanding of human habits, perhaps, or of the psychology of the individual author whom they study; but concern? What <sup>5</sup> detached, ice-cold, Olympian, morally and politically unconcerned, remote historian, who was not a mere chronicler, a mere accumulator of facts which he did not bother to criticise or understand, has there ever been, small or great? So long as language is used, which itself, because it is shaped by and refers to human concerns, and therefore to human values, which is therefore shot through with evaluative – indeed even emotive – properties, how can there be talk of scientific objectivity, or the moral standards that go with that? I do not wish to go so far as to say that in each province <sup>6</sup> moral categories prevail: that objectivity and subjectivity are something totally different as

<sup>3</sup> [‘scholarship’?]

<sup>4</sup> [‘demonstration’?]

<sup>5</sup> [‘completely’?]

<sup>6</sup> [‘distinct’?]

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between natural science and history or epigraphy and criticism; nevertheless, each needs examination on its own. To expect historians to employ the criteria of physicists, or physicists to shape their findings in terms of values which historians cannot escape, is unreasonable, and must lead to absurdities in theory, and perhaps damage in practice. Historians must be concerned and objective: Professor Frye says something very true and important when he points to the pathology of each of these categories, to anxiety as inflamed concern, and to unconcern or remote detachment as exaggerated objectivity. But in their normal states – or what, being as we are, we take to be such – there is obvious incompatibility between the two: it is only by artificial analogy on the one hand with science, on the other with []<sup>7</sup> life, or politics, that we get the apparent conflict between these disparate aims. Perhaps I have overstated this point, but it is perhaps worth discussing, even so.

I have only one other point of substance to make. Professor Frye offers a noble ideal – an ideal society in which men are what they offer, and in which the morality of scholarship is a contribution to the common good. At least this is what I take him to mean. This seems to me to rest on a presupposition which does not seem to me at all self-evident, namely that there is a single goal that all men, as men, do, or should, strive for; or some harmonious pattern of such goals, such that, if they were realised (and it does not matter for my argument whether this is practicable or not), then Professor Frye's desirable society would come about, and we should have no need for irony or romantic idylls. A non-alienated community would be achieved, and the scholar's function – his contribution to it – would be plain. But suppose truth – without stopping to consider what this troublesome term means – were seen to be incompatible with, let us say, happiness; or happiness with [];<sup>8</sup> or certain sorts of art that we regard as moving and deep with certain types of psychological integration, or what the Russian Hegelians called 'reconciliation with reality'; or []<sup>9</sup> with utility or happiness, and so on. Surely, though, the morality of scholarship could be regarded as the need to realise this, to choose one goal and suffer from having to sacrifice another; but above all, to

<sup>7</sup> ['everyday?']

<sup>8</sup> ['knowledge?']

<sup>9</sup> ['justice?' 'equality?']

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consist in not denying that this is how things are. This would be a form of saying that the morality of scholarship consists in telling the truth literally, at all costs. And if the cost is too high, then perhaps we must not pay it – this is a matter of individual concern. If I choose not to pay the price of pure scholarship – because it is too high – because it involves me or others in misery, or may promote other situations that I am, after reflection, opposed to, then I sacrifice scholarship to something else. But at least I must know this. If I do betray the morality of scholarship, I must admit it at least to myself. That this could be so seems to me not easy to face, but important to consider. I shall leave the matter there.

And now, finally, my pedantic historical point. Professor Frye says that the eighteenth century was confident that no new discoveries in morality would be made. This I think is largely true of English writers. It is certainly less true of French Encyclopaedists. Condorcet – and who was more characteristic of the driest kind of enlightenment? – did suppose that all kinds of new discoveries would yet be made by sociology or anthropology, discoveries which would widen and alter our views: we could discover what was good and bad, noble and ignoble, for or against mankind, only by empirical investigation. I do not wish to volunteer anything on the validity of this thesis; only to mention that it was propounded, and that the thinkers of the eighteenth century were perhaps not quite so dogmatic on this matter as they are sometimes represented as being, though a good many of them were of course exactly what Professor Frye takes them to be. And, after all, Kant lived the greater part of his life in the eighteenth century, and he certainly discovered something new in morality; and those who were affected by him – Schiller, for example, or the English romantics – knew well that the great moral revolution, the latest consequence of which is existentialism in its acutest forms, had its roots in the very eighteenth century that is represented as a peaceful, glassy, symmetrical, self-satisfied sort of world.

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