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THE HUMANISM OF C.P. SNOW

WILLIAM F. HALL

The critics seem already remarkably unanimous as to the nature of the moral outlook revealed in Snow's sequence of novels "Strangers and Brothers." Lionel Trilling sees "no new notions of the moral life — on the contrary a set of rather old-fashioned notions, chiefly about loyalty and generosity."¹ Bernard Bergonzi, who grants Snow no value at all as an artist, describes his moral outlook more harshly: "the moral assumptions underlying 'Strangers and Brothers' . . . seem to me distinctly shallow . . . the code of the good-chap-cum-man-of-the-world."² Jerome Thale, who has examined Snow's moral outlook more seriously than any critic so far, still reaches essentially the same conclusion. Snow, he writes, "is not to be defined by any single or easily identifiable set of ideas or attitudes. . . . He offers little new to those looking for a new ideology and may simply look like a man with a very conventional stock of moral ideas." Thale sums up Snow's moral interest as that of "a tolerant knowledgeable pragmatism."³

Part of this insistence on the lack of "newness" in Snow's ideas is no doubt based on the very old-fashioned form of his novels. I would not deny that much of the adverse criticism of his style and dialogue, and frequently of his presentation of character is well-founded.⁴ The general verdict on his ideology is, though, in my opinion, seriously awry. Snow's moral assumptions are not at all "shallow" and appear anything but "old-fashioned" once the principles on which they are based are understood. These principles explain the vehemence with which he attacks "the facile despair . . . of the literary neo-classics, the 'men of 1914.'"⁵ They explain also his rejection of orthodox Freudianism and his complete acceptance of modern society:

1 *A Gathering of Fugitives* (Boston, 1956), p. 129.

2 "The World of Lewis Eliot," *Twentieth Century*, CLXVII (March 1960), 225.

3 "C.P. Snow: The Art of Worldliness," *Kenyon Review*, XXII (Autumn 1960), 621-634.

4 A recent study of Snow's technique which presents the case most clearly against Snow as literary artist is Jay L. Halio's "C.P. Snow's Literary Limitations," *Northwest Review* (Winter 1962), 97-102.

5 "The Age of Rutherford," *The Atlantic Monthly*, CCII (November 1958), 76-81.

its industrialism, its social patterns, and the means by which power is wielded within it.

Snow's statement of his principles varies slightly according to the context but they are always essentially the same. In "The Future of Man" he writes:

In each of our individual lives there is something beyond human help. . . . That part of our experience is right outside of time, history and progress and has no meaning there. In this sense the individual condition is tragic.⁶

Each of us in this sense is alone — a stranger. And this aspect of the self, which Snow variously describes as man's "endowment," "the burden of the self," "the rapacious self," man can do nothing about. Snow insists that man must "face the individual condition," must not lose his awareness of his loneliness, his "endowment." However there is "a moral trap which comes through the insight into man's loneliness; it tempts one to sit back complacent in one's unique tragedy and let others go without a meal."⁷ Snow considers the literary humanist to have fallen into this trap; and he condemns him for this, since "there is no excuse for not doing our best with the social condition. . . ."

Unlike the literary humanists, "the scientists did not think continually of the individual human predicament. Since they could not alter it they let it alone . . . they gave their minds not to the individual condition but to the social one" (*Rutherford*, 79). This is why, in Snow's opinion, the scientific outlook is valuable and has more to offer modern man than the "irresponsible" humanism represented by the heirs of "the men of 1914."

Snow does not, however, present this scientific outlook as perfect. In an interesting essay entitled "The Changing Nature of Love"⁸ he points out that both attitudes can result in a kind of passivity. He labels the passivity of literary humanism "crystallisation" and that of scientific humanism "predestination." Crystallisation is a passive blindness towards the experience outside oneself which is "within man's will." Predestination is a passive blindness to the inward self which is "beyond human help." And both attitudes are mistaken: predestination

6 "The Future of Man," *The Nation*, CLXXXVII (September 13, 1958), 124-125.

7 *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge, 1960), p. 6.

8 *Mademoiselle*, XLVI (February 1958), 105.

because an unawareness of man's endowment can lead to a facile optimism about society; crystallisation because it overlooks the fact that, although the "individual condition" is beyond man's control,

. . . what it drove us to in action, the actual events of our lives — these were affected by a million things. By sheer chance, by the interaction of others, by the choice of our own will.⁹

It seems clear that Snow's idea of man's moral obligations is anything but shallow or worldly. And it seems equally clear that he is attempting to find a new humanism accepting the insights of both the others, but avoiding what he sees as their faults.

This new humanism accepts the presence within the single personality of two selves. One of these selves is within the control of the total personality and the other not: one accessible and assessable, since it operates in a social context; the other only to be felt, or imperfectly described, beyond change and beyond judgment, but nevertheless affecting the activity of the total personality in society. From this follows a certain tolerance, an unwillingness to pronounce moral judgments. There follows also a strong insistence that man should not confuse these two selves.

. . . it was jet-clear that, despite its emollients and its joys, individual life was tragic: a man was ineluctably alone, and it was a short way to the grave. But believing this with stoical acceptance, Martin saw no reason why social life should also be tragic: social life lay within one's power, as human loneliness and death did not, and it was the most contemptible of the false-profound to confuse the two.¹⁰

The ideal, then, is a balance between a pessimism based on a continuous knowledge of man's inescapable individual fate and an optimism based on an involvement in the experience "that lies within man's will."

What we see in the novel sequence "Strangers and Brothers" is the constant shifting of this balance; the unhappiness that results from the "false-profound" confusion of one of its elements with the other; and the striving for and occasional attainment of the ideal. We see this within the individual characters, particularly in the protagonists of the different novels.

9 *The Light and the Dark* (London, 1947), p. 368.

10 *The New Men* (London, 1954), p. 229.

From novel to novel we follow the shifting of the balance back and forth within Lewis Eliot himself as he becomes involved with (or deliberately holds himself aloof from) the personalities who together make up his experience. And this constant movement between the extremes of crystallisation and predestination is as clearly mirrored in Snow's panoramic view of society as a whole.

The novel in which this conflict is presented most clearly, almost diagrammatically, at both the personal and public levels, is *The Light and The Dark*, the second novel of the sequence. The title itself suggests both the conflict between democracy and fascism and the dual nature of the individual personality.

In this novel Lewis Eliot observes Roy Calvert, the individual obsessed with his "burden of self" as he attempts to escape from it in his relationships with other characters. Each of these is clearly representative: the relationship with Rosalind is representative of the ties of earthly love; with Joan, of a more spiritual love; with the College, of ambition and fame; with Lewis Eliot, of friendship; with Udal, of religion; with the Nazi Schader, of political power. Calvert cannot come to terms with any of these relationships. He is unable to do so because of his unwillingness or inability to face and reconcile himself to his peculiar "endowment": "the melancholy, the depth of despondency, the uncontrollable flashes and the brilliant calm" (368); and then to accept the responsibility to the world outside himself that these relationships represent.

He hoped that he would escape the burden of self, struggle from under the weight of life and so leave melancholy and despair behind forever. . . . He thought he could conquer them once he broke loose from the chains of the self . . . free of the confines of one's personality. (368)

Lewis Eliot watches his struggle with considerable sympathy but also with a passive helplessness.¹¹

I was bound to watch him go . . . until in the white and ruthless light of self-knowledge he perceived himself. (368)

11. He is as passive in *The Light and the Dark* as he is in *The Conscience of the Rich*, where he takes an intense pleasure in his passivity:

I felt a trace of worry about Francis and Katherine; I felt a trace of self-pity because Charles and Ann might be lucky; but really, walking back to the house through the warm air, I was enjoying being a spectator, I was excited about it all.

Calvert's decision to join the Air Force, his refusal to avoid the death which he finally meets in a bombing raid over Germany, is a form of suicide. And suicide, to Calvert, is a last attempt to escape the horror he sees "in the white and ruthless light." Lewis Eliot himself defines suicide in these terms, when, sick and alone, he is in a similar condition in *The Time of Hope*:

. . . the idea of suicide . . . had come . . . not only as a relief from unhappiness, but also as a sign, the only one possible, that the horror is not there, and that one's life is, in the last resort, answerable to will.

(324)

Eliot watches with sympathy: with much more sympathy than Snow reveals in his essays towards this kind of total pre-occupation with one's own tragedy; and with much more sympathy than Eliot himself is to show, as he grows older, for attitudes and characters like Calvert's. In the later novels Eliot continues to withhold judgment of those who cannot reconcile themselves to their "endowment" — but his attitude towards them grows much cooler. He sees them as less significant. This is most clearly reflected in *The Affair*, where we are told:

I was more suggestible than she [Margaret] was. I had had to train and discipline myself out of it. . . . As a young man I had been fascinated by, and so had over-valued, the ambivalent, the tricky, the excessively fluid and even now, though they no longer suggested to me the mystery of life as they once did, I had a weakness for them. I saw value in Tom Orbell, for instance, that others didn't. (45)

One might interpret this later change in Eliot as a loss of the perfect balance that is necessary for the preservation of what Snow regards as the desirable moral attitude. However, the balance is already disturbed within Eliot in *The Light and the Dark*. As Calvert himself remarks: "You believe I've got my sentence, don't you? . . . You believe in predestination, Lewis" (144). Aware of the conflict between the two selves in Calvert, Eliot is himself "content to stay clamped within the bounds . . . of conscious personality" (144). Full of impotent sympathy for Calvert's despairing struggle against the "crystallisation" that seems inevitable, if he should ever face the truth, Eliot forgets his own "burden" to view the struggle in Calvert as predestined to its end.

In *The Affair*, Eliot is deeply involved in experience, in his defence of Howard before the College Tribunal, but as the passage quoted above suggests he has lost still more of his

awareness of the inescapable endowment of the human individual. Significantly Eliot is aware of a sense of loss without being able to explain it:

As we sat there in the Old Schools I looked out at the bright lights, resentful at being kept in, resentful without understanding why, as though the strings of memory were being plucked, as though once I had been out in the cold free air and known great happiness. And yet my real memories of days like that in Cambridge were sad ones. (170)

These two notions — the sense of loss and the sense that the personality obsessed with his own unique tragedy no longer suggests the mystery of life to him — always go hand in hand for Lewis Eliot. In *Homecoming* Eliot suffers a number of blows almost simultaneously: his wife Sheilah commits suicide, Calvert is killed, and Margaret Davdison with whom he has been having an affair breaks with him to marry Geoffrey Hollis. The result is to make him deliberately withdraw his attention from the “individual condition.” He no longer wishes to become involved, as he had formerly, with characters like Calvert, George Passant, or Charles March:

. . . the labile, the shifting, the ambivalent, the Lebedevs, and the Fyodor Karamazovs, had given me an intimation of the depth and wonder of life . . . my tastes in character had changed. (*Homecoming*, 188)

His condition at this time is so bad that he slowly withdraws also from his responsibility in that area which is “within man’s will.” “I was growing tired of it; or perhaps not so much tired, as finding myself slide from a participant into a spectator” (196). He is no longer, as he was in *The Light and the Dark*, an intimate witness of man’s struggle with his self, but a spectator at a much more superficial level: the same level as that of his landlady Mrs. Beauchamp. She, who is comically waiting for him to propose to her, tells him confidentially: “Rather than do what some people do . . . I’d stay as I am forever with my own little place upstairs, looking after myself as well as I can, and doing my best for my tenants and friends” (214). For a man like Eliot this is the worst kind of passivity: the passivity of total despair.

The tracing of Lewis Eliot’s development to and from this nadir of despair is complicated by the overlapping in time of *Homecoming*, *The Light and the Dark*, *The Conscience of the Rich*, *The Masters*, and *The New Men*. The main core of Eliot’s experience in each of these novels is concerned, roughly, with the years from 1937 to 1945. The curious compartmentalising

of what is, in effect, one total experience, that of Lewis Eliot, into five separate novels is perhaps one of the most puzzling aspects of the sequence. At the same time that Eliot is engaged in his relationship with Sheilah in *Homecoming* he is involved with Calvert in *The Light and the Dark* and with Charles March in *The Conscience of the Rich*. His courtship of Margaret in *Homecoming* coincides with the equally important relationship with his brother Martin in *The New Men*. At the same time he is occupied with university politics in *The Masters*; with law in *The Conscience of the Rich*; and with his career in the Civil Service in *The New Men* and *Homecoming*. And yet each of these relationships and each of the involvements in outside experience is kept separate within each novel. It is as if, in fact, each of them were having no effect on Eliot's total reaction to each of the others. Thus, to take only one small example, in *The Light and the Dark* the longest reference to Sheilah is the following:

For I went through much trouble at that period. My wife died in the winter of 1939. Everyone but Roy thought it must be a relief and an emancipation, but they did not know the truth. That was a private misery which can be omitted here. (306)

Considered in any other terms than those in which we are considering Snow here this would represent a major flaw in the sequence. One could only explain it by assuming that Snow is unable to integrate the various elements of experience into a total unity; that he is unable to show the inter-relationships between them; or, the final absurdity, that he assumes there to be none in terms of the central character who is engaged in them all.

However, in terms of what we have described as Snow's ideal, we can see this compartmentalising as *Eliot's* inability to achieve the ideal balance in his own total experience. He cannot maintain his awareness of the individual condition concurrently with action in experience. He can himself only act in experience by putting away from himself that awareness. He can only hold the two together as he *witnesses* their interaction in the careers of others like Sheilah, Calvert, and March. His tolerance, sympathy, and unwillingness to indulge in moral judgments as he watches this interaction, as well as the feeling of helplessness with which he watches, are in fact the result of his knowledge that he cannot, at least at this stage, himself attain the ideal balance he knows to exist.

That this is a reasonable explanation becomes clearer, I think, if we look back from this central core of Eliot's ex-

perience to *Time of Hope* and the beginning of his marriage to Sheilah, and forward to what he learns from his marriage to Margaret.

In *Time of Hope*, sick and alone at Mentone, Eliot for the first time has the sense "of my life being outside my will." He contemplates suicide, but he does not kill himself as, in a sense, Roy Calvert does. He has been forced, artificially, by his illness, to recognise the "individual condition" and he accepts it. "In that clear moment — whatever I protested to myself next day — I knew that I had to accept my helplessness" (325).

His relationship with Sheilah at the beginning of their marriage, in the same novel, makes him understand more exactly the nature of his own peculiar endowment.

I had not seen enough of my life yet to perceive the full truth of what my nature needed. I could not distinguish the chance from the inevitable. But I already knew that my bondage to Sheilah was no chance. . . . Some secret caution born of a kind of vanity made me bar my heart to anyone who forced their way within.

(414)

He is "curiously at one" with himself at this moment of enlightenment. He knows that part of himself that is inaccessible and unchanging; but he still has hope, because in the world of experience there is change and, as Snow puts it in "The Changing Nature of Love," "we don't know what's open in the future, and we ought to act as though we don't know."

He knows these things and the knowledge informs his view of others with tolerance and sympathy; but he slips from this moment at which he feels "curiously at one" with himself, unable to hold the two views, the two strands of knowledge together in his mind at the same time. The central core of his experience in the five novels I have mentioned is in consequence shadowed by despair. He makes an attempt — in *The New Men* — to act wholly with his brother Martin, but the result is unsuccessful: it transforms his brother into a "stranger" and Eliot himself suffers "a darkness of the heart." It is not until his marriage to Margaret (at the end of *Homecoming*) that he feels that he is once more capable, or on the way to being capable, of recapturing the sensation of being "curiously at one." During Margaret's pregnancy he thinks:

In a true relation — I had evaded it for so long — one could not absent oneself, one could not be above the battle, one fought it out. It was hard for me to learn, but we were able to know each other so. Only in one

aspect, I thought, had she found me absenting myself. . . . with her boy, Maurice, Geoffrey's child. . . . I was as considerate as I could be, but that was my old escape, turning myself into a benevolent spectator. (338)

The sickness of their son reveals more to him: I thought of his death. . . . I should want to lose myself in sadness. . . . In sadness I should be alone: I should finally and at last be alone. (391)

The temptation assails him, in other words, to become obsessed, as Calvert had been, with his unique tragedy. He understands it as this and with his son's recovery understands further the futility of this attitude.

At the beginning of *The Affair*, then, Eliot is a changed man. He has passed through a number of significant stages of development. He has reached an awareness of the nature of his double self and has experienced, if only momentarily, the ideal balance a man should preserve between the knowledge of his inner self and the knowledge of the possibilities open to him in the experience — the social condition — outside himself. He has, made tolerant by the memory of this awareness, witnessed in a number of friends the same struggle to attain this ideal. He has, under the shock of experience, sunk into the passivity of despair. And finally he has recovered to re-establish the true balance in at least one relationship — that with Margaret.

The total effect of all this has been to alter Eliot's — and possibly Snow's — attitude towards the principles which underlie his moral outlook in the earlier novels. The Eliot of *The Affair* is no longer so interested in the "ambivalent, the tricky, the excessively fluid personality," in the individual condition of others, as he was earlier. He is occasionally aware of a sense of loss in consequence. But his new position is, for him, a largely satisfactory adaptation of his earlier principles. A constant awareness of the individual condition, his own or that of others, is no longer considered necessary in *all* relationships. There is instead one successful relationship at the centre of Eliot's life — that with his family — in which the ideal balance is maintained. And from this centre Eliot is reluctantly¹² drawn to outer social experience.

12 Eliot's reluctance is stressed in the novel. His reason for overcoming it is given quite clearly:

Also I knew, and I knew it with the wreckage and guilt of part of my life behind me, that there were always good, sound, human, sensitive reasons for contracting out. There is great dignity in being a spectator: and if you do it for long enough, you are dead inside. I knew that too well, because it was only by luck that I had escaped. (111)

That Snow means us to regard this compromise as satisfactory is clear, I think, when we compare Eliot's compromise with that of the other characters in *The Affair*. The "trial" of Howard is a testing ground for each of the codes of conduct by which the various characters have chosen to live. Clark, Skeffington, and Brown, are, in their different ways, orthodox Christians and conservatives; Francis Getliffe is a liberal, judging by "a strict code of fairness," and yet "he wanted to be respectable and to be received by the respectable." The significant fact is that each of these codes, except that of Eliot himself and his brother Martin,¹³ is shown as corrupted, or at least undermined, by Howard's paranoia and lack of faith.

To draw any hard and fast or even very firm conclusions on the basis of this new shift in Eliot's attitude would be unwise, as two further novels of the sequence are yet to appear. However, I think one point is clear: that in following the career of Lewis Eliot through the sequence, as we have it so far, the reader is following the career of modern secularised man in search of a code that will enable him to live decently and not altogether selfishly; and that the code of conduct that is set up as an ideal is at least as good, in its realism, its tolerance, its sympathy, and its striking lack of moral rigidity or self-righteousness, as any of the other solutions to the problem available. To dismiss it as "shallow," "a set of rather old-fashioned notions," "a tolerant knowledgeable pragmatism," seems to me totally misguided. It is an ideal that is difficult, as the novels suggest, of attainment, but it opens up the possibility of "a liberal culture . . . based on human beings driven by their fears and desires, human beings who are cruel and cowardly and irrational, with just a streak of aspiration."¹⁴ It is a humanism based on the hard reality of human nature.

13 In *The Affair*, the code of Martin Eliot is identical with that of his brother Lewis. This identification is anticipated in *The New Men* (see the quotation beginning ". . . It was jet clear . . ." above) in which Martin finally arrives at the same understanding that Lewis had reached at Mentone in *The Time of Hope*.

14 *The Search* (London, 1934), p. 301.