After the Deluge : criticism as reconstruction

Brian Wicker

Morality today is clearly in a mess. The word 'moral' has lost almost all its bearings: it simply flies about loose in the machinery of our discourse. For example, in my own college, philosophy students are always asked the following question:

> Jones has agreed with Smith to paint Smith's house for the price of £1,000. Both agree that Jones has now done the work to a satisfactory standard.
> — Does it therefore follow that Smith now owes Jones £1,000?
> — Does it therefore follow that Smith now ought to pay Jones £1,000?

Students almost invariably agree that Smith now owes Jones the money, but when it comes to the question whether he ought to pay him, they begin to wobble. This is a 'moral' question, they say, as if this makes the answer uncertain. Given that we are in this kind of muddle about morality, perhaps it would be better to get rid of the word 'moral' altogether, as Elizabeth Anscombe said in her memorable paper 'Modern Moral Philosophy'.

In this article I want to consider some parallels between 'morality' and 'literature'. For here, too, it is plain enough that we are in a mess, and I would claim that it is the same sort of mess—indeed, that it is at bottom the same mess.

What is morality?

Once it was generally agreed that ethics and politics were 'sciences': they were as much part of knowledge as, say, biology. For the human being was an animal and, as such, you could discuss or even know what ends it was after. Among the human animal's ends were certain social roles to be fulfilled. A person who undertook good social roles and fulfilled them well would be happy. To learn to be happy it was necessary to exercise skills and virtues, moral and intellectual. So taught Aristotle. To this picture Christianity made an addition, namely, that the key criterion of a

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good role done well was, did it build up a loving community? A better community? Just as there was a science of politics and of ethics there was now a science of love too: theology.

But not long before the beginnings of the modern era it became widely accepted that human beings were not after all animals with functions and ends that could be known, but peculiar composites of body and mind. So it no longer made sense to ask about the human function or end. The function of the body was to perform as a good piece of machinery should; the function of the soul was something else—God alone knew quite what. Human actions were no longer seen as good or bad depending on whether or not they tended to the fulfilment of the human project. Another criterion of good actions needed to be found, and the most favoured choice was either the consequences of actions (an action is good if it produces more good than bad consequences) or the degree of sincerity with which these actions were done (an action is good if done with a clear conscience). Roughly, one might say that our modern mess consists in trying to plug the holes in our morality with these two kinds of cork.

That we are in a mess seems to me to be demonstrated by (among other things) the sorry state of our attempts to grapple with problems which are manifestly ethical, political and indeed theological all at once, and which will not wait long for some kind of answer. What is it to be a human being? In what circumstances can it be justified to bring its potential for being human to an end? What counts as an innocent person whom we may not directly threaten or kill? Can the taking of lethal nuclear risks be justified in the light of the human potential of future generations? These questions manifestly cannot be answered within the framework of 'modern moral philosophy', but so much the worse for that philosophy, for they have got to be answered. It is not surprising that people are desperately poking about in whatever philosophical dustbins are still around to find replacements.

What is literature?

So much for moral philosophy; now for literature. But what is literature? Or, to put the question more precisely, what makes a particular piece of writing literature? What is *literary* about it? Put in the modern framework of thought, it is a non-question because the whole context of thought in which it might have been posed is no longer operative. Yet it is notorious that every book on modern literary theory has to begin by asking, and trying to answer, what is literature? What is the justification for studying these particular texts and not others? What makes *Hamlet* literature and *Dallas* not? Orwell's essays but not the second leader of today's *Times*? *Ulysses* but not the *Reader's Digest*?

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The question is itself a very modern one. To an ancient or mediaeval critic, or even to Dr Johnson, it would hardly have been intelligible. An Aristotle or a Dryden could, of course, ask what is tragedy? or epic? or comedy?, just as the ancient philosopher could intelligibly ask what is justice? or prudence? or courage? or hope? But, just as the ancient philosopher would not have needed the further question, 'What is morality?', as if it stood behind all of these (for morality just *is* these), so, for the critic of the remote past, there was no need of the further question, 'What is literature?'.

'What is literature?' is one of those questions over which debate is interminable, as Alistair MacIntyre has said, because, like 'moral' questions posed in the modern way, there is simply no common criterion for what is to count as an answer. In so far as literary criticism is set on discussing this question, before it can properly begin its own work, it is pretty well doomed to failure. In the process of failing, however, literary criticism has said some very remarkable things, and revealed many more about the way its value-system operates to reflect and influence the general value-system of its society.

Mimesis versus pragmatism

Mark Abrams divided pre-romantic theories of criticism into two: mimetic and pragmatic. The *mimetic* theories, of which Aristotle's *Poetics* was only the most famous, were based on the idea that a work of literature was an imitation of life. Thus a tragedy was an imitation of a tragic action. Hence the story itself, or 'plot'? was the paramount feature of a tragedy. The kind of story it told was what defined the work as a tragedy. 'Tragedy' (says Aristotle) 'is primarily an imitation of an action, and it is mainly for the sake of the action that it imitates the personal agents' (*Poetics* 6 1450a—b).

Criticism would consist, on this basis, of a discussion of the ways in which the various elements of a tragedy (plot, character, diction etc.) contributed to the imitation; that is, of how good an imitation it was—given, of course, the nature of its medium. But Aristotle also discusses, as one aspect of tragedy, the effect tragedy has on the audience: that is, how it inspires the typically tragic emotions of pity and fear. And it is this aspect of his critical theory which was taken up by the neo-classic theorists of the Renaissance in their *pragmatic* theories. In these, the value of a tragedy, or an epic, or a lyric poem, lay in its effect on the reader or audience more than in the quality of its imitation as such. Neo-classic criticism tended to see the objective of a play or poem to be to 'teach and delight', as Sir Philip Sidney put it in the *Apology for Poetry*. Whether the delight existed for the purpose of teaching, or the teaching for the purpose of pleasing, was a matter debated within neo-

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classical critical circles: but the twin objectives were not in question. And it was accepted that it was through some form of *imitation* of life that the pleasure and the learning took place.

Common to all such theories is the assumption that we *know* what 'literature' is: namely, that it is tragedies, comedies, lyric poems, etc.; for all of these are imitations. But writings in (say) astronomy or zoology or philology were not literature, because they were not imitations of 'nature', but straightforward descriptions or explanations of it. They taught, but without having to delight through imitating, and the pleasure they gave was not that special pleasure which comes of our finding a pleasing imitation of something. The basic feature of such an outlook, of course, is the assumption that there is something out there, some 'nature', to be imitated. This 'nature' is a reality accessible to human minds, about which we can have knowledge. We do not need the peculiar qualities of the creative artist (what we might nowadays call the faculty of 'creative imagination') to know about this 'nature'. What the artist does is to please us, or terrify us, by the fidelity of his imitations, but we can only be so pleased or terrified because we know already something at least about what it is that he is imitating. Nature exists, it does not have to be constructed: and the same goes for our knowledge of it.

Christian criticism

In a magisterial piece of neo-classical literary criticism, namely his *Preface to Shakespeare,* Dr. Johnson says this:

> He (sc. Shakespeare) seems to write without any moral purpose... He makes no just distribution of good or evil, nor is always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked... It is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent of time or place.

This is a very revealing passage in a number of ways. Johnson has been praising Shakespeare for mixing comic and tragic scenes on the grounds that such mixing is characteristic of the real world. To this extent, the criterion for preferring Shakespeare is that he gives a better imitation of reality. But Johnson is a Christian, not a pagan Aristotelian: and he knows that, good though the world is because God made it so, it is full of evil that has yet to be redeemed. It is the job of the dramatist, like that of any other human being in this world, to make it not just good but better, as far as he is able. We do not have to interpret Johnson's words in a puritanical, let alone a Mrs. Whitehousish, kind of way. For Johnson, the dramatist is not a special kind of man, exempt from the ordinary demands on him as a Christian to make the world better: on the contrary, he is an ordinary kind of man, whose job is to make the world better in the way he knows best. Just as the bootmaker makes the world

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better by making good, and, if possible, better boots, so the dramatist does the same by making good, and, if possible, better plays.

Underlying all this is the assumption, in Johnson, that we know what the world is like, and that it is a place of mixed good and evil, and furthermore that it is a place that can be made better by the co-operation of men with the grace of the Creator. It is a necessary part of the job of the dramatist to do all this by teaching his audience the path to virtue by pleasing it and attracting it to virtue through imitations which are true to life. Part of this truth (for Johnson the Christian) is that there can be a triumph of good over evil, and that it is the job of the dramatist to show *this* truth too, through his power of imitating a nature in which this redemption has already begun.

So we can see in this short passage how one neo-classical Christian critic's value-system operates to help produce that loving community of which I spoke above, for it is the triumph of love in the drama which Dr. Johnson is after. Not of course in any facile or evasive way, but through the imitation of the evil and suffering which have to be endured in tragedy as in life. Johnson's point is that to depict an action in a way that failed to show a 'just distribution of good and evil' or not to display 'in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked' is to depict the world *falsely*. Terms like 'virtuous' and 'wicked' are necessary terms in any accurate description of the way things really are.

Romantic criticism

The *new* post-classical question, 'What is literature?' is posed for the first time, perhaps, in a really powerful piece of English literary criticism, by Wordsworth in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. His problem is how to define what poetry is in such a way as to be able to include in the definition the new kind of poetry he has been writing. His answer is revolutionary: poetry is 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. This is not so much a new definition of an old word as a complete redrawing of the map. We had thought that poetry was a general term for various kinds: tragedy, comedy, lyric, epic, pastoral, etc. But now we are told that it is simply the expression of feeling, and as such has no clear boundaries, no determined shape or form, and does not naturally fall into separate kinds. It is no longer an imitation of nature, according to which its merits depend upon a relation to something known: it is a gushing-out of feelings from the inner man, an opening of the flood-gates. Poetry is an elemental force. As Keats says, if it comes not as naturally as the leaves to tree, it had better not come at all. 'What kind of words are the truly poetic ones?' becomes an apparently significant question, in the light of Wordsworth's linguistic explorations.

From this moment on, the question 'What is literature?' becomes

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central to literary criticism. At first this is a purely theoretical enquiry, largely because those engaged in it are, in a way, disinterested: men of letters, not people with careers to make in literary criticism. Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Mill, Carlyle, Newman, Arnold, Pater are only the most famous names of those English critics in the nineteenth century who engage themselves in the interminable debate. Writing poetry becomes the business of trying to find words and figures adequately to describe the powerful feelings of individual poets, who are no longer interested in making the world better by addressing a public in order to teach or please through imitation: they are interested in listening to themselves. As Mill says, poetry is not heard, it is overheard, and approaches to the condition of soliloquy (viz. *What is Poetry*?). Keats claims he has never given the least shadow of public thought to what he writes. Yet, paradoxically, the poet in this new mould is also claimed by some to have become, as Shelley put it, the 'unacknowledged legislator of the world'. This self-contradictory expression—for how can anyone be a legislator without even being acknowledged?—reveals at once the ambitious futility of defining poetry solely by reference to subjective feeling. Yet one can understand Shelley's reasons for his *Defence of Poetry* against Gradgindery. If Benthamites were to become the only acknowledged legislators, then let the poets become their most indefatigable opponents. For the poets were not just giving expression to their own most powerful feelings. Because they were prophets, or geniuses, their feelings coincided by a kind of miracle with those of the spirit of the age. 'Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration.' They are the unmoved movers of a new world coming into being.

A crucial part is played in this romantic 'expressivism' by the notion of the creative imagination. Romantic theory claims that the poet does not hold up a mirror to nature, but a lamp. In other words, poetry casts its own light upon reality. By throwing its own special chiascuro on to experience poetry constructs a world: perhaps the only world there is. Nature is no longer something out there, to be known: it is a transaction between reality and the knower, to be constructed by an exercise of the creative faculties: first of perception (which is no longer something that happens to a person, but is what a person does to the world) and then of imagination, which now combines perception in novel ways—especially by the universal faculty of metaphor—to produce a new creation. Yet, in a sense, every new world is still private, for it is the world I perceive and recreate. Whether we share the same world is a question to be answered, not an assumption to be taken for granted. Each of us, as Eliot says in the *Wasteland,* is a broken Coriolanus, each of us is in a prison thinking of the key.

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Academic criticism

I said earlier that at first the quest for an answer to 'What is literature?' was a disinterested one, because the men who conducted it were largely people with private incomes and no careers to protect. But once the question was taken into the corridors of academic power, and the study of vernacular literatures became first a respectable and then a dominant pursuit of the faculties of humanities in twentieth-century universities, the tone of the enquiry necessarily changed. For now the question was not only 'What is literature?', but also 'What literature is to be included in our syllabus?' From the early years of this century onwards, that question has haunted every academic teacher of literature, and this means—for practical purposes—almost all the professional literary critics there are. For the question is, of course, unanswerable (as we have seen). Where, then, does it leave the career critic, with a family and a mortgage to keep up? By what justification does he earn his living if he cannot answer the most basic question, namely: what am I paid all this money *for*?. Is it credible for him to say, with Dr. Johnson, that he is paid to make the world better?. If so, should he not rather go into politics, or join Greenpeace, or learn to teach the handicapped?.

T.S. Eliot tried to turn the clock back by claiming that the critic's job was 'the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste'. But the idea of a correct taste seems to be as preposterous to the modern mind as the idea that one code of morals might be intrinsically better than another, might even be true. Other critics of the early twentieth century tried to show that the job of the critic was to explain the autonomous meaning of the words on the page, and not to explore such irrelevancies as the author's mind, intention or life, or the so-called 'climate' of his age. Others have attempted to show how the work came into existence, by using sociological or psycho-analytical tools, or Marxist forms of social causation, and earn their living by a kind of science or historiography. Others again, have thought of themselves as teachers, and indeed moralists, whose job was to do what once was done by the clergy in the way of using stories to point a moral or to gain a new understanding of what life was about.

The study of the values of a literary critic boils down to answering the question: what is literary criticism *for*?. But in the absence of any answer to the question 'What is literature?', it seems difficult to see how any coherent reply to the question could be given. There are just as many literary criticisms, and critical value-systems, as there are moral codes.

Structuralism

Two of these codes of value have been the subject of much discussion in recent years.

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The first is the philosophical notion that language is not just a verbal map which faithfully follows and imitates the contours of the known world, but is a game or family of games we play according to rules we, as social animals, have constructed. Instead of being able to map the world because we already know it without maps, we are now told that the world is knowable and describable only through our maps and their various projections. Different language games, like differing projections, can give us different ways of perceiving reality, but there is no unmediated way of seeing: there is no journey without maps.

The second is linguistic: namely, the idea that meanings in language are derived from a system of differences within a more or less closed system of signs. We grasp the meanings of words not by seeing how they refer to the world and latch on to it, but by learning how they are systematically distinguished from each other and thus connect with each other through difference and similarity as a sign system.

These post-Kantian influences have led us to think of the world as something made by language, not given in experience, and if we can rejoice in it, this is because (as T.S. Eliot says) we are obliged to construct something upon which to rejoice. They are the notions which make up the basis of structuralism—which, of course, adds the point that we, as human beings, have many kinds and levels of sign-system, from the clothes we wear to the stories we tell and the foods we eat: indeed, the whole of culture is a system of signs. Whatever else literature is, then, it is certainly part of this sign-system. It is not about imitating actions going on in some known realm 'out there', but about making new things out of the signs available to us. Literary criticism, in such a conception, is not any kind of appraisal of how well a work imitates 'nature', but is about showing how an author, or more correctly an implied author, or narrator, or mere 'voice' or 'pen', has manipulated the sign system.

In short, literary criticism becomes semiotics, the science of signs. But in so doing, of course, it becomes immediately obvious that the notion of literature as a special kind of writing, distinguished from other writings by certain 'literary' features, will no longer do. Everything is now writing, and all reading is literary criticism. The only thing one can then say about literature in the 'traditional' sense, as understood in the academy, is that, because it is peculiarly self-conscious about its rhetoric, it is less likely than most other forms to deceive us into thinking it is quite simply a representation of raw nature as it really is.

One value-system that has been produced by this set of ideas is what has become known as 'cultural studies', typified in British academic circles by, for example, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University, which was an offshoot of the English Department and begun by a professional literary critic, Richard

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Hoggart. The activities of such a centre are intelligible only in a 'structuralist' light. If all writing is literature, and all reading is literary criticism, then equally everything written, every inscription (including the electronic sort) is worth studying by literary critical methods. (Sociology itself, in this perspective, is only another kind of literary criticism, another 'reading' of the material.)

In one version the value-system of 'cultural studies' may be quite plainly political: to revolutionise literary criticism—for example, by drawing attention to what has been left out until now (e.g. all study of 'popular' culture from unwritten ballads to the comics we now have masquerading as newspapers). Another version, however, may be conservatively defensive: by showing that the old canons of literary criticism can be applied to this new work in a rigorous and sophisticated way, it may be attempting to bolster up those canons themselves, to reassure the traditional schools of literature that all is not lost.

Deconstruction

The second product of structuralism that must be mentioned is the militant tendency called 'deconstruction', still associated especially with Jacques Derrida although he has ardent followers at Yale. To adopt a strategic manner of speaking, it is a doctrine of massive retaliation against the centres of power of the literary and philosophical establishment. If all writing is now literature, then philosophy is literature more or less by definition. What is important about philosophical propositions, then, is not their claim to be true, or to refer to things in nature, but their rhetoric, and especially what they do not say, what they systematically fail to say, what they hide in the saying, or—above all—what contradictions they try to conceal, with a figleaf of objectivity, in the very process of getting written down.

Now, deconstruction is, from the beginning, a literary activity, parasitic as it were upon structuralism and, through that, upon romantic conceptions of literature and literary criticism. But whereas it seemed possible for a structuralist to come to some *modus vivendi* with his romantic or neo-classical colleagues, this course is not open to the deconstructionist. The latter is out to deconstruct not only the old literary critical values, but also the revolutionary ones. It begins with a claim that, contrary to popular assumptions, the paradigm use of language is not speech but *writing*. Instead of thinking of 'writing' (i.e. any linguistic artifact) as dependent on the spoken word, as the shadow speech casts upon the material environment, deconstruction says that writing is the basic form of language-use. Only secondarily is this system of artifacts, or signs, taken up and used by people speaking, or saying things as individuals.

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But now deconstruction comes slap up against at least one strand in linguistic analysis philosophy, namely 'speech-act' theory. As J.L. Austin said, much of our language use is not designed to describe the world, or propose truths, but to perform actions. And more recent 'speech-act' theorists, such as John Searle, have shown that far more of our language-use than we had thought is made up of doing actions rather than talking about them in statements. Indeed, in a sense every speech-act is a performative utterance. Here, however, deconstruction comes in, for it points out a hidden problem in Austin's too-easy formulation. When, as a philosopher, I write about the action performed by the words 'I promise', I have to write the words 'I promise' in order to say that 'I promise' *is* the action of promising. The written form, then, somehow takes a logical precedence over my speech-act, in that it has to be there, written down as it were, for me to use it in my philosophical analysis. And if all language use is performative, then behind every speech-act is the written artifact. Before, behind and in front of all analysis is the written word, immune itself to the analysis I want to subject it to. Meanings are thus elusive, and to subject any piece of language to an analysis of what it means (say, a poem, or a play, or a piece of philosophy) is a hopelessly self-defeating, sisyphean task. All we can do usefully is to point to the inconsistencies between the bits, to hidden contradictions that lie in the interstices of the utterance, to 'deconstruct' what we thought we had constructed.

Back to the old questions

One of the most obvious points to make against all this, of course, is that what deconstruction says about language-use has to be applicable to itself. There is no good reason to think that deconstructive criticism is in any sense immune from the strictures it passes on all other uses of language (a point made long ago against the logical positivist criterion of meaning). Where deconstruction stands on this point is unclear. One British explicator of deconstruction tries to cope with the problem this way:

> Deconstruction is an activity performed by texts which in the end have to acknowledge their own partial complicity with what they denounce. The most rigorous reading ... is one which holds itself provisionally open to further deconstruction of its own operative concepts.
>
> (Norris, *Deconstruction* p. 48)

But this obviously won't do. 'Partial complicity' is a useless term unless we can tell when the deconstructor is in complicity and when he is not. It is like finding yourself sitting on a branch only to be told that the tree is 'partially' rotten. We need to know which bits are rotten so that we can

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avoid sitting on them.

To speak of values in the context of deconstruction seems pointless. The only value which (occasionally) intrudes is something called science, which—for some inscrutable reason—is sometimes said to be immune from deconstruction, perhaps because it is (wrongly) thought to be nonlinguistic. But I can see no sense in this recourse: obviously scientific discourse is as deconstructible as any other.

To find a modern literary criticism which is laden with values, we have to look to Marxism. In a Marxist perspective, literary criticism is of course necessarily political. For all discourse is political, in the sense that it exhibits or implies (often without knowing it) a political attitude or principle. The best critics of all persuasions have known this, of course: it is why Dr. Johnson says that all writers have a duty to make the world better—an aim in which he is echoed by Terry Eagleton in his Marxist book on literary theory:

> The strength of the liberal humanist case ... is that it is able to say why dealing with literature is worthwhile. Its answer ... is roughly that it makes you a better person. There is also the weakness of the liberal humanist case ... because it grossly underestimates (literature's) transformative power, considers it in isolation from any determining social context, and can formulate what it means by a 'better person' only in the most narrow and abstract of terms.

I see no reason to dissent from anything in that, except to take leave to doubt that Marxism as at present conceived has much of an idea as to how to improve on the liberal notion of a 'better person'. And this is because of the problem about moral thought with which we started. 'What is it to be a human being?'—an Aristotelian question. 'What is it to become a better person?'—a Christian question first; later (perhaps) a Marxist question. 'What end do we, as human beings, exist to promote and serve?' These are the questions which, *pace* the deconstructionists, literature, along with philosophy and theology, all exist to help answer.

Note: This is a slightly revised version of a paper written in 1987 for a conference, organised by the Centre for the Study of Individual and Social Values at the University of Leicester, which did not in fact take place.

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A note by the Editor:
The exchange between Professor Michael Dummett and Professor Nicholas Lash which we published in our October and December issues (pp. 424—431; 552—566) has attracted quite a lot of attention in the press. Is a 'liberal consensus', supposedly adopted by a large number of theologians and seminary teachers, undermining the unity of the Roman Catholic Church? This is what they were arguing about. We promised to print some contributions on questions raised in the debate. Here are two, by Timothy Radcliffe and Joseph Fitzpatrick.

Interrogating the Consensus: a response to Michael Dummett

Timothy Radcliffe OP

Professor Michael Dummett, in the October *New Blackfriars,* quotes an article by Thomas Sheehan which asserts that there is 'a liberal consensus' among Catholic Biblical scholars as to the historical basis of our faith. This consensus includes such views as that Jesus did not think that he was divine, that Mary was not a virgin and that Joseph was the natural father of Jesus, that Jesus did not refer to himself when he talked of the Son of Man but rather to some future apocalyptic figure, and that the remains of his corpse are still in a tomb in Palestine. Professor Dummett maintains that these views are a denial of the solemn teachings of the Church, and in his subsequent article (the one which appeared in December) he argues that if they are accepted then 'that teaching is reduced to a demand for the acceptance of certain forms of words, which may be taken as expressing anything one chooses' (566). I would agree with Professor Dummett, but I would question the existence of such a consensus. In fact, in a letter published in *The Tablet* of 5 March, commenting on *The Tablet's* report of the debate between Professor Dummett and Professor Lash, Father Raymond Brown (who is Auburn Distinguished Professor of Biblical Studies at Union Theological Seminary, New York) writes:

> ... I found no better example of ultra-liberal distortion than the writing of Thomas Sheehan. From personal experience, I know very well the kind of biblical exegesis that is being taught in most Roman Catholic seminaries in the United States and it is a very moderate centrist presentation, almost diametrically

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