

Literature and the Humanities Ideal

Literature, instead of being an accessory, is the fundamental *sine qua non* of complete living.

—Arnold Bennett

IN recent statements certain educators have urged the schools to return to an emphasis on form and technical analysis in the teaching of literature. Essentially their thesis is that English teachers have been obsessed with the emphasis on ideas, and, in their zeal, they have overemphasized content and neglected the study of form to the detriment of the student. At times the attack is so vehement that one would think that the humanistic tradition is the path to illiteracy and corruption.

Were it possible to separate substance and form, it is at best a wavy line of division, and where and how is it to be drawn? The return-to-technical-analysis proponents claim to have discovered a national trend in their direction; however, in examining the polls for evidence of this momentous movement no significant data were found.

Nevertheless, it is asserted that the trend is with us, but is it not difficult, if

possible, to "return" to an approach which, unfortunately, many teachers did not leave? Many classes today are cluttered with definitions of quantitative meters, heroic couplet and similar earth-shaking, cogitative matters, but too often the content of the story, essay, poem or play, is absent. In the teaching of literature it is not, according to Coleridge, the acquisition of "lifeless technical rules—but living and life-producing ideas . . ." that is important.

In today's world rather than to "return" to where we now stand, we are in need of a resurgence of the humane values in the teaching of literature, an approach which we have neglected or subordinated to drudgery, mechanical and, in general, threadbare and meaningless trivia. The requisite is not for greater emphasis on technical analysis but to transcend the mechanical elements toward a deeper concern with the responses to the human condition, its thought patterns, value conflicts and social predicaments. And we desperately need the classroom setting in which the student will be encouraged

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to read and to react to these stimuli for ". . . the subject area in the curriculum which deals most obviously with the inner life of man, since it is a direct reflection of that life, is literature. . . ." ¹ "What is needed for every student is a program which quickens the senses, turns sight into insight, and, above all, gives him a sense of worth as a human being." ²

This is not to deny the value of literature as an aesthetic experience; it does mean that *the essential function* of literature, in the words of Samuel Johnson, is to teach the art of living. A modern literature program, based on this principle, will serve as an extension of the student's experiences and as an instrument of articulation for his values, attitudes and emotions. How are these to be dealt with where technical analysis is the center of attention?

If the humanities ideal is to be emphasized, the literature program's materials and goals will require a reappraisal. Certain schools presently include a humanistic approach; others claim such programs with lofty aims described in courses of study, but, unhappily, these are not transmitted to the classroom. The humanities approach is not presented as a panacea, as the solution, to the multi-problems of teaching English. (Need we be reminded that current practices have not produced the desired results?)

A Vital Link

The teaching of literature is a vital link in preserving and communicating the humanistic tradition in our technological society. It serves both civilizing and utili-

¹ Board of Education of the City of New York. "Balance in the Curriculum: The Role of the Humanities in the High School Literature Program." *Curriculum and Materials*, Vol. XV, No. 3 (Spring 1961), p. 9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

tarian functions. Cognizant that specifics in aim, method and content will vary, to achieve the humanistic ends a literature program will provide students on all grade levels, elementary and secondary, with materials that:

Stimulate their growth, self-development, and understanding of others through literary experiences that sensitize them to the extent and variety of human affairs because a primary task of literature is "to lay bare the foundations of human emotion"; ³

Focus on materials that connect with the lives of young people, books that reveal, clarify and illuminate reality, that reach different readers in different places, giving them a "lens on life" from many angles of vision;

Broaden their aesthetic perception, sensibility and understanding of the miracle and beauty of the creative process;

Raise their levels of aspiration through contact with literature that involves readers in the moral life, thus combating moral illiteracy by exposure to what is noble, compassionate and faith-provoking;

Explore not only the contributions of their own culture but the ideas and values from varied cultures by studying foreign works in translation, thereby discovering the sense of human connection;

Expose them to literature that will cultivate the lifetime reading (and thinking) habit, for such an approach will "probe our prejudices and presuppositions, challenge our premises, and test the basic assumptions of our business, moral and political codes"; ⁴ and

Serve as a counter-movement to the

³ Max Lerner. *Ideas Are Weapons*. New York: The Viking Press, 1939. p. 409.

⁴ William O. Douglas. *An Almanac of Liberty*. New York: Dolphin Books, 1954. p. 41.

mechanistic approach to literature by teaching for meaning, and, not to be minimized, for enjoyment and delight.

Suggested Principles

Without presuming to prescribe an entire curriculum, the following principles, which James A. Michener advocated, are worthy of consideration.⁵ (The readings are suggested only; where they are inappropriate to a particular program, the teacher will know many meritorious books that treat the central idea.)

1. "People are the aim and end of life. Teach the supremacy of people over machines, political systems, economic systems, or any other systems. People are the focus of our interest, our only hope." (This may be illustrated by teaching Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina* or *War and Peace*, Camus' *The Plague*, Dickens' *Great Expectations* or the stories of Jesse Stuart.)

2. "People are endlessly complex, endlessly superb." (Balzac's *Père Goriot*, Dostoevski's *The Brothers Karamazov* or Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*.)

3. "But people are sometimes also endlessly confused and evil." (The short stories of Poe, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*.)

4. "Optimism has not yet been discredited. Students need contact with sensible optimism; desperately they need it." (Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Saint-Exupéry's *Wind, Sand and Stars* or White's *Charlotte's Web*.) The simple themes in these books "acquire a majestic dignity. It is this dignity we must show our students lest they fall into the sinful indignity of thinking their world to be a gruesome and lost place."

5. "Society is worth studying. Students should be encouraged to read the great fictional studies of our national life." (Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*, Lewis' *Main*

Street or Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.)

How will these principles be accomplished? The school program must offer a reading program with a wide variety of choice, subjects which have meaning to the young reader, careful teacher guidance and encouragement of pupil initiative.⁶ This kind of program will provide units on the individual, intergroup relations, the American heritage, the great traditions of western civilization, and similar subjects. Such units are now taught in many schools.

In addition, provision must be made for the study of world literature, not only to introduce young people to the important writers of the non-English speaking world, but as a cultural vehicle for gaining insights into and understanding of the peoples of the world, the art-for-art's sake school to the contrary. Why world literature as one aspect of the humanities ideal? An exclusive diet of British and American literature, regardless of its excellence, is ill-balanced and it may cause literary and cultural anemia. There is no isolated literature and the curriculum has an obligation to make the student cognizant not only of his national heritage but also of the republic of letters, which is international.

The Best Plot

The humanistic approach concerns itself with man's central problems as a human being; often we learn more about human beings and "the depths within" from the creation of the great literary artists than from the "professional" writers on the subject. "A human being," John Galsworthy once said, "is the best plot there is." Although literature presents masses, many writers' main concern has

⁶ Lou LaBrant. *We Teach English*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1951. p. 263.

⁵ James A. Michener. "Idealism Today." *Books in Their Courses*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (April 1949). p. 3.

been the individual, and in their tales what counts is the insight into the human heart. Perhaps this is best represented in the simple words of Joseph Conrad, writing about Lord Jim: "Because of his feelings, he mattered."

In the present period of history, filled with illnesses of the spirit, chaos and violence, we must cling to this ideal—the sense of the worth, uniqueness, dignity and importance of the individual, despite the current malaise of confusion, cynicism and conformity which has created erosive patches of anti-humanism. The business of the writer, Anton Chekhov wrote in a letter, is to stand up for man. This is evident in the many literary works that attack ignorant dogmatism, blind prejudice, barbarism in all forms, and prove over and over again that man is not an absurdity.

The daily newspapers are filled with headlines on South Africa. But what journalist has presented a document comparable to Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*? We read about the tragic struggle of the Jew in Europe, but where do we find in the social science tomes the variety and depth of experiences comparable to those narrated by I. J. Singer, Isaac Babel and John Hersey in *The Wall*?

The fate of the "little man," living on the edge of survival—where is this theme better portrayed than in the writings of Giovanni Verga, John Steinbeck, Honoré de Balzac or Giuseppe Bertolucci in *The Works of God*? What psychologist has analyzed the problems of growing up in greater detail than Sigrid Undset in *Kristin Lavransdatter* and Roger Martin du Gard in *The World of the Thibaults*? The plight of the Negro in our society is diligently described in the books of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and William Faulkner. Which professional philoso-

phers and historians have explained our immediate era as meaningfully as Albert Camus, Thomas Mann, Jules Romains and Franz Kafka? And so it goes. These are but a few of the elements covered in a humanistic approach to literature—one means of interpreting and illuminating human behavior.

A Balance

Further, a basic requirement of this program is the balance of books of the past and contemporary works. Without disparaging the older "classics" the age of a literary work is not the sole or primary means of determining its suitability for use in a particular school or for a particular student. "A work of art no matter how old and classic is actually, not just potentially, a work of art only when it lives in some individual experience."⁷ By assigning materials that interest and stimulate our students we will provide them with live education. Ultimately what matters, when young people read a book, is its power, how and why they respond to the experiences, and the lasting effect of the work.

If it is true that the depth of feeling and cerebral awareness the reader experiences determines a book's value, then we must include works that challenge and even provoke us! This means the reading of so-called controversial materials for the kinds of learning that bridge the school with the outside world. A major fault of our schools is that "they try to teach only that which is not controversial. When anything passes the point of being controversial, it no longer matters, except as history. This keeps both teachers and learners pawing over

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⁷ John Dewey. *Art as Experience*. New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1934. p. 108.

duction of the child to use of strange symbols (letters, words, figures) may tend to weaken his ability to relate new learnings to his own life experience. He indicates that "the digital processes, in machines and in humans, are governed by the analogical processes which we take for granted and so often overlook" (p. 33).

This volume in a certain sense may be regarded as a sequel or companion to an earlier, and equally significant, book by Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*. In the latter publication, a strong case is made for regarding society as consisting of an older (and controlling) culture, closely related to the humanities and of a newer and emerging "scientific" culture. Dr. Frank's volume suggests a means by which the great benefits and potentialities of the scientific advances can be incorporated in our primary culture. His reliance upon the school in this role, utilizing the best that is now known of logical and psychological methodology, poses a great challenge for all persons connected with instruction.

—Reviewed by ROBERT R. LEEPER,
Editor, EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP.

Literature

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material that has lost its significance." * On occasion the literature teacher must, for the very survival of the curriculum, turn to books that do not fall into the categories of safe, wholesome or noncontroversial. The fact is that many students now read "controversial" books and periodicals outside of school—why not discuss such materials openly and objectively in the classroom? Failure to recognize and to act on what we know

* Earl C. Kelley. *In Defense of Youth*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Spectrum Books, 1962. p. 124.

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about our students' reading habits and social behavior will perpetuate an unreal and sterile curriculum.

Literature must keep alive the sparks of idealism, human decency, hope, belief in a better world, and dedication to the goodness of mankind. . . . Let our students be trained in commas, and mathematical formulas, and chemical analyses, and historical understandings. But above that vocational training, let them be shown that sensible idealism is more needed today than ever. Let them meet in their teachers people who are not afraid to affirm the great humanist values, for I believe that it is upon those values that we will build a strong society.*

* James A. Michener, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

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