

Robertson Davies

Delusions of Literacy

The Lahey Lecture of Concordia University

A lecture by Robertson Davies speaks for itself, as the reader will find, and needs no introduction. But its place in this Journal at this time deserves an explanation. What is happening in English studies at any level of education touches the sensitivities of English-speaking people in a way no other "subject" appears to do; questions about the value of what we do with words seem to be disturbingly intimate with questions about the value of what we do with life. The Journal will attempt in its next issue of February, 1979, a survey of the present state of English studies; and Robertson Davies' eloquent expression of feelings that are shared by many — an expression as exemplary of a style in life as it is of mastery with words — is by way of being a curtain-raiser to that theme.

One of the most difficult things about making a speech is to find a title for it. The difficulty is compounded because the title must be found and announced, as a general thing, before the speech is composed. When I was asked to speak to you as this year's Lahey Lecturer I agreed that I would talk about some aspects of English studies in modern universities, and that is what I am going to do. *Delusions of Literacy* is no better and no worse a title than a dozen others. At one time I wanted to call it *Delights of Literacy*, which would have fitted what I am going to say just as well. I forget why I decided at last on the gloomier title, but gloom is very fashionable just now, and that may have had something to do with it.

I wanted to talk about English studies because for the past year or so I have been reading in an unplanned, rambling fashion about the way in which English gradually asserted itself as a university subject, and what has happened to it in consequence. The history of English in universities is only of about 150 years' duration, and in many of the greatest universities it is less than half that age. English rose as Classics fell, and it first asserted itself in institutions whose students were drawn from a class of society that had not been given an extended classical training. From these working-class and evangelical colleges and night schools, and especially from the University of London (which was

neither working-class nor evangelical, but was determined to treat university education in a new way) the university study of English Literature had its beginnings.

The objections to it, on the part of the old and privileged universities, were chiefly that English literature did not lend itself to formal study, and that anyhow a gentleman read English literature for pleasure and needed no training to appreciate it. There was something to be said for that point of view, but the change in the structure of society was all against it. It was the success of Classics that brought about what was very nearly the fall of Classics; classical studies were said to teach students to think, to use language with skill, and to appreciate poetry, history and philosophy in a way that not only trained the mind, but encouraged the heart to feel. And that was what Classics did, for its best students. It does so still, for its best students.

But during the nineteenth century a numerous group of students arose who had not the background for university classical study. They might sometimes have a little Latin and Greek, but it was not an equipment that allowed them to go very deep in the literatures and the histories and the poetry of those languages. They wanted to be trained to think, to use language with skill, and to enjoy the enlargement of spirit that Classics provided for the fortunate. They were, as it happened, very well acquainted with another classical literature; from their daily lives they knew intimately some Hebrew and some Greek classics in translation. Their text was the Bible, and the translation was the noblest and most magically evocative of all translations. It was the King James Version of the Bible, and from it they had philosophy, poetry and history of a profoundly influential order, bracing to the mind and enlivening to the heart. Cut off from one classical source, they redoubled their allegiance to another.

Noble models of English

What is a classic? The new edition of the Concise Oxford Dictionary defines it primarily as "of the first class, of acknowledged excellence;" for the nineteenth century the Bible was indisputably in this rank, and whatever its other effects might be, it acquainted every attendant at the services of any church or chapel with a noble model of English.

That is something that everybody says to this day, but it is uncommonly hard to get them to act as if it were true. When I was a newspaper editor, scores of young reporters used to ask me what they should read in order to form a good newspaper style. I always replied, "Make yourself thoroughly acquainted with the Bible." I cannot recall that any one of my enquirers took me seriously. I suppose they thought I meant that they should begin every report of a fire with the words, "Verily I say unto you . . ." That was not what I meant at all, though

I was hopeful that whatever they said they would say verily, and not supposititiously, or by indirection, or in a tangle of subordinate clauses. The Bible is a splendid guide to the art of saying difficult and abstruse things in simple terms.

Occasionally, realizing that the Bible would not appeal to these enquirers, I used to suggest that they should read *Robinson Crusoe* three times, and try to write like that. The style of *Robinson Crusoe* has its roots in the Bible, and possesses many of the Bible virtues. But too often these young men and women thought that *Robinson Crusoe* was a book for children, like *Gulliver's Travels*, and they suspected that there would be no sex in it. When I explained that Daniel Defoe was a very great journalist they looked at me with suspicion, because they knew he was dead, and they had no faith in the dead. Of course faith in the dead, and affection for the dead, is part of a classical education.

In our time acquaintance with the Bible, and consequently the influence of the Bible on literary style, is much diminished. Sometimes I am prompted by a spirit of mischief to offer my students some uncanonical comment, cloaked in the language of the Bible, or perhaps the Book of Common Prayer, which ranks second to it as a literary influence. If I were to say, "Hear what comfortable words Paul saith: never give a sucker an even break," there would certainly be a few who would diligently put it down in their notes, because they don't know who Paul was, and the words of that great natural philosopher W. C. Fields have an authoritative ring in their ears.

Those students from the working-class at the new universities of the nineteenth century very often had another group of classical texts at their command. It was a number of the plays of Shakespeare. Where did they acquire that knowledge? Sometimes by reading, but much more often by attending the theatre, where *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Lear*, *Othello*, *Richard III*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and in all perhaps twelve of the most popular Shakespeare plays were perpetually being revived by actors who wanted to establish their reputations in the classical repertory. The audiences of the day — a large proportion of them working-class people — went happily to see new interpretations of familiar plays again and again. Shakespeare is easy to memorize, and for many people it is easier to remember what is heard than what is read. It is a mistake to think that people who are not extensively educated are deaf to the appeal of poetry, and splendid dramatic rhetoric rarely fails with them. The people who do not respond to Shakespeare are not the uneducated, but the half-educated. Shakespeare wrote for an audience a great part of which he knew to be uneducated, but not for that reason stupid or unfeeling.

Anyone who is well-grounded in the Bible and Shakespeare may hold his own against a disputant whose mind has been honed on Greek and Latin, and in time English studies in universities became a com-

mon thing. But the form English studies took in those early days was not the form we have given to it since.

When we read about university studies in English as they existed seventy or more years ago we fall at once under the spell of professorial giants like Walter Raleigh at Oxford, Quiller-Couch at Cambridge, and George Lyman Kittredge at Harvard; the spell we feel is less than that they exercised over their students, but it is powerful still, and we think what a privilege it must have been to hear them. It was as lecturers, as inspirers and guides to taste that they exerted their influence; Kittredge was, of course, a fine Shakespeare scholar, and the other two men were writers and notable anthologists, but it seems to have been in the lecture-hall that they put their mark on their students. How did they do it? They deployed the splendours of English literature, praising, exhorting and manifestly enjoying the works they talked about, and speaking in terms at once familiar and reverential about great writers. What they said, in effect, was, "Literature has made my life glorious, it has extended my powers of mind and heart, and it will do the same for you if you will apply yourself; I am offering you the classics of your mother-tongue; I am inviting you to enter into the splendour of your inheritance." And it worked.

It worked for a reason which I must explain in terms that will not be offensive to modern sensibilities. Part of its effectiveness was that it played on the spirit of emulation which always exists in the young, however they may seek to conceal it. A young man might think: literature has made Kittredge the marvellous creature I see before me, and I want to be at least as marvellous as Kittredge and perhaps a little better; therefore I shall tread the path that he has taken, and from which he beckons. These great professors were academic stars. They were performers. They were not deluded about themselves. They exerted not only their taste and scholarship, but also their personal gifts of presence and voice in the service of literature so that their hearers might (to paraphrase the words of a great literary scholar, Henry Sedgwick) apprehend noble, subtle and profound thoughts, refined and lofty feelings, because these were the source and essence of a truly humanizing culture. They were living evidence of a life-experience a student might desire to make his own. They were enviable.

Forty years with Ezra Pound

You may very well say, this was inspiration, but was it scholarship? Not always; though it was criticism. Scholarship was to come, and it came with the introduction and extension of graduate studies in English. At first such studies were confined to the establishing and editing of texts, to bibliographical detective-work, to the clarification of technical problems. But something was happening which the pioneers of university English studies had not foreseen; their subject became popular, and the English classes were crowded. Many of the

students who wanted to study English did not want to be textual scholars; they wanted to be critics, and of their desire the modern English thesis was born. They wanted to say their say and make their mark, and the moment slipped by when somebody in authority might have told them that their say would be better left unsaid for a few years, and their mark made when it was certain to be clear and bold.

It was not long before the craze for publication and the cancerous proliferation of academic criticism began, with the results that we behold all around us if we enter any university library. The principal aim of the young scholar in our field is to publish a book, or at least a few articles, which will set his feet on the path of professional success. The negative side of this desire is that too often the books are thin, and the young scholar is trapped in an area of study of which he may tire before he is forty but to which he may be chained until he is sixty-five. It may be a terrible thing to have to live with Ezra Pound for forty years.

It would be absurd to condemn all that is involved in the modern conception of literary scholarship, but it may be said that too many people attempt to become scholars too soon, before they have become good teachers, and indeed one might say before they have become men and women. The great themes of literature are love, war and death. I assure you that I am not jeering in an elderly fashion when I say that too many young English scholars know far more about metaphysical love poetry than they know about love. Their ideas about war are chiefly derived from faculty squabbles. Death has not yet entered their minds as a personal concern, except when some senior professor retires, or succumbs to boredom, and everybody in the department moves another rung up the ladder. Literature is a distilment of experience, and experience comes by living. Too much scholarship, too soon, may bring the scholar to that particularly bitter form of disillusionment that comes of not having lived enough.

Living, of course, need not be a rowdy business. It is not necessary to have been a pirate, or to have murdered someone, or to have been chased out of the Caliph's harem by bloodthirsty eunuchs. It is a matter of having come to terms with one's own destiny, of having understood and weighed whatever experience you have had; it means having loved someone happily or unhappily, of having brought another life into the world and accepted fully the responsibilities that brings, of having been very ill, or in some danger, or having faced an enemy and overcome or been overcome; it means all these things and it also means having thought seriously about them in terms of your own life, and not in terms of life as it is presented in books. Books may enlarge or explain your own experience, but they cannot provide it.

This is why I think we permit students to enter our graduate schools too early, and to become Doctors of Philosophy before they have become people.

What is the outcome of our present plan? It is very darkly set forth and discussed in a remarkable short article by the eminent modern scholar and critic, George Steiner, which is called *To Civilize Our Gentlemen*. The reference to gentlemen is misleading, because what he says applies with equal truth to our ladies. Steiner asks, "Is a man who has spent his last years of school and his university career in the study of English literature, to the exclusion of nearly every other language and tradition, an educated man?" No, he says. The study is too narrow; at least one other language and literature is needed, as well as some history, some classics, and a serious involvement in the great problems of modern life. Without these things, the literacy of the English scholar is a delusion.

Frozen custard

Steiner has an axe to grind; he thinks modern English scholarship, called a humane study, fails to humanize. He quotes Kierkegaard: "There are two ways, one is to suffer; the other is to become a professor of the fact that another suffers." And he concludes with Kafka's passionate outburst: "If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it? So that it shall make us happy? Good God, we would also be happy if we had no books, and such books as would make us happy we could, if need be, write ourselves. But what we must have are books which come upon us like ill-fortune, and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide. A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us."

This is admirable if we bear in mind that it is Kafka who is speaking, and George Steiner who is calling him as a witness. Personally I think that happiness is a great civilizer, and I often recall G. K. Chesterton's fine comment on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, that it is a great adventure in what he calls "the mysticism of happiness." But it takes a good man to know that he is happy; to be miserable, in a fashionable way, is all too easy. I do not for a moment believe that we are all capable of writing the books that would make us happy. Ill-fortune, death and suicide may be depended upon to touch our lives at some point, and though we would be fools to ignore them, we need not suppose that they are more truly educative than good-fortune, birth and self-discovery. If we can only learn from misery, we are caught in a fashionable sort of stupidity which has far too much to say to us in the world as it is at present. But I do agree that if we have a frozen sea inside us, a book may well be the ice-axe that breaks its surface. My experience has been other than Kafka's, who was never, so far as I know, a university professor, and it appears to me that many students of English literature have indeed a frozen sea inside them, but it is a sea of frozen custard. That sea can only be made tolerable if it is somewhat melted, and a good deal of brandy or rum added to give it flavour. A book may be a brandy-bottle, as well as an ice-axe.

I am not mocking Steiner, for whose fine gifts I have a strong admiration. The truth of what he says is indisputable, but I do not think it is the whole truth. The gist of his complaint is that the study of English literature may leave the student untouched — an expert, perhaps, on the drama of Webster who does not understand that torture, degradation, tyranny and the abjection of human dignity are facts of the world in which he himself lives. This is indeed a danger. I remember once teaching some students Dryden's *Aureng-Zebe*, in which the jealousy of a ruler for his heir is one of the themes. I pointed out that *Time* magazine had recently reported the tyrannous action of an Eastern potentate who, on coming into his kingdom, lost no time in executing his five brothers, in order to ensure his undisputed claim to the throne. To my astonishment the effect of this comment was to make the Imam of Yemen, our contemporary, seem a figure in the past, rather than to make *Aureng-Zebe* nearer to the present. For those students the divorce between life and drama was complete. They could not conceive of the dangers of absolute power, or believe it existed in their world. They were uncivilized, because they did not know what civilization is.

Steiner wants the student of English to wake up to the horrors and terrors of life; he wants the concentration camps — and there are plenty of them today — to be an ever-present reality to our senses. I understand and respect his concern, but I should like students of English to be aware of more than horrors that are real in our world, and the fragility of life and civilization. I should like them also to be aware of the splendours that life offers to virtually all of us, and the undying resilience of the human spirit. I want them to seize and exploit to the full the good fortune and civilization that are ours. But we both want English students to wake up. How are they to be awakened?

Cleansing

I have my campaign planned, if anybody wants to put it into action. It would start with a resolve in grade schools, high schools and universities that our language should be cleansed.

That would mean restoring a rigorous instruction in grammar. Grammar is nothing less than the rules of the road in speech and writing, but it can be something else; it can be a guardian of thought, because untidy grammar excuses untidy thought and allows stupidities and illogicalities to pass under a colloquial guise. Grammar, then, should be a foundation stone, proceeding from the simplest rules of syntax to a study of what used to be called rhetoric. Nowadays people often think that rhetoric means insincere or empty speech; it means formal speech, persuasive speech, and logical progression from one point to the next.

As well as grammar I should re-institute, from earliest schooldays, reading aloud and memorization of passages of prose and verse. I am shocked to find how poorly graduate students of English read, and how frequently they mispronounce words which they write with the greatest freedom. In spite of what has happened in the past century, the sound of poetry is still a searching criticism of it. You know what that unfailingly interesting poet Robert Graves says on this subject: "The poet's first rule must be never to bore his readers, and his best way of keeping this rule is never to bore himself." Children may fittingly get a lot of poetry by heart, and what they learn in childhood will never leave them.

Of course my plan would mean that we should have to throw overboard a great deal of what has passed for the last few decades as educational theory. Much of it seems to proceed on the principle that children are stupid, and can only understand stupid stuff. Not so. I went to Canadian schools in the days when we did a lot of memorizing, and some of what we memorized was rather beyond our understanding. But we grew up to it. To use a favourite word of the educational theorists, it "challenged" us. Consider this:

It is not growing like a tree
In bulk, doth make men better be;
Or, standing long an oak, three hundred year,
To fall a log at last, dry, bald and sere;
A lily of a day
Is fairer far in May,
Although it fall and die that night;
It was the plant and flower of light.
In small proportions we just beauties see;
And in short measures, life may perfect be.

I had to get that by heart when I was ten years old, in a country school up the Ottawa Valley. Did I understand it? I understood what a child might understand, which is that a child is not an unimportant creature, and that length of life and quality of life are not the same thing. I didn't know who Ben Jonson was; I didn't know what a Pindaric was. But I had learned something important, clothed in fine language, and it did something to victual my ship for the voyage of life that no amount of theoretical twaddle can approach.

If I seem hard upon the educational theorists, I think they deserve it. Because of my work as a teacher I receive unsought and unpaid-for a great deal of what these men and women write. And what they write sounds like this (I have taken this sentence at random from a recent wad of Xerox that reached my desk): "Each component of a response-sequence provides sensory feed-back in the form of response-produced kinesthetic and proprioceptive cues." The people who write like this sometimes ask me to meetings where we shall have meaningful interface and establish parameters valid as of now. When I reply

that I will see them in hell first they are astonished and hurt by my negative input, and especially by the over-reactive modality in which I express it. There has been a hullabaloo recently because some homosexuals wanted to visit schools and put forward their ideas about what they called "an alternative life style." They were righteously rebuffed, and yet people who commit unnatural acts against our language are permitted to roam the schools unchecked, and are even paid to do so. Which sodomy does most damage?

But I am growing heated. Let me return to my point and repeat that I should like to see our language cleansed; cleansed, not reduced to an unnatural austerity, or robbed of colloquial nuance, but kept clean as we keep anything clean which we value. The place to begin is in the schools. Let every child be given a good dictionary, and let him be expected to justify every word he uses in his formal speech and in formal exercises, from that dictionary. If he is gifted he will in time outgrow all but the very largest dictionaries. He may even contribute good new words to dictionaries. But let us be sure he *starts* from the right place.

Grounded thus

When young people so trained appeared at the university they would be better equipped to begin English studies (not to speak of history and the study of other languages, philosophy and science) than they are now, for they would be able to say what they meant, and if they meant nothing they would be unable to conceal the fact by adopting the ejaculatory mode of speech which has for a few years been so popular. I mean the sort of speech which forms no paragraphs, but which supports simple statements with eager cries of "Right?" and "Okay!" They would be ready for serious study of their own tongue.

I favour a modified historical approach to such study. No harm is done, and much good may result, from some understanding of Anglo-Saxon and Middle English. Not every student wants to undertake philology, but I think an introductory course in philology is desirable, because nothing makes us so aware of the value of words, and so eager to keep their use within proper bounds, as some notion of where they came from, how they happen to be here, and what may become of them if we use them foolishly. There is nothing innovative about what I have proposed. But I should like to see two full, obligatory courses in Bible study for each student; one of them would involve close reading of a substantial part of the Bible, and the other would be a study of the many translations that have been made of the original texts, in order to acquaint students with what is involved in translation, and also to make clear to them what a committee of literate Bishops can do, in quite a reasonable length of time, without a computer and without much of what it is now fashionable to call 'funding'.

These are not the only compulsory courses I should institute. Another would involve the reading of all the plays of Shakespeare, in chronological order, to be followed in the second year by a course which would carefully consider five of the tragedies. I do not think I would encourage the study of Shakespearean plays in high school. Other poetry, of course, and a generous amount of modern poetry; I would suggest that high school pupils be encouraged to write in the classical verse forms, so that they would find out how language might be accommodated to the conditions of verse. But not, I think, Shakespeare, who would be kept as a treat for advanced students.

Grounded thus, I think university English students might do very well. I should like them to continue the school discipline of reading aloud. Such exercise is by no means childish, and skill in reading would bring skill in appreciation of poetry as well as what Thomas Mann calls "the finer and much less obvious rhythmical laws of prose."

Why this emphasis on reading aloud? Because, as I have already said, it is a first-rate critical instrument. Though some poetry may be written for the eye alone, most of it is meant to be heard; when verse loses its music it has lost half its worth. People who find, for instance, Browning difficult, would be surprised how his verse reveals its meaning when it is read to be heard. And Auden and Lowell are all for the ear.

Speak like a literate being

Another matter, which has to be approached with tact, is that many university students have no notion at all of how to speak like educated people. I do not propose an affected form of speech, but surely clarity, correct pronunciation and a degree of melody and euphony are not too much to ask of the best-educated people in our society? The result may be gained by reading aloud before a critical audience of one's peers. Many of you have had experience of what it is to be read aloud to by Hal Holbrook, when he reads Mark Twain, or by Emlyn Williams, when he reads Dickens or Dylan Thomas. Something comparable to that sort of reading is possible to anyone who will work for it.

I repeat, the student of English who cannot speak the language like a literate and educated being is either cheating himself or has been cheated by his educational system. There is nothing novel in what I say. During the Middle Ages, scholars read aloud as they studied; many of you know the story of the cardinal who regretted that he must suspend his studies for a few days because he had a sore throat. And within living memory the great Birmingham critic and professor of English, Ernest de Selincourt, used to make his students read aloud to him frequently, and if they needed it, he sent them off to a speech teacher to be instructed in what he regarded as a necessary

part of their craft as teachers, and their equipment as critics. If you cannot hear, can you comprehend? Marshall McLuhan has given freshness and force to this point of view.

Many of you, I expect, rebel against my emphasis on Biblical study, because you fear that it might suggest indoctrination in the Judaeo-Christian form of belief. Very well, rage within your own bosoms. There is not the slightest likelihood that anyone is going to put my plan into action in every university in Canada. But I am serious in what I suggest, and for your consideration I offer you this quotation from a man who was fully as opposed to narrow doctrine as many of you can be. Here it is: "Though many of us can no longer, like our fathers, find in its pages the solution of the dark, the inscrutable riddle of human existence, yet the volume must still be held sacred by all who reverence the high aspirations to which it gives utterance, and the pathetic associations with which the faith and piety of so many generations have invested the familiar words. The reading of it breaks into the dull round of common life like a shaft of sunlight on a cloudy day, or a strain of solemn music heard in a mean street. It seems to lift us for a while out of ourselves, our little cares and little sorrows, into communion with those higher powers, whatever they are, which existed before man began to be, and which will exist when the whole human race, as we are daily reminded by the cataclysms and convulsions of Nature, shall be swept out of existence forever. It strengthens in us the blind conviction, or the trembling hope, that somewhere, beyond these earthly shadows, there is a world of light eternal, where the obstinate questionings of the mind will be answered, and the heart find rest."

That is a truly humanistic estimate of the Bible, and who wrote it? Sir James Fraser, whose great work, *The Golden Bough*, did as much as any scholarly research to shake the absolute authority of the book he so generously praised for qualities which have nothing to do with literal truth. Such Biblical study as I have proposed would not, I think, shake the faith of any convinced young atheist who believes, as Bertrand Russell believed, that "we are all exiles on an inhospitable shore." But if we seek to study English literature seriously, we must acquaint ourselves with what the majority of those who made it, and who have preserved it, have taken as their rock of belief, their exemplar of morality, and their fountain of common speech.

No graduate study under thirty-five

My proposals for English studies have only advanced, you see, as far as the B.A. What about graduate study, without which a teaching career at the university level is impossible? I should like to see a generous gap between the first degree and any subsequent study, and therefore I propose that universities decline to admit anyone to their graduate schools who is not — let us say — thirty-five years old.

What is to happen in the interval? Live dangerously: be a pirate or a high school teacher. Then, if you still want to be a professor, advancing to what is, in my ear at least, humorously called "a full professor," go back to the university and begin your research. What I suggest is entirely in accord with the modern idea that we should not spend all our lives doing a single kind of work. What the mature student would bring to his graduate work would be enlarging and helpful not only to him but to his university. The full professors who undertook his supervision would have to have better answers for the questions they are asked than some I have heard in the past. Furthermore, I think that graduate work could be done better, and more rapidly, if the student had a sense that middle age, and the possible second career, was not far off, and that he was wholly committed to it. Rather too often, now, the graduate student begins his research at the end of eighteen years of schooling of one sort and another, and he is exhausted, his appetite for learning is jaded, and he knows little but school. My scheme, I think, would help to make higher degrees more precious, would cut down the diarrhoea of publication on stale or trivial themes, and eliminate the people who now go into graduate studies either because they are unable to think of anything else to do, or because they are afraid of the world.

What would they be like, these graduate students who, having left the university at twenty-one or twenty-two, returned to it fourteen years later, to seek a doctorate? They would be vastly more literate than those who now progress directly from the B.A. to the M.A. and then set their teeth grimly for the long haul toward the doctorate. They would have had time to read the books they never managed to read at the university. One of the absurdities of our system of which we are all aware, but which we do not often face squarely, is that we demand more reading than is humanly possible. I am sure there are some students who do indeed read, after a fashion, all or nearly all the prescribed texts, but there are many who do not and cannot. I have been pretty much a constant reader since my childhood, but I know how my gorge rises when I have to gobble a book in a hurry for some purpose or other. I am aware that I am rushing, that I am anxious not to *read* the book but simply to *have read it*. However attentive I may be I know that I am skimming the surface of a work that requires deeper and more thoughtful attention. This is not reading in any sense except that of the lowest form of book-reviewer. I have been one of those, in my time, reading five books a week and sometimes more, and it is a drudgery to which nobody can submit himself for long if he hopes to preserve any sensitivity of taste.

In the years between the B.A. and the return to advanced studies the student would have time to find out what it was in literary studies that called out the best in him. He might discover, after a year or two with Henry James, that Henry James was not really his man. But he would always know a good deal about Henry James. He would have time to look at those authors who, for some reason, do not figure

largely in university studies. Two of my own favourites come to mind; they are Thomas Love Peacock and John Cowper Powys, who must surely be the most unjustly neglected major novelist in all our literature. The student — you see, I still call him that — who had achieved his B.A. would have time to find out what he really wanted to do. He might even find out that he wanted to do no more, but to go on happily reading without getting a Ph.D. But his literacy would be no delusion.

He would have time for something else, something extremely necessary for a student which no university provides or can afford to provide. He would have time for that sweet idleness without which no true appreciation of literature is possible. Yes, I mean it. Students ought to have time not only to read, and to think about what they have read, but to *think around* what they have read, which may take the form, for long periods, of thinking of nothing very much at all. Our system of university education has become as frantic, as rushed, as everything else in the modern world, and because of a little-recognized psychological law called the Law of Reversed Effort (I assure you that there is such a law) we do no more, and perhaps not as much, as our Victorian ancestors, who took things more easily. Sometimes I wonder how modern students stand the pressures that are put on them. I myself teach drama, and sometimes I say to my classes: Do you think you can read two or three plays before next week? Then I discover that they must read *The Ring and the Book*, a large portion of *Paradise Lost* and *The Golden Bowl* before I see them again. But they undertake my two plays quite happily, and when next we meet there is evidence that they know the plots and the characters and may even be ready to confront me with a new concept of tragedy. But they have had no time to reflect and feel. This is not real reading. A university ought to be an ocean in which the student bathes, not a tank in which he frantically fishes. The fisherman cannot know the sense of splendid abandonment to another embracing, maternal element, which is the joy of the bather.

But if the universities cannot provide time for creative idleness — and they can't — they might do better to put the student into a situation where he can provide that idleness for himself, by barring him from the university between the B.A. and the later, mature period of study and research.

Drink ink and love the art

I have not forgotten that this lecture is called *Delusions of Literacy*, and thus far I have said nothing about literacy, although I have said a great deal about literary studies. Literacy does not mean that one has read everything, nor would any sensitively literate person assert that he had read all that was best in any literature. Nor do I think that a truly literate person would recommend anyone to read nothing but what had been labelled, by some authority or other, “the

best." From time to time attempts are made to isolate "the best," and lists of books are compiled which, it is eagerly asserted, will make a literate person of anyone who reads them attentively. I have never met anyone who had gnawed his way through any such selection of books, so I cannot speak of their effect. I can only put forward my own conviction that not everything is "best" for everybody, though the reading of certain great books may be necessary and salutary if one hopes to understand others. My own experience, if it is of any value, is that I cannot live on a diet of the best; I must have much that is merely good, and now and then I have a primitive hunger for something that is really bad, unwholesome, and intellectually contemptible. My reason is that I regard literature as my principal artistic approach to life, and although one must know what is great in order to appreciate the greatness of life, one must also have some acquaintance with what is mediocre, or even what is tawdry, or the great things have no shadows to set them off. One cannot dwell forever on the mountain peaks if one is to know what a mountain is; one must now and then look at the mountains from the valleys. If you want to see the moon at noonday, you will do it more easily from the bottom of a well.

In our universities I think we sometimes lose sight of the fact that literature is an art, and that to be literate is to be sensitive to the subtleties and overtones of that art. Not to know the theories, and to be able to play with them as a juggler plays with half-a-dozen glittering baubles, but to be profoundly changed by what we have read, and thought about, and read again, and made part of our minds and our emotions. To be literate is to have found at least one of the foundations of our life and belief.

Do you remember what the curate says of the clown in *Love's Labour's Lost*? "He hath never fed of the dainties that are bred in a book; he hath not eat paper, as it were, he hath not drunk ink. His intellect is not replenished." That is a fine, euphuistic definition of literacy. In the university we have time to eat paper and drink ink. The replenishment of the intellect will only follow if we have time and inclination. We must love literature, and we must love it as an art — that is to say, something which is worth much of what is best in a life.

It may be that you think my insistence on the artistic element in literature is old-fashioned. I am well aware that there are other points of view. Earlier this year, when Professor F. R. Leavis was honoured by the Crown, his contribution to literary studies was described thus: "Dr. Leavis teaches that the critical study of literature is of importance not only as a discipline but as a social and moral force, an antidote to the debased values fostered by an acquisitive industrial society; that the study of literature is capable of forming, and should be made, the core of liberal education, the primary agency for the transmission of cultural values; that its place is that once occupied by the classics, or reserved by Newman for theology." I have no fault to find with any of that, but I think that in Canada we need emphasis on art, rather

than on social and moral force. Those things will follow art, in our country, which is far too fond of words like *discipline* — by which is often meant an iron framework — and *social* and *moral force* — which so often with us means yet another foredoomed attempt to make revolutionaries out of a society which is bourgeois and comfort-loving from top to bottom. I think we shall change Canada through art sooner than through any of those delusive agencies.

By means of social and moral force, a man is compelled to look at other men and seek to change them. By means of art, he is compelled to look at *himself* and change himself. What we need here is not a handful of political revolutions, which will never change anything, but five or six million personal revolutions, which could change everything. It is not that, as a nation, we lack intellect and feeling, but that we do not respect and cannot command our intellect and feeling. We must plunge deeper into ourselves if we are to find our truest and most socially effective selves. We must begin with what lies nearest, which is whatever we are as individuals; and the art to which we are, in varying degrees, committed, is the agency that will change and enlarge us.

Too often we forget that literature is an art, because it is rooted in language, and we use language as the commonest agency of everyday living. Let us cleanse language, and its quality as the instrument of an art will be more easily apparent. Let us respect our language, even to the point of obsession, as the French do. And let us rid ourselves of any idea that art, and especially literature, is a pretty thing, which we can use or set aside, and which is not part of the marrow of our bones. To be literate is to have advanced to a point where we cannot separate ourselves from the art we profess.

Let me offer you one more quotation, not from a literary scholar (though he has been that, in his time) but a great scholar of myth and religion, Joseph Campbell. This is what he says: "The function of art is to render *a sense of existence*, not *an assurance of some meaning*: so that those who require an assurance of meaning, or who feel unsure of themselves and unsettled when they learn that the system of meaning that would support them in their lives has been shattered, must surely be those who have not yet experienced profoundly, continuously or convincingly enough, that sense of existence — of spontaneous and willing arising — which is the first and deeper characteristic of being, and which it is the province of art to awaken."

Literature is one of the paths to that sense of existence. When that has been achieved, there is no further delusion of literacy. The reality has been achieved.

NOTE

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