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Struggling with the Question of How to Live

Teaching literature in the university

Why is the study of literature evidently not doing what it is supposed to do, which is to educate the young in a richer sense of life? In an article scrupulously sensitive to the balances involved, Geoffrey Durrant unravels the reasons for the characteristic incapacity of a modern university to communicate a sense of values with any confidence or credibility. Prevailing presumptions about what constitutes scholarship in the field of literary criticism are at odds with the realities experienced by those who give their quiet attention to particular works. He describes with refreshing clarity the simple but uncommon elements of teachership called for by class work in literature, and points out that the undeniable pleasures of such teaching offer the potential common ground on which a new confidence in the profession of English studies should be based.

In the October 1978 issue of *University Affairs*, the official organ of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, two short articles are printed side by side — an account of a conference on the teaching of ethical values to university students, and a defence of a liberal education, by Dean John Woods of the University of Calgary. What strikes one most forcefully about this juxtaposition is that the authors of the two articles seem to inhabit different intellectual universes. Dean Woods writes, for example:

He who is wise is a good judge of value, is ready with a discrimination between cost and worth. Such a person possesses, to the extent that he is wise, discernment and horse-sense. . . Such a person, Aristotle would say, possesses “intellectual virtue” . . .¹

This brief extract does little justice to the cogency and force of Dean Woods’ argument. It is however enough to establish a contrast. The conference report includes the following:

Another revelation was that most faculty saw themselves at the top of the moral schema . . . The most recommended (method of teaching) is modelling, i.e. fostering open discussion using a faculty member's own personal ethical problems and decisions as a basis.²

These quotations give the flavour only; those who are interested should read both articles. What is perhaps most significant in the report of the conference on the teaching of values is that the desperate expedient of using ourselves as ethical models is advanced without any mention whatever of traditional alternatives. One would think that those attending had never heard of Socrates, and that Aristotle and Kant — or any formal study of ethics — had been dismissed without serious attention, as part of the dead and totally forgotten past. Nor is there any inkling, in the discussion of “consciousness-raising,” that the participants in the conference even glanced at the usefulness of painting, music, poetry, drama, and the novel for increasing our awareness of ourselves and the world around us. Moreover, the opening sentence of the conference report suggests that this interest in values is a mere expedient to fill the gap left by economic incentives:

Since university education no longer seems to be a definite ticket to employment, emphasis is shifting to its potential for human fulfillment. However, if the student feelings expressed below are typical, these objectives do not seem to be met in the universities either.³

The conference report asserts that “there probably are levels of morality we are just now becoming aware of through consciousness-raising etc.,” but gives no hint of what higher morality the conference had in mind. We have always known that we could raise our consciousness of nature by looking at a Cézanne, our consciousness of humanity by reading Dickens, and our consciousness of our ethical experience by reading Jane Austen or Henry James. For some reason, however, as the conference report illustrates, it is only in our schools and universities that literature and the arts are treated as if they had no consequences for our personal lives. Perhaps we should prefer the parents who complain about obscene books in the schools, however much we may deplore mistaken applications of their insight, to those who find nothing to worry about; at least the parents recognize the formative influence exerted by the books their children read.

How to live — an educational failure

Though Dean Woods writes as an educated man for other educated men, and the report of the conference suggests that traditional thought and wisdom have been discarded in advance by the participants, there is one point of agreement — that our educational system is failing us in the essential task of helping us to deal with that most urgent and inescapable of questions — how to live. This is not so much argued either by Dean Woods or by the author of the conference report as it is assumed, though both articles include sharp animadver-

sions on the failure of our expensive educational system in this most important respect. And if we turn the page of this issue of *University Affairs* we find a letter from a professor of mathematics asserting that universities are neglecting teaching and turning out "illiterate graduates." Other issues of the same journal, or of any journal devoted to the discussion of education, would no doubt provide similar evidence of dissatisfaction.

To a teacher of English in a university this must make painful reading. For many years now, English as a formal study has been the chief means through which the community has hoped not only to ensure literacy in the young, but to awaken their imaginations, to quicken their sympathies, and to sharpen their judgments. Since English became the central humane discipline in our educational system, vast sums have been spent in the education of teachers and professors. In recent years more and more Ph.D. degrees have been awarded, and more specialists have been appointed in our departments of English, specialists who with every year that passes know more and more about less and less, so that conversation about literature has become difficult in some departments of English simply because there is little common literary culture left, even among scholars. The production of scholarly books and articles increases every year, and every year the money available for research, for sabbaticals, and for conferences increases, with an occasional minor fluctuation. Yet what we see as a result of this vast expenditure of time and energy is a general dissatisfaction with the performance of the schools and universities, and a vague sense among students that their education, even in literature, is not offering the illumination they hope for. The justification for giving English the priority it enjoys in our educational system was that it could be made into an essentially humane discipline, a source of wisdom and delight, and not only of useful techniques. Yet the energies of many universities have been directed to turning English studies into an ever more studious avoidance of the questions of value that are at the heart of all serious literary works.

Perhaps we should welcome the new interest in values, however uninformed, and however much it appears as merely a second line of defence for university education and the employment of an army of professors. But there remains the question whether we do not deceive ourselves by supposing that the study of literature is likely to encourage a richer life and somewhat less destructive patterns of behaviour. A widespread scepticism on this count is expressed for example by George Steiner, who in *Language and Silence* argues not only that literary studies may fail to foster the moral imagination as it relates to reality, but that they may offer an emotional substitute for ethical conduct:

We know that some of the men who devised and administered Auschwitz had been taught to read Shakespeare or Goethe, and continued to do so. . . . Here also recent times give harsh evidence. Men who wept at *Werther* or Chopin moved, unrealizing, through literal hell.⁴

George Steiner does not abandon his muted hopes for “humane literacy” through education, but the question he raises of the value of literary culture, when so highly educated a nation as the German could succumb to the worst barbarity, is one that cannot be set aside.

Value-free scholarship

One thing however needs to be said. It is that to “weep at *Werther*,” though a sign of some kind of literacy, is by no means a proof of a genuine literary education; on the contrary, so unreflecting and uncritical a response to the work may suggest a deficiency in developed critical intelligence. One may know a good deal about Shakespeare and Goethe, and still remain untouched by the central human values these authors are concerned with. To have read *King Lear* with an eye to the tragic flaw in the hero, to the dramatic conventions of its age, and to the use of blank verse and imagery, is of itself no guarantee that one has come to grips with the problems of personal choice which are insistently posed at every stage of this play. To know about Goethe does not mean that one has really grasped the imaginative vision of *Faust*, no matter how much one weeps at *Werther*. And here it must be said that the example of German moral collapse, dreadful as it is, need not be applied too simply. I need not stress the evident fact that it was in Germany above all that the notion of a value-free (*wertfreie*) *Wissenschaft* dominated university studies. As a student who moved from English studies in Cambridge to literary studies in Germany during the thirties, I could observe the very striking difference; in Cambridge literature was studied in its relationship to society, to moral philosophy, and to personal responsibility, while in Germany it was on the whole treated as a branch of philology. In this value-free world of traditional German scholarship the national-socialist demand for “committed” scholarship and for the propagandist expression of “national” ideals found scholars and students alike ill-equipped to assert the value of their traditional objectivity and to resist the national-socialist onslaught on reason and human decency. How could the proponents of value-free scholarship assert with conviction that it had social and human value?

What was seen in the collapse of the German universities was to be seen in a lesser way in the sixties in North America, when the academic objectivity of the scholars was met with a demand from revolutionary students for “relevance” and “commitment” of the crudest kind. We were fortunate in surviving that crisis; but we dare not be confident that we have yet found a legitimate and intellectually honest way of meeting the student hunger for an education which will provide not merely a living, but an illumination of life. In literary studies the signs are not encouraging; in particular the growth of critical formalism, and with it the ever increasing specialization of scholarship and the concomitant growth of technical jargon, have made our universities steadily less capable of meeting the innate desire of young people to be given some help with that most crucial of questions — how to live. To quote Matthew Arnold and to assert that literature is a “criticism of life” is quite obviously disqualifying; the new

academic specialist gives little thought to the value of literature to the human person; he is as busy as any natural scientist in “advancing the frontiers of knowledge”, and is not impressed when such old fogeys as Arnold are trotted out.

Yet it seems fair to ask what kind of answer the scholarly formalist can give to those who inquire into the value, for their students and society, of their activities. It is not enough to say that knowledge is an end in itself; though this is true, it would justify the existence of a limited number of scholars in each academic field of study, but could scarcely be used to defend the large establishment of literally hundreds of professors of English in one province of Canada. A professoriate of this size — much greater than in philosophy or history — can only be defended with reference to its value in the education of students. And we are faced with a paradox; no doubt most of the participants in the conference on values had been educated in our universities, and yet they seemed to be utterly at a loss in their attempts to formulate a coherent program of humane education. We can scarcely blame the professors of philosophy for this; they are few in number, and not all students take courses in their subject. But it is almost impossible to escape from some study of literature in the university. How do those who have studied literature come to be so utterly blank on the question of its human significance?

The question has disturbing implications for the subject which still makes at least a numerical claim to be the primary humane discipline in our universities. And here perhaps it is apposite to quote the report made by Professors F. E. L. Priestley and H. I. Kerpeck on the teaching of English to undergraduates — a report made after a survey of the Canadian university scene:

There are disturbing signs, discussed below in the report, that some members of departments, and even to an extent some departments, are no longer sure of what they are doing and why they are doing it; they themselves are no longer convinced of the power and the importance of literature as the greatest of the arts, and are hunting for various ends they can make literature serve as means.⁵

To this the report adds a depressing account of the general state of morale in departments of English; although a number of other causes for low morale are given in the report, it seems probable that none is so important as the weakening of faith in the value of the literature that scholarly activity is meant to serve.

An act of momentary courage

There has of course always been an ambiguity in the scholarly view of literature, and an inbred tendency to forget the purposes that literary scholarship exists to serve. The more abstract and general the discussion, the more we are likely to suffer from this confusion; and for this reason I shall turn for a moment to a particular literary work, chosen only because it is both short and effective:

A slumber did my spirit seal,
I had no human fears;
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of early years.

No motion has she now, no force,
She neither hears nor sees,
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Such a poem demands attention, not as an instance of the Ballad, or of the Lyric, or of the Lyrical Ballad, or for that matter of the Poetry of Wordsworth, or of the Romantic Revival, but as a statement about our own lives — which is after all what serious literature aspires to be. What it offers to us is the act of perceiving an “obvious” truth (that even those we love must die) which in spite of, or rather because of, its obviousness we cannot habitually live with. In the reading we enact rather than perceive this truth, and the poem is “valid” only inasmuch as it illuminates experience and is confirmed by experience. A successful reading of this poem is more than a technical feat; it is a moral act, requiring at least a momentary courage. It is true that scholars and critics soon enough retreat from the act of courage, informing their readers, with the aid of a concept of “Wordsworth’s pantheism,” that the young woman is not to be thought of as dead, but as diffused through the universe, present everywhere, or merely sleeping. Such evasions tell us only how hard it is to keep a poem before the mind, and how tempting it is to explain away whatever disturbs the habitual slumber of the spirit. Yet the critic who thus renders the poem harmless may well have read it once, even though he cannot live with it.

In the same way the truth-to-experience of “The expense of spirit in a waste of shame,” or of *King Lear*, or *Emma*, is strangely remote from the knowledge we have of these works as being “by” Shakespeare or Jane Austen, or as examples of the Sonnet, Tragedy, and the Novel. That knowledge of this kind plays some part in our capacity to receive the full import of the work is certain; but such knowledge need not be conscious, at least during the act of reading, yet may very easily become too dominant in the mind, so that we pay too direct an attention to what is after all only a branch of grammar. So long as we struggle with the grammar, the easy mastery necessary for successful reading is unattained; when it is mastered, it is forgotten. And really the human mind with a little experience moves to master such structures very quickly and confidently, just as children show an amazing mastery of a grammar which may baffle the experts.

Students do not need a formal history of the sonnet, from Dante and Petrarch to Surrey, Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth, to grasp the essentials of an individual English sonnet. Such material fills critical histories and makes useful lecture notes; and such ordering of our knowledge is gratifying and

even useful once we have it. The student however can best approach the history of literature and its forms through experiencing particular works. This has the further advantage of concentrating his or her attention on the unique import of each work, and discourages the contemplation of it as the mere exemplification of a general idea.

Ambiguity of the scholarly view

It is generally held to be naive to think that poems, novels and plays have usually something to say. Since Plato and Aristotle, the classifying of the various activities of dancing, building, sculpting and painting, along with the making of poems and plays, as “the arts,” has become an ingrained habit; so that we pay more attention to what “the arts” have in common than to their differences, and even regard the intrusion of *meaning* into poetry as a painful vulgarity: “A poem should not mean, but be.” This prescriptive assertion, which denies meaning to Shakespeare’s sonnets, to *Paradise Lost*, and “The Dunciad,” expresses neatly a tradition of academic aestheticism of the kind that, with Livingston Lowes, sees “The Ancient Mariner” as offering a sophisticated thrill, and dismisses the ethical import of the poem as adventitious.

The conclusion that has to be drawn from such criticism is that poems which contain so much ethical foreign matter can scarcely be pleasing aesthetic unities; but such conclusions are rarely drawn. There is instead a tacit agreement to overlook the breaches of aesthetic good taste committed by such poems as “Let me not to the marriage of true minds” or “Resolution and Independence.” Poets, like the common man, are incorrigibly naive; Keats hears Chapman “speak out loud and bold,” Tennyson calls Milton “God-gifted organ-voice,” and Wordsworth, with extreme vulgarity, writes of the poet as “a man speaking to men.” Academic sophistication on this point has the advantage of sheltering us from the sharp edge of criticism that serious literature presents. (“Lord, what would they say, / Should their Catullus walk that way?”) Yet exposure to that sharp edge may be what we and our students most need; and certainly to empty serious literature of its thought is to make it into a poor substitute for music, and less significant for our lives than the art of painting.

It is of course, as Professor Frye rightly asserts, impossible to study “literature” just as it is impossible to study “nature”:

Physics is an organized body of knowledge about nature, and a student of it says that he is learning physics, not nature. It is therefore impossible to “learn literature”; one learns about it in a certain way, but what one learns, transitively, is the criticism of literature.⁶

This linking of criticism with physics is most encouraging to those of us who feel that literary studies are the intellectual poor relations, in the universities, of the

impressively systematic and above all precisely predictive physical sciences. It is almost a pity that Professor Frye backs away from the analogy in the same paragraph, offering instead the less encouraging analogy with philosophy and history:

Criticism, rather, is to art what history is to action and philosophy to wisdom: a verbal imitation of a human predictive power which in itself does not speak.⁷

It is something, however, to be offered at least the respectability of history and philosophy, and *The Anatomy of Criticism* has done much to remove the haunting doubt of the validity and dignity of the academic study of literature — or rather of criticism.

A poem is not dumb

However, something has been quietly overlooked in the process of generalization. “Literature” indeed does not speak; but can we say that a poem is equally dumb, or a novel, or a play? It is true that we cannot study “literature”; but is it equally true that we cannot study individual literary works? We know that the contrary is true, and that we cannot distinguish between reading and study — that even the feeblest poem demands an effort of mind, an act of sustained attention and of interpretation. A poem which is at first a mere collection of marks on a page becomes, after this act of attention, a coherent part of our experience and an addition to the conceptual frame through which we construct our further experience.

Inherent in this process, moreover, is the act of valuing; one may be deeply moved, or at least emotionally stirred, by a poem of Housman’s, and yet, by referring this experience as we inescapably do to other similar experiences (for example the “Lucy” poem quoted above) we incorporate within the heart of the experience the perception that it is less compelling, less adequate as a frame for future experience, than the intensity of our response might suggest. Criticism, in the sense of judgment, is not superadded to the act of reading, but inherent in it. To separate the aesthetic experience from the critical experience is a wholly artificial act of abstraction; as we listen to Tchaikovsky’s *Romeo and Juliet* music even our emotional response, however intense, is modified (sometimes by the emotion of slight embarrassment) by our sense of its relationship to the original play, or perhaps to our own experience of love. We cannot, even if we believe it our duty in the interests of academic objectivity to do so, suspend or delay the act of criticism; though we may and certainly should try not to make such criticism dogmatic or exclusive.

The study of actual works of literature — in contrast with the study of academic criticism — is a challenging and dangerous commitment of the whole personality. Those who see *Romeo and Juliet* as an immoral play, and those who

regard it as dangerous sentimentality, have a better sense of its significance for students than those who insist that criticism shall be deferred until it has been adequately placed on the critical map of the literary universe which it is the perennial task of academic scholars to revise and extend. The work of general criticism and of literary history is unending and inherently provisional (perhaps the only characteristics it genuinely shares with physics). But the task of living is insistent and immediate — and we can no more postpone judgment of the works of literature we read than we can postpone an ethical decision about the acts we perform.

The teacher of course does not supply the judgment. His task is humbler. It is to give the work a chance in the mind of his students, to help them quietly over difficulties of language and historical context, and above all to guide them to a variety of literary works, so that their growing powers of judgment are provided with diverse examples of excellence. “Literature” indeed is dumb; but the poet is not; as Wordsworth put it, he is “a man speaking to men”, a man “of more than usual organic sensibility” and who has also “thought long and deeply.” It would of course be reassuring to suppose that literary study could present itself as a fully qualified member of the established academic disciplines, as objective and impartial as the study of physics, or at least with the appearance of the objectivity of psychology and sociology. But until a science of criticism can be convincingly established — as few would claim that it has — we must live as well as we can with our uncomfortable status as auxiliaries to the poets, novelists and dramatists, helping to clear the road for them into the minds of our students. Evidently this carries with it the danger of mere acceptance of an established culture; and for this reason the study of the literature of one’s own language should, to my mind, be accompanied by the study of at least one other literature in the original language.

Conceal learning

The teaching of literature requires a willing commitment to the work in hand. As Jacques Barzun puts it:

A teacher who wants to read a series of books with his students will be well advised to show a kind of willing discipleship, shifting ground from book to book. He must be a Christian moralist with Dante, a sceptic with Lucretius, and a pantheist with Goethe. . . . If he wants the readers to lend their minds, he must himself be able to do it.⁸

The scholarship a teacher needs is that which enables him to use this inwardness with a variety of literary works, not for a display of learning, but on the contrary to conceal learning so that the reading of a poem by Donne is made to seem as little as possible a matter for anguished explication, and as much as possible a natural and delightful exercise. Here there is much misapplied in-

dustry, as for example in the texts that are edited and over-edited for student use, in which every expression that might conceivably cause a moment's hesitation is anxiously and painstakingly glossed in a footnote. I well remember hearing a visiting Professor of American Literature introducing a class of first-year students in a South African university to *Huckleberry Finn*. His lecture consisted almost entirely of the reading of passages, with a few brief linking comments. For the most part it was through a lively and subtle reading that he awoke in his audience a full response to the text. At one point only did he offer a gloss — when he came to the word *ornery*. "Some of you", he remarked quietly, "will not understand this word; it means *just, plain, ORNERY*." The audience was immediately enlightened.

A light touch is essential to the effective teaching of literature, and the best advice we can give to new professors is to try to wear "all that weight of learning / Lightly, like a flower." Since a display of learning is what for the previous four years has been required of them, a new habit is not easily acquired. They should also recognize that what they most need as teachers of literature is the ability to read well — a skill which they will have to acquire for themselves, since their training has almost totally ignored it. And those who have, to use Professor Frye's phrase "learned about (literature) in a certain way" — through a study of a critical system — will find themselves at a loss in the classroom (where only "a long-continued intercourse with the best models of composition," as Wordsworth put it, will enable them to be helpful to their students). What they will need is knowledge *of*, not knowledge *about*.

Repeated acts of attentiveness

Discrimination of values, in the arts, arises not from theoretical considerations — which in any case belong to the competence of the philosopher rather than the literary scholar — but from repeated acts of attentiveness to actual works. In *The Merchant of Venice* Jessica remarks, listening to the music at Belmont: "I am never merry when I hear sweet music," and to this Lorenzo responds with the comment: "The reason is, your spirits are attentive;" after which he goes on to explain that just as animals are made quiet and attentive by the power of music, the human spirit is also made attentive to the harmony of the universe by the power of music and poetry. And later in the same scene, Portia finds the music unusually beautiful when played in the dark, and comments:

The crow doth sing as sweetly as the lark
When neither is attended, and I think
The nightingale, if she should sing by day,
When every goose is cackling, would be thought
No better a musician than the wren.

In the play, night and silence are the school for an attentive spirit; the many distractions of the daytime are stilled, so that differences of intrinsic value which

are blurred in everyday experience may be clearly perceived. The classroom, in the school and university, may — if we set aside the current cult of indiscriminate “experience” — provide a similar setting of quietness and concentration, in which there is no need to argue about the beauty of an Ode by Keats, because that beauty has been directly perceived by the attentive spirits of the class.

Since there are so many distractions in our lives, and since students in particular have little privacy or quiet, it is more than ever necessary to create at least in the classroom those moments of collective attention which bring them a communal equivalent of the private act of thinking. The task of the teacher must be not so much to give students ideas about literary works, as to give them unobtrusive help with that attentiveness without which neither the significance nor the value of a work can be perceived. Students may rightly ask, before they have studied a sonnet of Shakespeare’s in class, why they should think it worth studying; after an attentive reading of the work, however, the question simply does not arise, since the special quality of such works is evident to any attentive mind. The aim is to bring the student who has not as an individual learned to take delight in the art to contemplate it and enjoy it with others. If we can do this, we have made a great step forward in the student’s education; if we fail, the student’s advance in scholarship is merely an accretion of dead knowledge.

The principle of activity in the classroom — well suited no doubt to the kindergarten — has tended in recent years to encourage “participation”, which — as it is commonly understood — implies much discussion, argument and general talk. I recently overheard a young instructor expressing his amazement at getting a first-rate essay from a student: “She never says a word in class; I couldn’t believe it.” He will learn in time, no doubt, that the current belief in the talkative student as the model is misplaced. Some very good students take part actively in discussion; but often the most sensitive and intelligent are quietly attentive, not so much to the instructor, as to the literature which it is his task to present to the class. And since their minds are engaged in a silent dialogue with Donne or Henry James they are perhaps better occupied than in discussion with their professor.

One result of the exaggerated belief in teaching by discussion is that even graduate students are ready at the drop of a hat with an opinion, a generalization, an argument, and yet are lacking in powers of sensitive comprehension. Since they have learned only to talk about a poem, but not to pay quiet attention to it, many of them have such undeveloped powers of discrimination that they cannot confidently distinguish between a passage of Pope and a passage of Milton, a poem by Whitman and a poem by D. H. Lawrence. We are in short producing connoisseurs of wine who cannot tell the difference between a claret and a burgundy.

The literature class, the group, and the instructor, begin to be helpful

The understanding of literature goes on in the individual mind, which is where all the activity generated by symbols on a page or by words vibrating in the air must go on. Membership of a class, of a group, is valuable only inasmuch as it aids this process; if it substitutes for the complex and subtle responses of the individual mind a simplified and levelled-out group response, little will be gained. Yet, however much the individual response to a work of literature may vary in subtle and perhaps important details, the general response to a poem, a novel or a play seems to vary little. A poem like Blake's "The Tyger" is so constructed as to gain and hold the attention of readers and listeners of every kind, so that it is probably true to say that those who are indifferent have never paid adequate attention to it. This is where the group begins to be helpful. Since man is a social animal, we find it easier to be attentive with others who are attentive; listening even to recorded music in a group is almost always more rewarding than listening alone.

The literature class is first of all a help to attention. Next, there is a mutual heightening of mood in any organized group; the interest aroused in the few subtly communicates itself to the many, so that the whole group is caught up in the heightened general attentiveness. Finally — and this is where the crucial importance of the group and of the instructor enters into the story — what is attended to by the heightened consciousness of the group is not mere symbols on a page, but those symbols made living, immediate and human by the speech of the instructor. In this the teaching of literature is in itself a small drama. A play performed by living actors moves us as no reading can, because we see and hear the characters represented by actual persons, who by their very flesh-and-blood presence represent our common humanity. Students dislike films, recorded readings, and other mechanical substitutes, and — unless their teacher is incompetent — prefer the living voice of the actual person. When he brings the words of a poem to life for his class, the instructor embodies the poem for each of his students, on behalf of each of his students, as the actor who plays Lear or Cordelia embodies the language of Shakespeare for the audience. The living presence can not be provided by film, recording, or television; and this is why all attempts to substitute these for the teacher have failed; and must always fail.

Perhaps the picture I have presented of a university teacher suggests the *dilettante* offering a merely aesthetic interest in literature. It ought to be evident, however, that the reading and interpretation of literary works, if it is to be of value to students, must be guided by mature literary judgment, wide and careful reading in the whole tradition to which the work belongs, a knowledge of the literature in other languages available to the original writer, and in addition a well-developed sense of the relationship of the work that is studied to the intellectual and moral urgencies of our own time. Scholarship of this kind is not reducible to lecture notes, to footnotes and bibliographies, but arises only from

what Wordsworth calls “a long-continued intercourse with the best models of composition.”

A proper place for English Studies

It would be dishonest to assert with any confidence that the direct study of literature, of the kind I advocate, will of itself produce mature and sensitive citizens. The effects of even a prolonged formal education are likely to be less — in the contemporary world of mass communication and mass entertainment — than those produced by social pressures. Without the aid offered by a systematic study of philosophy, of a foreign language and its culture, and the study of a genuinely rigorous science, the study of literature may produce merely sensitive but undisciplined minds. However, the choice is not between ideal education and a literary education, but between two kinds of literary education — that which offers as a discipline the study of the criticism of literature, understood as a means of learning “about (literature) in a certain way”, and that which offers instead the exercise of imagination, powers of discrimination, linguistic precision, and aesthetic and ethical judgment directed to a variety of literary works. And even here it is a question of balance, not of mutually exclusive choices, since all discussion of literary works implies some critical philosophy, and even the strongest believers in systematic criticism require their students to pay attention to some particular works.

The balance has in recent years, and especially in senior and graduate courses, been tilted towards formal and systematic studies for which works of literature are the material, and away from the direct and attentive study of particular works. And if I appeal for a return to direct study, it is in the belief — which I think wholly reasonable — that the mind of Shakespeare is more interesting when literature is in question than the mind of Aristotle, that students have more chance of finding nourishment for their minds, and especially for minds struggling with the question of how to live, in the works of poets, dramatists, and novelists, than in the works of academic critics.

The consideration of ethical choices which serious literary works entail may not ensure the making of right choices, but it ought at least to ensure that actions are indeed the result of choice, and are not a mere blind following of the habits and fashions of an alarmingly conformist society. Whether we choose to admit this or not, our educational systems transmit values; and the best defence against unconscious indoctrination is to enable students to experience at first hand the handling of value-judgments by a variety of first-rate minds of not one generation only, but of many. And even if we were to abandon in despair the hopes that were once placed in literary studies as central to a humane education, it would still be true that the study of poems and novels and plays is both more delightful and more intellectually invigorating than the study of academic literary theory and classification.

The crisis of confidence in literary studies is collective, not individual. The individual teacher spends much of his time in the classroom on the direct study of literary works, and knows with what pleasure and imaginative life his students respond to them. Collectively and professionally, however, he is made to feel that his real task is to contribute to a body of knowledge about literature, and that it is by this measure, and not by what he has contributed to the minds of his students, that he will be judged. Inside the classroom, with very few exceptions, literature is what matters, not criticism. The actual experience of seeing young minds awoken to new perceptions sustains most teachers through their doubts and confusions about the general condition of the profession. What we do chiefly is teach; but what we use to justify our teaching is research. It is this disconnection between our teaching and our image of ourselves that causes the crisis of confidence. What we most need to remove it is a firm assertion that our task is educational, and that scholarship is to be valued in the degree to which it serves literature and the dissemination of literature, not as an end in itself.

It is no accident that one often hears of the pleasure with which a colleague returns to his classroom after a committee devoted to a confused discussion about the curriculum or about the quality of a colleague's research. There is a good chance that the conviction teachers bring individually to the classroom can become a consciousness of common purpose in the profession as a whole, if we are prepared to give up the pretensions to scientific theory and scientific objectivity which cause us to see our educational task as less important than our research. There are hopeful signs, including the recent report on undergraduate education commissioned by the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English, that we are beginning to be less shamefaced about our educational activities. The answer to any doubts about the proper place of English studies in the university lies, it seems to me, not in an attempt to emulate other disciplines, but in proclaiming that what we do in a unique and indispensable way is to sustain the claims of the imagination in the minds of our students.

NOTES

1. J. Woods, "The Case for a Liberal Education," *University Affairs* (October 1978), p. 13.
2. K. Lea, "Faculty Search for an Effective Method of Teaching Values," *University Affairs* (October 1978), p. 12.
3. *Ibid.*
4. George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 5.
5. F. E. L. Priestley and H. I. Kerpneck, *Report of Commission on Undergraduate Studies in English in Canadian Universities* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 9-10.
6. Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 11.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Jacques Barzun, *Teacher in America* (New York: Doubleday, 1954), p. 145.