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## The Long and the Broad View

### Literature in Modern Education

*Whereas tradition is recognized to be the major factor that has determined the main lines of content of our present-day curriculum, that recognition is not generally welcomed. Indeed, the word traditional in education may be said to connote a certain unquestioning if not mindless acceptance of givens. We have reached the point where it comes as a surprise to learn that when an educational system was set up long in the murky past someone had really thought about it with great care, displaying a superior reasoning and understanding that may indeed be entitled to the long survival of its product, on merit rather than on seniority. Could Alfred the Great (he of the burnt scones) have been right; by our own standards? Conway, admitting a vested interest as an Anglo-Saxonist, cunningly presents us with a translation into modern terms of the principles and the practical benefits outlined by scholars twelve centuries ago in justification of education, and particularly of the study of language through literature.*

**I**n speaking about such an important subject, I should like to take the broad view, and begin by digressing. However, I shall try to bring my digression home before I end.

When I was growing up in Huntsville, Ontario, there was a Literary Society which met every other week. Since this Society provided a ready audience for the musical and dramatic activities of the younger citizens of the town, I came to know a number of its members over the years. I recall one of the town's blacksmiths, who sometimes came to speak on subjects drawn from his wide reading in literature. Another man, who worked in the office at the tannery, was in his way an authority on Rudyard Kipling and on arithmetical problems, both of which he would discuss with wit and energy. There was a farmer who worked a piece of land back along the Ravenscliffe road, and I remember not only his interest in poetry, but also the gracious refinement of his speech. Now I am not claiming that Huntsville was a community of rural sages. There was much about the place that was intensely antipathetic to learning and art. On the other hand...

I do not intend to make a caricature of these people. The members of the Literary Society were not pretentious bumpkins, but people who in the midst of a frequently hard life still found time to take pleasure in the written and spoken word. As I set about considering literary aspects of education and the arts, it is to the memory of such people that I turn.

I teach in a University Department of English, and I am frequently asked, not usually by my own students (many of whom have come to terms with the problem) but by others: "Whatever use can a degree in English be?" If one pursues the logic of that question to its end, one sees within it the notion that schooling is the servant of the labour market. This is an attitude which teachers sometimes have to face in government administrators. Such a view is constantly after "practical" ends. It results in a question frequently asked in Huntsville of the young (though not at the Literary Society): "What are you going through for?" We may disagree with the assumptions behind such a question. However, it leaves us with another one which should not be ignored: is it ethical for us to continue to welcome students, when we know that jobs related to literature are in fearfully short supply? I admit that the argument that it is not ethical may carry some economic weight when it comes to specialization in literature to the exclusion of everything else (even though we must continue to train some specialists). However, the same kind of scepticism is sometimes applied to any study of any literature. "Why should I spend my time reading stories?" asks the reluctant student from some other Faculty. "There's no practical value in such things at all." Well, I am going to argue the converse: that there is a practical value in *all* such things, even for one whose living is to be earned in other ways.

Naturally, I am influenced by the models I observed when I was young, some of whom I have referred to. However, the idea that literature is an essential aspect of education is a very old one, and here comes the long view. As one who is now primarily an Anglo-Saxonist, I look back upon a period in which many people of influence regarded education itself as absolutely essential for the survival of the nation. Englishmen of the seventh to eleventh centuries undoubtedly took many of their ideas from Roman and Greek writings, and after the ninth century they owed much to the Carolingian Franks. However, it is instructive to consider what they themselves had to say about education, and about education in literature.

## **Maintaining the faith**

In the last part of the ninth century, King Alfred of Wessex rebuilt the educational system in his territories after the ravages of the First Viking War. His reforms were developed and reinforced through the tenth century, and one of the high points in pre-Conquest English humanism was reached in AElfric of Eynsham, who was born in 955 and died about 1020. In his *Colloquy*, a text he wrote as a Latin primer for classroom use, AElfric has a group of students answer the question "Why are you so eager to learn?" by saying, "Because we

don't want to be like stupid animals, who know nothing but grass and water."<sup>1</sup> Education is what marks man as man, and raises him above a concern for his own appetites. The *Colloquy* also suggests that education should lead to a deeper understanding of the human community within which one lives. In the Preface to his *Latin Grammar*, AElfric touches on another point:

It is fitting for young people to learn a subject, and for the old to teach the next generation something sensible. The reason for this is that the Faith is maintained through learning . . . Where are we going to get wise teachers for God's people, unless they have studied when they were young? Furthermore, how can the Faith develop if both the teachers and what is taught deteriorate?<sup>2</sup>

Now, one can see from his references to the Faith that AElfric takes what we could call a religious view of education. Today we might think that that primarily involved the development of personal spiritual and moral qualities. AElfric would not deny that such a development was necessary. Nevertheless, because of the particular nature of his Christianity, AElfric is talking about the development of a more enlightened citizen as well as a more devoted soul: a man or woman (and we know that women were sometimes very highly educated in Anglo-Saxon England) better able to guide and direct the affairs of this world, as well as to find the way to the next.

There is a whole tradition of academic writing in the Middle Ages which regards education as a key practical tool in the civilizing of the barbarian. However, despite a still all-too-common modern opinion regarding medieval life, the barbarism to fear was not seen then merely as rude knocking about in mud huts among the pigs. However uncouth such a way of life might be, it could have been an accident of circumstance, and might say nothing about the essential man. Rather, the concern was with an inner barbarism of soul which even we might well sit up and take notice of: a brutish love of self and pleasure that led away from a life of reason and restraint into an existence where one was a prey to passion and self-interest, a danger to one and all. In a private person such barbarism was bad enough; in a leader, it was a national catastrophe, and no nation was immune unless it took steps to protect itself.

In the Preface to a treatise on music which is associated with the great Northumbrian scholar Bede (who died in 735) although probably not written by him, a passage occurs in which it is argued that the arts provide a remedy against the Fall. Here, the sense of that barbarism which I have just mentioned is equated with the theological idea of a flawed species nevertheless capable of restoration:

Inherently, man wants to know everything. However, four impediments have entangled human nature ever since the original man committed sin. The first of these is ignorance, the second moral failing, the third awkwardness in speaking, and the fourth poverty and want. Nevertheless, four good qualities have been set against these impediments. Wisdom stands opposed to ignorance, virtue to moral failing, eloquence to inarticulateness, and sufficiency to want. Moreover,

God in his mercy has given it to the philosophers to discover the arts, so that everyone who is learned may attain to the good qualities I have mentioned. In so doing, one can elevate fallen nature to a better condition.<sup>3</sup>

## Language a remedy for human failure

Education restores something of man's intended nature, and covers a wide range of concerns from the ideal to the practical, all of which spring directly from a concern for the essential growth of the human person. The arts are designed to ensure that the learner may have wisdom (which includes knowledge, but surpasses it), a sense of how to act in life, the means of expressing himself clearly, and an effective way of supporting himself. Notice that the fluent use of language is seen as a characteristic of proper human function, here put in moral and spiritual terms. One of the academic arts which related to language was grammar. In the Preface I have already referred to, AElfric of Eynsham describes grammar as the "key which unlocks the meaning of books."<sup>4</sup> Grammar shows forth the structure of language, and one Old English word for "language" is *gereorde*, "an ordering": an ordering of words, an ordering of ideas, and an ordering of the basic principles upon which reality stands. In Christian terms, beyond words lies the Word, which among other things is seen as the shaping and enlightening aspect of Divinity in the world of matter.

In a poem on the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites, written some time before 975, the anonymous author refers to the giving by Moses of the Law in textual terms, and speaks of reading that Law as a kind of literary criticism:

They accepted the holy book, which contains enlightened discourse, and this book is still respected. Each and every one of the laws can be found there which the Lord uttered in words of truth to the journeying Israelites. If the Interpreter of Life, the intellect, which shines within us and is the guardian of our physical senses, will unlock this ample blessing with the keys of the spirit, then its secret teaching will be declared openly, and understanding will develop. We will have wise speech in our hearts, and that speech will rigorously instruct our minds. Then we will not be deprived of God's governance and discipline, which represent the gracious favour of Him who has given order and proportion to the universe. He keeps on unlocking more and more secrets, and now scholars can tell us about a better and more stable happiness [than the usual kind we know about].<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the work, the poet displays for the reader a world in which there are a number of significant dichotomies. The major one is that of order and chaos. For the poet, order gathers about it reason, enlightenment, meaning, due process, law and truth. Conversely, associated with chaos are irrationality, ignorance, meaninglessness, anarchy, lawlessness and falsehood.

Notice that the passage I have just quoted speaks of words written in a book and the way in which the mind can understand those words and thus understand the Law. By the Law, the poet means more than the specific code

mentioned in *Exodus*. Rather, he is talking about the entire principle of order upon which human, natural and spiritual laws rest. Notice also the reference to “words of truth.” The sense of the original Old English terms carries also notions of rationality and real-ness. A word of truth is a term which leads to an actual objective correlative; what it talks about is *there*. On the other hand, a false word, a lie, would lead finally to nothingness: there would be “nobody home.” In Anglo-Saxon parlance, the true word is the foundation of law, and therefore of social (as well as spiritual) order. The false word is nothing more than a boast, and it destroys laws and leads to a fragmentation of the social order.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, AElfric’s reference to grammar is not merely a casual remark about rules of syntax. Behind it lies a sense that grammar is an essential tool for discovering the principle of meaning in the visible world and beyond it to which the word and the book point. Therefore, it provides one of the means by which the scholars that the *Exodus* poet referred to can unlock the secrets of the Law, tell about the better happiness, and serve the ends of Divine order and proportion both spiritually and in society.

### Translating the Alfredian system

To understand why this activity was important in Anglo-Saxon thinking, one must understand to what extent education was not merely seen as a kind of transitive activity upon an external body of material, but was also a reflexive activity upon the learner. In studying to be wise about one’s subject, one would strive to become wise about oneself. Thus, education in the arts served not only to train people *to do* certain tasks; more importantly, it served to train them to be certain kinds of humans. Not that education necessarily neglected *doing* (most education was directed towards some practical end), but *doing* followed from *being*. It is interesting to see how this was accomplished. In the Alfredian educational system, the basic subject taught was English literature, especially poetry. From English one went to Latin and to all the formal academic arts (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music, etc.). This is illustrated in the Preface to King Alfred’s translation of Pope Gregory the Great’s book *Pastoral Care*, where the King refers to the need to arrange things

so that all the young people now in England who belong to the free classes, and who can apply themselves successfully, are set to learning during the time in which they cannot be otherwise employed, and until they can read English literature well. Afterwards, further instruction in Latin should be given to those for whom a more advanced education is desirable, and whom one would like to promote to a higher position.<sup>7</sup>

Notice that for this stage of education Alfred does not speak merely of the nobility or the clergy, but of all young people of free families. The distinctions between free and bond are happily not applicable to our century; however, in his own terms Alfred is advocating the equivalent of universal education. We might

also wonder about the designation of education as an activity for times when young people cannot be otherwise employed; however, we must remember that as Alfred was writing he was also attempting to reconstruct English society from the ground up after nearly a century of war, so there were many practical jobs to be done. His call for education is the more remarkable for that reason, as is the opinion that literature is of paramount importance in the forming of a man or woman to live in the commonwealth.<sup>8</sup>

Now all of this educational theory may be entirely too theological for the modern reader. Ours is not a Christian society in the sense that Alfred perceived his to be. If Alfred's example, and the others we have been looking at, are to have more than merely historical interest, then modern teachers have to make certain translations. However, since I am not merely indulging in my own interest in the past, but am drawing on the past to help consider a matter which I regard to be of great importance to the present, then I believe that that translation can and ought to be made.

One begins to effect such a translation by understanding that in ninth- and tenth-century England, Christianity was seen not only as what we would call a religion, but was also what we would call a political and social ideology. Now the lessons of one ideology can often be applied to another. In this case, the principle that stands out is that which speaks to education as human development rather than simply as skill training. Indeed, the principle *has* stood out with the passing years. In the Carolingian and Alfredian school systems (the Carolingian system was founded by Alcuin of York who died in 804), one finds the roots of the humanistic educational theory of the Renaissance which spoke to the "education of the whole man." This notion was current perhaps even right up until about 1964, when we were solemnly told that the Renaissance was over: but it has survived in the French system in the term *formation humaine*, and is a concept which I hope we teachers will never forget, despite pressures upon us these days to send our students out into the world as little widgets trained to take their places in the Great Machine of Life.

Now certainly we should be teaching our students how to do useful things, and I can even find an Anglo-Saxon precept for that! An Old English version of the *Distichs of Cato*, a set of moral aphorisms used in classrooms, says:

If you have children, teach them trades so that they can make their livings. One never knows what will happen to wealth, and having a trade is better than owning property.<sup>9</sup>

Very sensible! In his biography of King Alfred, Bishop Asser tells us that the King insisted on all the members of his family learning a useful craft. No doubt Alfred's own earlier experience had taught him that one cannot always rely on one's station in life to maintain one. Perhaps he himself even took cooking lessons — unless the reported episode of the burnt cakes was a slander! In any

event, there is no question but that as creatures of flesh and blood, people have to learn to make their way in the world. However, while we are teaching our young ones, I believe that we must pay attention not only to what they do but also to what they are. Education for doing speaks to what end the educated person will serve, what external factors will govern his life. Education for being speaks to what grows within the person himself, and according to what internal principles he will make important choices. An efficient society requires large numbers of those who are trained to do; but a free society depends on those who are fully themselves. The specific terms may have changed since the days of Charlemagne or Alfred, but the basic principle remains the same.

#### Four remedies in literature study

Now we have seen that in tenth-century English writings, the understanding of word and text are equated with an approach to the fundamental order that sustains the world. If Alfred required that English be an essential part of education, what can we say of the study of literature today? But I am going to continue to assume (as the reader may well suspect) that the most practical end education can serve is the development of a free and informed citizenry. I will make a generous translation of what I perceive to have been the humanistic principles followed by the exemplars I have been discussing, and will outline four points which I believe serve to illustrate the argument that a study of literature ought to be part of the core *at all levels* of education, and may act as a mainstay in life after formal training has been completed.

First, a wide experience of English writing provides one with an excellent sense of how the language can be used. Technical writing is usually monochromatic. Literary writing, whether in prose or poetry, expands the possibilities of words. This in turn may impart an increased skill in expressing highly refined concepts or ideas, and in making essential distinctions among things. In my home area, many of the older generation had been taught from the King James Bible and the *Book of Common Prayer*. The effect could be heard not only in the style of their speech, but also in an unexpected breadth and precision of vocabulary. Those works are not appropriate models for everyone, for a number of reasons. However, there is a wide range of excellent current models to choose from. There is more to expanding the range of one's language than the pursuit of elegance. For one thing, to be able to express and argue an idea clearly is to be able to take charge of a way of thinking — as the ability to articulate concepts grows, so grows one's consciousness itself. For another, though words may be beautiful, they may also cheat and enslave. Our civilization is run on words. Genuine freedom depends on a proper mastery of them.

Second, although any sort of writing may increase our vicarious experience, fiction provides us with a special opportunity to see certain ideas, ideologies, problems and states of mind worked out in a dramatic mode. Reading can take

us beyond our own borders of experience, and teach us about other people, times and circumstances. In an age of “existential isolation” this is important for our mental health. Authors of fiction are practised in the examination of human motives, and are free to work out the consequences of certain ideas and emotions. Poets act out before us an intense response to certain stimuli. Though all this may lie beyond our normal experience, nevertheless by allowing ourselves to be carried along by a poem, novel or story, we may discover important things about ourselves. By having at our disposal a wider range of responses than our own experience can give us, we may find ourselves fortified in the crucial and most intense moments of our lives, whether these be happy or sad. Literature may guide our responses to them.

Third, a study of literature can help to build a healthy inner life. This comes perhaps the closest to a sense of the sheer enjoyment of reading. At the very least, an acquaintance with books can provide us with a means of escaping an environment which is temporarily difficult. The practice of any art or skill — and reading is surely one — can grace our seasons of leisure. This is a more important aspect of “practical education” than may be apparent at first. Many of us work shorter hours than previous generations did. How can we utilize our own time so that it is not frittered away? Many will have to face periods of unemployment and layoff. How can we learn to go through these times and retain health of mind and soul? More than in previous generations, many will have to face long and idle years of old age. How can we learn to survive during these years, and still keep on growing and adapting as long as possible? To do so requires great inner resources. Technical education may arm us with the outer resources to live well during our active times, and that is important. However, “education for being” arms us with the inner resources to live well during the times when we are inactive. Any system of training which gives us the first without giving us the second is defective.

Fourth, one of the problems of a too-refined technical or professional education is that it may train us for a specialty that is obsolete before we are ready for it. In order not to be submerged, we must develop that extra ability which permits us to take charge of our own formation. The development of such an ability may be found more in the humanities than elsewhere, and if not especially in literature, at least where the use of language and the exercise of thinking are followed.

### **A remedy for 20th century barbarism**

Now I have re-arranged the categories to suit a modern approach to the subject, but the four considerations I have just given correspond closely to the four objects stated in the (?Pseudo-)Bede passage which we saw above. My argument to inner resources speaks to the category of wisdom, my argument to the extended range of language use speaks to eloquence, my argument to guided



responses speaks to ethics, and my argument to one's professional self-formation speaks to sustenance. So there is a greater consistency between what I am drawing on from the past and what I am arguing for the present than meets the eye.

It is a consistency which the Huntsville blacksmith, tanner, and farmer, whom I mentioned as I began, perhaps understood unconsciously. Certainly I remember them all as happy men — or at least as men who had in some way come to terms with their own limitations, and with those of their environments. As I said before, their range and grace of expression was striking. They were never at a loss for words, and they could make those distinctions among things which are the beginning of understanding things themselves. Further, the range of ideas within them was impressive. They could look at events from various points of view, and could imagine a number of possible responses. Their intellectual horizons were not limited by their own day-to-day experience, although that experience became a rich source for reflection about deeper aspects of life. In addition, they were their own men. Although they gave their work unstintingly to their crafts and professions, they were not entirely defined by their trades. There was much left over at the end of the day, and at the end of their working lives.

Finally, the qualities of mind they possessed reached even into the way in which they practised their professions. Because they could think things through from cause to effect, because they could say what it was they wanted, and because they did not need to be told how to define their work, they were a better blacksmith, tanner and farmer than they would otherwise have been. They are good examples, then, to tie the historical analogy I have discussed into the present. One might argue that their generation is long gone: but I would reply that theirs is a value we should not forget. One might argue what I have said about human development was perhaps more suitable for the old free days of the sixties than it is now in the sober eighties: but I reply that I am not merely talking about self-development as an entirely individualistic centrifugal force, but the very thing we need *because* of our so sobering environment to strike a balance between personal and common goals. We need to consider these matters if we are to avoid a spiritual poverty which will enervate the psyche and deaden the intellect. If education is brought down from being an art in its own right to being a branch of the Ministry of Manpower, then that would indeed be barbaric!

## NOTES

1. The Old English text can be found in *Ælfric's Colloquy* (ed. G. N. Garmonsway, London: Methuen, 1939), p. 42, and that edition contains interesting prefatory material on Anglo-Saxon schooling. The translation here is from *Anglo-Saxon Prose* (ed. and tr. Michael Swanton, Everyman, 1975), p. 114.
2. My translation. An Old English version can readily be found in "Ælfric's Preface to his Latin Grammar," *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Primer* (first publ. 1882; 9th ed. rev. Norman Davis, Oxford: Clarendon, repr. with corrections, 1957), p. 78.

3. My translation. The original Latin may be found in *Bedae Musica Quadrata seu Mensurata* (Migne, Patrologia Latina, volume 90), column 919.
4. My translation. An edition can be found in *Sweet's Primer*, as cited, p. 78.
5. My translation. An edition of the Old English can be found in *The Junius Manuscript* (ed. G. P. Krapp, New York: Columbia University Press, and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1931), pp. 105-06. The passage quoted comprises lines 519b-532a of the poem *Exodus*. In the edition cited above, Michael Swanton speaks of the difficulties of translating Old English prose (see p. vii). It goes double for poetry! Leaving aside problems in establishing a correct text, Old English poetry is a vehicle which is compact, allusive, elliptical, often consciously ambiguous, and which therefore can carry several levels of meaning at once. To provide a Modern English translation which covered all the possible senses of the text would probably result in a parody. For a slightly different version, the reader may consult *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (tr. R. K. Gordon, Everyman, 1926), p. 118f.
6. In a paper of this length, one must unfortunately but necessarily say less than could be said, especially as the concepts I am referring to strike me as central to an understanding of later Anglo-Saxon civilization. Furthermore, the great changes that have taken place in Anglo-Saxon studies over the past fifteen years or so have not yet produced for this generation the kind of wide-ranging study which might put these ideas into context. What I am arguing is a distillation from much more reading than can be cited here.
7. My translation. For a slightly different one, consult Swanton, ed. cit., p. 32. I have taken the Old English text from *An Anglo-Saxon Reader* (ed. Alfred J. Wyatt, first published 1919, Cambridge: University Press, 1962), p. 23f.
8. The association of education with the common good can be found in Bishop Asser's life of Alfred, as well as in writings of AElfric of Eynsham, partly as noted, and in the writings of Archbishop Wulfstan of York, who died in 1023 and who was very interested in polity and statecraft. Alfred seems to have been able to carry out his wishes in the matter of schooling, at least to a certain extent. Asser says that the King established a school not only for the children of courtiers, but also for those of other ranks. As to how widespread this schooling was, we do not know for sure: except that when the Benedictine Order was re-established, about the middle of the tenth century, education was an important part of work. Also, at least one of the Law Codes of the tenth century enjoins that parish priests be responsible for schools within their jurisdictions. It may be that the ideal of a kind of universal education was approached more closely than has long been believed.
9. My translation. An Old English edition can be found in *Wyatt's Reader* (see footnote 7), p. 46. This collection of sayings contains other passages to the same effect.