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The Uses Of Literature

(The text below was the keynote address at a one-day conference of high school and university teachers of English at Dalhousie University, November 19, 1977.)

During the last fifty-seven years, that is to say from the time when I first became a professional teacher, I have been concerned with the teaching of literature (among other things) at every level from grade one to the Ph. D. As my own teaching moved about from one level to another, I retained my interest in the other levels, and did my best to keep in touch with teachers at all levels. And as I moved from one part of Canada to another, and made fairly regular visits to all parts of the country, I did my best to learn and to understand the problems and the practices of teachers of English throughout Canada. I certainly do not profess to have succeeded in becoming well-informed on every aspect of the teaching of English, but I think I can claim, after half a century and more of constant observation and brooding on the subject, that my views are not the hasty generalizations of an educational tourist, flitting across the academic landscape on a quick guided tour, comparing the meals and plumbing with the comforts at home. In fact, academically I have no home—I am a sort of academic millionaire, with comfortable homes in dozens of places across Canada and beyond, each maintained and staffed by members of my academic family.

During my long travels in both time and space I have naturally seen many varied things and watched many changes in the academic world, but one thing has been invariable and changeless. Since this one thing seems to me of primary importance to our occupation, it is what I propose to talk about. It is this: Our *raison d'être* as teachers of English literature. It should be obvious enough, one would think, that a clear

understanding of *why* you are teaching a subject is a necessary prerequisite before deciding *how* you are going to teach it. My observation is that the one changeless and invariable element has been the absence of this clear understanding. I remember the statement that introduced the curriculum for the Province of Alberta schools in 1920, and I remember a large number of similar documents since, all groping for justification for teaching literature, all too vague to instill any kind of conviction into a diffident teacher, and above all, expressing no aim clearly related to the contents of the curricula. The overwhelming impression created by these official documents was of curricula assembled by *ad hoc* choices, in response to a variety of whims and half-thought-out criteria, with a deliberately vague introduction that attempted to find a rationale in the irrational assemblage of texts. As far as I can judge, this has been the one permanent element in our part of education. For a relatively brief period, a degree of order of sorts was present in the high school curricula, particularly of the senior years, by the influence of the universities on matriculation requirements, but since no real thought or careful planning was devoted to the process, the results were never much better than a dubious compromise, a falling between two stools. As soon as the educational authorities decided that high school was not to be a preparation for university, even this slight gesture towards planning tended to disappear. At best, its only virtue had been a guarantee of some acquaintance with a limited number of texts drawn from major authors: it had never faced the fundamental question of *why*.

I hope I do not sound too uncharitable towards framers of curricula, or too supercilious. I am not naive enough to think that the question of why we should teach literature is an easy one to answer. One tendency that has made it more difficult to answer is the growing utilitarianism of educational philosophy, the sort of attitude reflected in a text-book on guidance I recall that was in use some years ago in Ontario. It advised students to take English courses if they intended to become journalists, actors, or lawyers—otherwise not. The author had obviously watched Perry Mason, and had equally obviously developed some illusions about journalists. Narrow views of education as mere vocational training clearly made it difficult to justify the study of literature.

Further complications are introduced by the fact that the study of literature can be made to do a number of things, each of which can be offered as a sufficient reason for its study. During the last twenty years, for example, there seems to have been a growing suggestion that the study of our national literature is important as a method of helping to create or to define our sense of national identity. I am not sure whether

this notion was stimulated by Stephen Dedalus resolving to create the soul of Ireland, or whether it looks back rather to Sir Walter Scott. Scott in many ways offers a better precedent, since Joyce, like his fellow-writers Synge and O'Casey, appears to have created a soul for Ireland which the Irish are reluctant to acknowledge. Scott, on the other hand, was not only popular with Scottish readers, but exercised an enormous influence on European writers like Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Sienkiewicz, who saw in Scott's novels an exploration of national character and of its formation by history and tradition, and also a lively dramatic exploration of the clash of national and racial cultures. But Scott and his continental followers would have been surprised or even puzzled by the suggestion that they were creating the national identities they were exploring. The identities were there, firmly and richly developed. Scott wrote *The Heart of Midlothian*, partly to acquaint his Sassenach readers in Regency England with the modes of life and thought of an alien country to the north, with the historical roots that nourish these modes, with the fundamental differences between Highlander and Lowlander, with the inherited rigidity of the Covenanter, and so on. He does not need to explain Scots to the Scots: they could read him with happy cries of recognition.

Apart from Scott, most writers who may be thought to concern themselves with national identity seem to me to be exploiting the sure sense of that identity in their readers by deliberate exaggerations and distortions of it, which their readers can enjoy *as* distortions, and which mislead foreigners. This is obviously the case with Dickens and Thackeray, and earlier with Fielding, Sterne, and Smollett. Modern Russian critics, for example, and some even in English-speaking countries, have mistaken the novels of Dickens for literal descriptions of English life and habits, sometimes even for descriptions of present-day England. Similar errors are made by 'outsiders' in reading Restoration drama and most eighteenth-century literature. Major poets seem even less reliable as creators or definers of national identity. An Italian has every reason to be proud of Dante, but if he did not know what it meant to be an Italian, I cannot see what Dante could do for him by way of enlightenment. Nor do I think that reading Milton or Shakespeare will throw much light on what it means to be an Englishman to anyone who doesn't know. In fact, generally speaking, the greater the work of literature is, as critics have constantly discovered, the more universal it tends to be. If a nation does manage to produce a great body of literature, then there is no doubt that this, by becoming part of its national heritage, and hence part of the influences that shape national

character, will, in some way hard to define, contribute to the development of that character. But I think it would be very difficult to say what difference it makes to an Englishman, *as* an Englishman, to have read Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Chaucer. It would be much easier to say what it has done for him in other ways.

A much older view of the use of literature is that its study can be made a vehicle for the inculcation of what are now called 'values'. Older generations called it the teaching of morality or the building of character. This is an ancient view, going at least as far back as the classical epics and drama. Classical epics, and later epics like *Beowulf* and the Norse sagas, undoubtedly praise the epic virtues of courage, fidelity to one's leader, and hardihood, and condemn cowardice, treachery, and weakness, and the dramatic writings of Aeschylus and Sophocles present modes of theodicy, inculcating right attitudes to the gods. But within the long tradition of the didactic function of literature there have always been fundamental problems of what it is that literature teaches and of how it does it, or ought to do it. In one very literal sense, all literature (with the possible exception of nonsense) cannot help being didactic. It is made of words, and words convey meanings, so it is always saying something, and that something will either be new to the reader or else, if the work is not negligible, something familiar but said in a new way, and hence fresh and didactic. The alert and thoughtful reader learns all sorts of things from his reading. The problem arises when we cease to trust general didacticism of good literature and demand a specific didacticism—when we reduce literature to propaganda.

It has always been possible to think of literature as didactic in either a broad way or in a narrow way, with a vast spectrum of shades in between. In the broadest sense, all literature is writing a *De Rerum Natura*, an examination and exploration of the nature of things, of man and his universe. It seeks to analyse and define the quiddity and the quality of all that man surveys, all that he thinks about what he surveys, all that he feels about himself and about what he surveys. It tries to look with a sharp and penetrating imaginative eye at the mysteries, the beauties, the terrors, the order and the disorder, of the world without and the world within. The whole of literature is properly seen as one vast and continuing *Essay on Human Understanding*. It can range from something as subtly simple as trying to put into words the sensations aroused by the beauty of a sunset, a landscape, or a human face or figure, to an attempt to find a pattern and a meaning in the baffling complexities of man's place in the physical universe, or of man's

behaviour as a social or moral being, or in the profound mysteries of human suffering. It can choose to explore the wonders of the familiar and apparently commonplace, or it can range into the exotic, taking us with its creator on journeys to strange strands and perilous seas. It can reveal us to ourselves in the details of our ordinary life and in our unreflective habits, or it can awaken us to unknown modes of thought and of feeling in the strange psychology of its imaginings. It is the perennial product of the creative human mind, brooding and reflecting on all human activities, physical, mental, and spiritual—solitary, and social. 'I am a man', writes Terence, speaking for all writers, 'I hold nothing human as alien to me'—I suppose now we should say 'irrelevant to me'.

This is why it has been traditionally argued that literature is the great vehicle for the extension of experience. Without literature, and the ability and opportunity to read it, each person is limited to the range of his own life, of his own observation and experience. His mind not only fails to reach out beyond the daily routine of his limited existence, but lacking the comparisons to provide perspective and to incite analysis, he stops seeing even his own little world. He becomes a Peter Bell, to whom, you recall, 'the primrose by the river's brim a yellow primrose was to him and it was nothing more.' Chesterton, you may also recall, said of Wordsworth's phrase, 'fade into the light of common day,' that it was the biggest blasphemy in poetry. Chesterton was right, but so was Wordsworth: the Chestertonian blasphemy of no longer seeing the marvel and wonder in the familiar *is* the regular and almost inevitable effect of the numbing of imagination and poetic perception through absorption into routine existence. And such an absorption *is* a blasphemy because it wipes out the best part of the potential of the human mind and paralyses its most valuable powers, reducing it to a preoccupation with the trivial and parochial.

With the aid of literature, a reader can live a thousand lives in one, can add the experiences of the wisest, most sensitive of human beings, alive and dead, to his own, and can have his own mind and imagination excited and disciplined and enlarged, until he sees his own life and experience from countless new perspectives, and understands them and himself, his fellows, and his world, with new insight. This is without doubt the great didactic function literature can perform.

I rather doubt, however, whether it will perform it easily and automatically. A useful analogy can perhaps be offered by travel, which is also said to be broadening. I was taught a salutary lesson many years ago by a supreme court judge of a western province. He was showing us slides of his European tour, with running commentary. A view of the

Seine evoked the comment, 'Not much compared to the Fraser.' Similar observations accompanied every picture, and I sadly realised that travel can confirm narrowness. He had perhaps travelled too little and too late. I have, however, noted similar responses to literature in students, who blandly (and blindly) congratulate themselves that Canada has no Vanity Fair, no politicians like those in Lilliput, no snobs, no slums, no hypocrites like those Dickens portrays, and so on. Instead of learning from literature, and gaining insight into themselves and their own milieu, they preserve their shell of parochial complacency and sit there like the three monkeys. I once had a class read Dickens' *American Notes* along with Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. They resented the unflattering picture of the United States given by Dickens, but very much admired *Huckleberry Finn*. (Needless to say, they had no notion whatever that the United States in 1842 was at all different from the present country they thought they knew.) I listed all the things Dickens had disapproved of, and asked them whether these things appeared in Twain's book. They thought not. I then showed them that with the single exception of the American habit of spitting, everything Dickens attacked is also attacked in *Huckleberry Finn*, and that Twain's picture of American life is, and is meant to be, as harshly critical as Dickens'. Their emphases and techniques are of course different. I think the class learned something from this; at least some of them learned how easy it is to miss much of the essence of a work read hastily and with prejudice. But with literature, as with travel, a trained eye and mind are necessary, and these are developed by practice and experience—and by being taught what to look for and how to find it.

I have suggested that my student travellers in Keats' realms of gold had also travelled too little and too late. Their minds were, if not paralysed, at least comatose, unexercised and unstretched. They had for years clearly evaded successfully the tasks of reading closely and of thinking about what they read. They had obviously not been exposed to a course of reading properly designed to train their minds, nor been questioned closely enough on anything they had read to teach them how to focus their attention. Such literary journeys as they seem to have been exposed to must have been like a three-day tour of Europe, glimpsing blurred landscapes through the bus windows. Many curricula in literature are rather like travel programmes on television—brief little visits to unrelated bits of territory: some Masai warriors bleeding their cattle, some South American Indians with their blow-pipes, some Mongolians driving and riding camels and yaks, some Eskimos hunting seals, and wheat farming in Saskatchewan—all very interesting to those

who know the context into which the pieces fit, but not very illuminating to those who do not. If the study of literature is to fulfill its function of enlarging experience and curing intellectual parochialism, it can only do so through a carefully planned and continuous system of training, which means through a coherently designed long-term course of reading guided by right methods of teaching. The planners of curricula are of course familiar with the contexts of their selections, and often find difficulty in remembering that for the student the selections themselves provide the only direct context. Now, this kind of broad didactic function of literature I consider a highly admirable one, but one not easy to put into practice—which does *not* mean that it should not be attempted.

The narrower kind of didacticism which is essentially reducing literature to propaganda is very easy to put into practice, and I consider it highly pernicious. To start with, it tends to ignore the quality of the work of literature *as* literature, selecting works which say the 'right' thing to support whatever cause the selector or selecting body favours. In my youth, curricula were enfeebled by the inclusion of revoltingly incompetent verses or prose pieces preaching what was taken to be wholesome morality. I recall often (with teeth on edge) a horrible piece of doggerel by Carlyle espousing his ethic of work:

So here hath been dawning
 Another blue day;
 Think, wilt thou let it
 Slip useless away?
 Behold it aforeside
 No eye ever did;
 So soon it forever
 From all eyes is hid. . .

As the virtues of work and other more Christian virtues became unfashionable, one set of vilely written anthology pieces disappeared, to be replaced by a new set celebrating the new ethical values. In all of this sort of work, selection is obviously made, not with reference to genuine literary standards, but in response to the current sentimentalities and the fashionable axe-grindings of the day. The selectors are blinded to literary values by their emotions and prejudices, and see literary merit in anything that says, however badly, what they want to hear. What I.A. Richards long ago labelled as 'stock response' becomes the literary criterion. This is lethal to literature. Nothing disrupts the process of learning to judge and appreciate genuine good literature more than offering a student a third or fourth rate piece of writing and inviting him

to admire it because its heart is in the right place. The teacher can, to be sure, sometimes bring forth good from evil by granting the right placing of the heart and then demonstrating the artistic botch the writer has made of trying to convey it. I used to educate some freshmen who indulged themselves in unstinted admiration for *The Grapes of Wrath* by something like this procedure. One can, indeed, make a pedagogical case for including inferior work in a curriculum to allow illustration of what differentiates great writing from the mediocre or even the merely competent, but this procedure is obviously not without its dangers. It is much safer, as a general rule, to choose the best—and I mean the best by literary standards, not ethical or social.

It is also clear that the narrow didacticism conflicts directly with the broad didacticism I have approved of. In my long career of teaching I have regularly encountered, and regularly opposed, the popular view of 'relevance'. Over and over again, in planning curricula for courses in literature, I have been offered the pedagogical principle that the student should be started with literature 'close to his own experience'. This was often laid down as a self-evident axiom, and most often by those who had least knowledge of what the students' own experience actually was. The particular applications, in choosing the curriculum, of this first law of pedagogic motion, or of intellectual thermodynamics, seemed to me especially bizarre. One such was the inclusion of a freshman course at Toronto, for the gangling youths reared in the comfortable suburbs of Toronto, and experienced only in the relatively tame exploits of suburbia, supplemented by the broadening influences of comic books and television, of *The Grapes of Wrath*. None of them had any experience whatever of drought, of the Depression, of poverty, or of hardship. They were full of comfortable sentimentality, nurtured by television and varieties of soap opera, and their hearts bled easily, but the notion that Steinbeck's book was any closer to their actual experience than a play by Shakespeare was ludicrous. In fact, their experience of all the realities of life was so limited, their contemplation of their own experience and of others' so infinitesimal, that almost any significant piece of literature would have been remote and strange.

There is much to be said for having them recognize this at the outset. In my own experience, I have found it at least as sound a principle to begin with something superficially remote from their experience but profound enough to become a new part of it. I remember with special satisfaction teaching *Samson Agonistes* to freshmen at Alberta, years ago, and later to a class of RCAF aircrew at the end of the war. The aircrew men, mostly back from active service, were of course adults with

real experience of life and death, and easily grasped the relevance of all the literature I taught them. The Alberta freshmen were the real confirmers of my theory. It is elementary logic to recognize that literature chosen for its 'closeness to the students' experience', will, if it is actually close, tend merely to be fitted into the shallow set of generalizations, prejudices, and emotional attitudes they already have; it will not, as a rule, jar them into fresh insights and new modes of thought and feeling. In short, it will do little to educate them.

Another fallacy I often observed in the application of this first law is the doctrine that the novel and drama are closer to the students' experience than poetry. This doctrine rests on a shift in meaning of the term 'experience', since it can really be based only on the students' experience, not of life, but of literature. Prose is more familiar to him than verse, and presumably his watching of television has accustomed him to some of the elements of drama and its techniques. One assumes that if the student had been used to hearing, reading and enjoying poetry from the time he first entered school, he could feel as much at home with it as with prose. It is, I think, a pedagogical fallacy for a teacher of literature to encourage the belief that prose is more 'natural' than poetry, especially because it also invites the student reader to ignore the fundamental importance of artistry (which is by definition 'artificial') in prose fiction and prose drama. A long familiarity with poetry, and with the forms, techniques, and devices used by the poet, will train the student to recognize the artistry in novel and drama more effectively, I am convinced, than the reverse procedure of beginning with prose fiction. The various shapes, movements, tones, and techniques of literary art appear in poetry in a small enough compass for the student to grasp: he can see the whole and the relation to it of its parts, and can see how devices and techniques operate in the shaping of the whole. Pedagogically, I would see the logical procedure for learning something about the art of literature as a start (and continuation) with poetry first, then drama, and then the novel (with perhaps short story as an intermediate study between drama and novel).

This brings me to my final and most important consideration. You will have noticed that I have at last begun to mention the *art* of literature. The reason for this is that the uses of literature I have so far been discussing, and which are in varying degrees functions literature can usefully perform, do not depend—at least directly—on a study of the literature as an art. They focus rather on what is commonly called content, rather than form. What this means is that it is possible to use literature for these functions paying little or no attention to the art with

which it is designed and built, which again means that it is possible to conduct a student through a respectably solid course of literature, broadening his mind in various ways, without his ever learning much about the nature of literature as an art. He will naturally recognize that some works impress him or move him or stir thoughts in him or delight him in various ways more than some others, but he will not have been trained to recognize how they do it. He will form judgements, but they will rarely be literary or aesthetic judgements, and for the most part he will be unaware of the grounds of his judgement.

Now, the most important and fundamental thing about literature is that it is an art—the greatest of the arts—and that what it has to say is said through the idioms of art, which are not translatable to the idioms of non-art. Anything which encourages a student to believe that the ‘meaning’ of a literary work can be extracted and reduced to a paraphrase in a non-artistic form is bound to destroy his understanding of the vital fact that art has its own idioms, unique to art. These idioms have to be learned, and they are far more numerous, complex, and subtle than what we call the idioms of a language. They have to be learned as the idioms of a language are learned, however, by practice and familiarity. Given an acquaintance with the idioms, reading literature becomes progressively easier and more rewarding—fresh idioms or fresh uses of idioms are recognized with pleasure, and the skill of the artist in using his medium brings to the reader the real depth of aesthetic delight in recognizing mastery. The greatest use of literature is in being enjoyed as an art, like its sister arts. With other arts, this is widely recognized. No one talks of ballet as a superior sort of setting-up exercises to produce physical fitness, though it undoubtedly is: everyone accepts it as ‘poetry in motion’ and finds its *raison d’être* in its status as an art. And in music even the *1812 Overture* is accepted, not as a record and comment on the retreat from Moscow, which it is, but as a composition in the art of music. Every teacher of literature should have constantly in the very front of his mind the fundamental truth that literature is important *because* it is an art, a very great art. If the doctrines of the late Dr. Coué were not so decidedly out of fashion, I would recommend that all teachers of literature should say aloud six times every morning, ‘Everyday in every way I grow more conscious of literature as an art.’

I hope I need hardly say that the study of literature as an art involves also a very close study of language, its medium. It is only through coming to understand the precision, subtlety, and power the great masters, the ‘lords of language’, bring to their use of it, and the ways by which they achieve exactness, depth of meaning, grace, and beauty by their

mastery of the medium, that the student can learn something of the potentialities of his own tongue, something of the infinite resources of language as a tool.

This means that the curriculum, and the methods of teaching it, throughout from grade one to the Ph.D. and beyond, should be shaped and controlled by the purpose of familiarizing the student with literature as an art, which means first of all getting him so thoroughly acquainted with fundamental shapes and patterns that he comes to recognize them intuitively, then gradually introducing more and more refined awareness and degrees of analysis so that he notices greater subtleties and delicacies of technique. Above all, it must be emphasized that literature is, like music, a performing art. A great deal of rubbish has been talked about print as a visual medium. It is no more so than a musical score. I have never known anyone who read a musical score without hearing the sounds in his head, and I have never known anyone who could read prose or poetry without hearing the sounds in his head. In each case, if you have not learned to produce the right sounds, and the right tempo and phrasing, in your head as you look at the printed symbols, you will not attain anything like what the symbols are meant to convey. As I have said elsewhere, learning to read well is not much less demanding than learning to sing opera well, or to play the violin well. I have constantly been shocked by the vile reading aloud of graduate students, and have shuddered at the thought that this shows how they hear the poetry they try to read. It is small wonder that they cannot recognize the tonal and metrical subtleties, the marvels of phrasing, of shifts of tempo, of legato and staccato, in the work of the great poets. They read like a beginner on the piano trying to stumble his way through a Bach toccata. At the Ph.D. level, these students have presumably been studying the art of literature for fifteen or more years, and would still have difficulty in doing justice to a nursery rhyme. The moral of this is clear. Teachers must train themselves very thoroughly in performance—that is, in reading aloud—and must train the students at *every* level. If they do not, neither they nor their students will ever be exposed to the real sound of great literature.

Through a carefully planned and coordinated curriculum of good literature, designed not only to acquaint the student with a wide variety of examples of the work of the great literary artists, but also to train him progressively in the understanding of their techniques, and through careful teaching and careful coaching in the art of reading, students could be brought, during the years of schooling, to a good level of understanding of the language of the art, its idioms, of the subtleties of its

medium, the English language, *and* of the forms, structures, shapes, conventions, traditional patterns, as they are used and constantly modified by the literary artist. They could be brought also, by a proper emphasis on the choices made by the artist in shaping his work, to some understanding of the delight of the artist in his creation and of the meaning of the word *poet* as *maker*.

Along with this growing understanding of artistry, the student may also acquire from a study of the insights of great writers some degree of skill in relation to living—as distinguished from ‘earning a living’. If he develops sufficient sensitivity, he will learn from those who contemplate deeply, the poets, how to contemplate his own experience and that of others. He may learn to begin to grasp something of its reality, both intellectually and emotionally, and hence to savour something of its qualities. He may come to live with a higher degree of awareness, with a growing understanding of what life is, what it is to be human, what the human situation is. These are the things literature has to offer: the joy and excitement of the artist, and the wisdom of the sage. These are its treasures and its uses, and we teachers should never forget that.