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## Literature and the “Good Society”

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*“Are they not criminals, books that have wasted our time and sympathy; are they not the most insidious enemies of society, corruptors, defilers, the writers of false books, faked books, books that fill the air with decay and disease?” Virginia Woolf*

About two years ago two well-known public figures—Prince Charles of Britain and Governor Mario Cuomo of New York—both lamented the fact that values were not being taught in the schools. Prince Charles hoped that a student might “be introduced to the principles of a religious attitude to life, [and that he might perhaps] learn to equate human rights with human obligations.” Cuomo, reflecting American concern to keep religion out of public schools, hoped that somehow civic virtues could be taught—such concepts as the dignity of the person and personal obligation to fellow human beings.

Commenting on these ideas in a September 14, 1986, *Des Moines Register* column, James P. Gannon, while conceding that values may be lacking in today’s education, wrote that “there is a line somewhere between teaching religion and teaching civic virtues—it’s up to us to find it.” Gannon, I

think, is imagining a world that never was or can be, for virtues and enduring values, civic or spiritual, derive from and are sustained by religion, not by secularism. This is the heart of our dilemma in the United States today where our pluralism cannot allow any religion an inch in the curriculum of the public schools but an increasingly unchurched society is watching too many of its sons and daughters grow up either committed to dubious values or committed to nothing.

If there were a chalk line between teaching religion and teaching civic virtues, teachers of literature would trample it into the dust as a matter of course, for the literature they teach defies such a line on every page. As T. S. Eliot has pointed out in his essay “Religion and Literature,”

If we, as readers, keep our religious and moral convictions in one compartment and take our reading for entertainment, or on a higher plane, for aesthetic pleasure, I would point out that the author, whatever his conscious intentions in writing, in practice recognizes no such distinctions. The author of a work of the imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he

knows it or not; and we are affected by it, as human beings, whether we intend to be or not.

Reading affects us as entire human beings; it affects our moral and religious existence.(25)

A glaring example of Eliot's point can be seen in the novel *Demian* by Hermann Hesse where Hesse has his hero Demian state,

You are only afraid if you are not in harmony with yourself. People are afraid because they have never owned up to themselves. A whole society is composed of men afraid of the unknown within them. They all sense that the rules they live by are no longer valid, that they live according to archaic laws—neither their religion nor their morality is in any way suited to the needs of the present.(140)

Clearly literature invades religion. Hesse challenges “rules [people] live by” and judges “their religion” and “their morality” unsuitable. Instead he proposes a new “morality,” one that urges surrender to “inner voices,” whatever they may be.

Not all literature trumps on religion so bluntly, of course. Nevertheless the religious import of much literature is as real as that of the catechism. Partly for that reason, no doubt, and partly because the concerns of Prince Charles and Governor Cuomo resonate in their hearts, English teachers have lately been re-examining what literature they should teach. In a required course called “Introduction to Literature,” to what imagined worlds should a teacher “introduce” a class? And what criteria should govern the choice? After all, for good or ill, the English teacher may be the last person on this side of eternity to ask some of these students to read a novel.

Should we be at least partially governed by our vision of the good society, asking what each book teaches our students about the obligations, aims, and pleasures of human existence? Traditional reasons for teaching literature certainly reflect such a concern. Samuel Johnson said literature taught the “art of living.” Matthew Arnold in “Hebraism and Hellenism” writes that

To get rid of one's ignorance, to see things as they are and by seeing them as they are to see them in their beauty is the simple and attractive ideal which Hellenism holds out before human nature;. . . human life in the hands of Hellenism is invested with . . .

clearness and radiancy; . . . what we call sweetness and light.(134)

Hellenism may not be the precise equivalent of literature, and “sweetness and light” has been lampooned by some cynics, but elsewhere Arnold has said we read literature to “know ourselves and the world by knowing the best that has been thought and said.” Robert Maynard Hutchins added that the “aim of education is to connect man with man, to connect the present with the past, to advance the thinking of the race.” I.A. Richards described literature as a “storehouse of values.” In *Testament of Vision*, the late Henry Zylstra wrote that literature was a “criticism of life, . . . wisdom of life, given us by gifted men.”(28) Zylstra added in “Why Read Novels” that the “importance of a novelist's fiction depends in the long run upon its fidelity to the truth about life.”

Other writers reflect John Dewey's departure from the classicist's thinking. Reading *English Journal* articles of the fifties, one finds such reasons for reading literature as “to investigate personal and social problems,” to “develop a personal sense of values,”(Dora V. Smith), or “to gain insight into the lives of many people through the reading of imaginative literature, seeing their problems, their humanity, their essential likeness to ourselves”(G. Robert Carlson).

The Bronxville, New York, high school English department suggested that the student in literature would learn to “understand his complex cultural heritage and be imbued with a sense of abiding human values which he must help preserve.” Though we see the influence of John Dewey in these last few reasons, the reasons, like the classicist's, point to literature as a source of abiding values and to a similar purpose for reading it: it can teach one how to live.

Still others have valued literature because it offers vicarious experience to students. Related to this is the notion that literature helps one escape the provincialism of time and place. We might add poet Robert Frost's implied reason for reading poetry when he said poetry provides a “momentary stay against confusion.”

All of these reasons no doubt make sense when we consider certain books, but something has drastically changed in recent years. John Milton in his essay “Of Education” once wrote that the “end of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents

by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him." Similarly, many American and British writers once thought of themselves as moral leaders of their times.

But times and literature have changed. T. S. Eliot has observed that

Since Defoe, the secularization of the novel has been continuous. Nearly all contemporary novelists except Mr. James Joyce . . . have never heard the Christian faith spoken of as anything but an anachronism.(24)

Though we can think of more exceptions today, Eliot's point is still significant. Even more telling though are the comments of Brooks Atkinson, the *New York Times* drama critic who wrote in the thirties that "The function of art is NOT to promote a code of standards or to establish social ideals."

like the reader of the established great literature of all time, exposing himself to the influences of divers and contradictory personalities; he is exposing himself to a mass movement of writers who, each of them . . . are really all working in the same direction. There never was a time, I believe, when the reading public was so large, or so helplessly exposed to the influences of its own time . . . . What I do wish to affirm is that the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism; that it is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life.(28)

So do we find in these writings the "abiding values" for which we search? Do we find the "best that has been thought"? In other words, to the

**Finally, is contemporary literature a "storehouse of values"? Though some is, the storehouse contains spoiled values as well as wholesome, enduring ones. Some anthologies have more selections that insult my values than affirm them. If I teach them—and I often do—I am rarely teaching them so that students will assimilate values from this storehouse, but rather so that students will see which values water the flower of life and which wither it.**

Rather, rebels of the twenties—Mencken, Dreiser—said what they pleased, arguing that they were "answerable only to [their] muse." After Mencken called the artist a "free spirit and darling of the gods," later artists assumed they too were rebels who had to express themselves, at "whatever expense to the integrity of religion, democracy, and the public morals." These writers are now in the anthologies; the rebels of the twenties and thirties have been canonized.

Eliot wasn't thinking of the penchant of anthologists to tear out the old and put in the new, but he might have been when warning readers of contemporary literature:

The reader of contemporary literature is not,

degree that we teach contemporary secular literature today, are the traditional reasons for teaching literature still valid? Does literature enhance "civic virtue" or undermine it? Does it nurture or nullify "abiding values"?

Considering some of the reasons in reverse order, let's look at Frost's comment that a poem can be a "momentary stay against confusion." Some of his own poems provide that stay, perhaps. "Two Roads Diverged in a Yellow Wood," for example, freezes for experience and analysis this moment in time when we are faced with equally appealing alternatives and can't choose between them. But Frost's poem "Design" ends by hinting that there may be no design—no plan and no planner in control of

events. For a college freshman the poem may provoke—more confusion than it “stays,” at least if he/she takes the thought seriously.

Or recall the idea that literature frees students from “the provincialism of time and place.” If so, the less contemporary the literature, the better it should serve, but in fact, each new edition of each anthology includes more modern literature than the previous one. Especially high school literature courses, I have found, are often dominated by literature of the 20th century (under the mistaken assumption that it is more “accessible”). To free students from the provincialism of time or place, it seems to me, literature would have to be about another time or place.

But today we must also ask, from what provincialism do we aim to free the student? Obviously some provincialism initiates prejudice, but I recently read a study which concluded that students going to community colleges while living at home were more likely to retain the values and beliefs of their parents than students who left home to attend state universities.

The study concluded that therefore the trend toward community colleges was bad. No doubt students who rejected parental values were also more fully freed of whatever provincialism their parents might have been guilty. But if freeing students from provincialism also frees them from the values and beliefs of their parents, as some modern literature aims to do, then the student would be better off freed of neither. At the very least we should ask, from what, precisely, do we want the reading of literature to free students, and not blithely assume that any freeing will be for their good.

Is then “providing students a vicarious experience” still a valid function of literature? It depends on the book. I have had students who, after reading *A Farewell to Arms* by Hemingway, *Desire Under the Elms* by O’Neill, *Medea* by Euripides, told me they were ready to jump out of their dorm windows. I have had students come away from *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath enamored of suicide as a solution to their problems. Instead of learning the “art of living,” some students were infused with the lure of killing themselves.

Clearly, as vicarious experience, the literature in some semesters may benefit some, but hurt others. I have since tried to anticipate more precisely what each vicarious experience, as well as the ac-

cumulated vicarious experiences of a semester, will do for or to my students. Though I can never know how each of forty different students will be affected by a given selection, as a Christian teacher, I cannot in good conscience ignore such considerations.

How about “acquainting the students with the best that has been thought and written”? Though this still might be a legitimate goal of literature courses, in fact much literature gets into anthologies today because it represents a certain school of thought, it reflects its time, or it represents well a certain genre. But only a nihilist would classify Hemingway’s well-crafted and often-anthologized story, “A Clean, Well-lighted Place,” as “the best that has been thought.” Though the parody on the Lord’s Prayer in this story shows us clearly men without God, we must bring our own wisdom to the story, for nothing in the story qualifies as such. I doubt that this story does for the reader what Matthew Arnold claimed literature would do, namely usher in “sweetness and light.” Good form and style won’t do it. The “well-lighted place” may be an antidote to nothingness for the old man, but to Christians, it’s a sad substitute for God. True, seeing the sad plight of the nihilist may confirm a Christian in his Christian belief, but what does it do for Cuomo’s unchurched citizens? Do they, as Hemingway wants them to, see the old man who gets tipsy every night, but is nevertheless neat, as somehow noble?

Finally, is contemporary literature a “storehouse of values”? Though some is, the storehouse contains spoiled values as well as wholesome, enduring ones. Some anthologies have more selections that insult my values than affirm them. If I teach them—and I often do—I am rarely teaching them so that students will assimilate values from this storehouse, but rather so that students will see which values water the flower of life and which wither it. As my students and I approach this storehouse, we must do so with equal faith in common grace and in the power of the devil to make bad values alluring.

Christian English teachers have often alluded to this problem in recent years. Leland Ryken has said: “Whereas some Christians have always felt the need to keep literature out of the Christian sphere, today the secular world is demanding that Christianity be kept out of literature.” John J. Timmerman has written in *The Reformed Journal* that

One gets bone-tired of having to admire works whose morality is utterly shoddy, whose religious orientation is impious, and whose reading of life is radically distorted. Why should one be forced to say such corrosive journeys into the repellent are great works of art? Art seems to me to become great finally in terms of spiritual and religious perspectives.

Getting "bone-tired of having to admire works whose morality is utterly shoddy" creates a rather pathetic picture of an English teacher helplessly chained to a canon "whose reading of life is radically distorted."

Timmerman must have been aware of this, and he offered his solution in another essay, "Literature in the Calvin Classroom":

The teacher of literature cannot simplify his task by an easy retreat from its difficulties. He cannot enforce an air-tight immigration policy by means of which he allows only Christian writers into his classroom. That would make a farce of education. He cannot solve it by admitting disturbing secular writers and then confining himself to slashing them to bits. That would make a farce of the doctrine of common grace because the image of God, however tarnished, enables unbelievers to contribute both truth and beauty to the life of man. On the other hand he can certainly not adopt the impersonal, spectorial attitude of the university teacher. A classic embodies a vision of life and therefore religious perspectives. The Christian teacher will regard a religiously unexamined classic to be as dangerous as a religiously unexamined life. (*Markings*, 237)

Timmerman suggests that a "classic embodies a vision of life," but how many true classics have been written since World War II? Surely many English teachers spend much time teaching works that won't make anybody's top forty if the criterion is "the best that has been thought and written." He rightly warns that the Christian teacher cannot be content to "slash" secular writers to bits, yet Calvin Seerveld once suggested that

We must scrutinize unchristian genius to know what is going on, to see what they are mistakenly getting at in God's world. . . . The Christian must so dissect the contributions of

secular man that the basic unchristian frame of reference, from which these contributions come, loses its impact on the Christian's insight into life.

But if we spend very much of our time "dissecting the contributions of secular man"—which sounds very close to "slashing them to bits"—we English teachers become more like sergeants for search and destroy missions than tour guides to ". . . wisdom of life, given us by gifted men."

Chuck Colson has observed that "we really live in an age where new barbarian hordes are overrunning our culture." T. S. Eliot observed already a generation ago that

The greater part of our reading matter is coming to be written by people who not only have no such belief [Christianity], but are even ignorant of the fact that there are still people in the world so "backward" or so "eccentric" as to continue to believe. (29)

If Colson, Eliot, and Leland Ryken (Christianity is being kept out of literature) are right, teachers of modern literature will find increasingly more to slash and increasingly less evidence of the common grace by which we justify the tours we conduct. Perhaps much of the literature taught in today's schools does more to confuse than to help students "develop a personal sense of values."

One might draw other conclusions, but at the very least, I suggest that when we teach literature which advocates dubious values, we can best teach it in contrast to books or stories with opposing values. Such literature may not be easy to find in current anthologies, but then we must resort to paperbacks or publish another anthology.

What might such a dialectical approach to literature gain for us? It will allow students to see opposing visions of reality before one vision "sets" in their mind. Think again of the old man of Hemingway. Hemingway wants us to see some stature in this pathetic figure whose saving virtue is that he is neat and, even when slightly drunk, has a "dignity." No teacher knows precisely what a student will take home from that story. One way by which students might see the old man's plight more clearly would be to see him alongside the marvelous Casper ten Boom in *The Hiding Place*—a book from the English teacher's apocrypha. When confronted by a pastor who refuses to shelter a Jewish mother and her baby because he could "lose his life,"

Casper ten Boom takes the baby in his arms and replies, "You say we could lose our lives for this child. I would consider that the greatest honor that could come to my family." Later when the German interrogator, feeling some sympathy in spite of himself, offers to send this eighty-year-old man home if he won't cause any more trouble, ten Boom says evenly and clearly to the officer, "If I go home today, tomorrow I will open my door again to any man in need who knocks." This man inspires genuine virtue and beside him, Hemingway's hero pales. Having seen the two men side by side, the student can sense how the Christian hero and the nihilistic hero differ, while the teacher does little more than ask the right questions.

By no means do I want to suggest that English teachers become peddlers of tracts. But I am suggesting that they re-examine their choices for a semester of reading, relying less on secular critics, relying less on anthologies, relying less on what they were taught, and relying more on independent Christian judgment. I am not suggesting some books be burned, but I am suggesting that if one teaches *Demian* by Hesse, then she should teach *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles along with it. Knowles has Gene say that "wars were made . . . by something ignorant in the human heart," a contrast to the romanticism of Hesse (193). Knowles could be the corrective to Hesse's naive optimism about human nature.

Susan Van Zanten Gallagher in a recent *Reformed Journal* article rightly challenges the traditional canon by which we have selected what literature to teach. She will, she writes, henceforth choose the works that she teaches so that students may "learn about themselves" and "learn about others." I applaud her declaration of independence. However, she allows herself the whole world without hinting at the enduring values, Christian and civic, which would benefit both the student and society. Such considerations may sound too functional and pedestrian for some English teachers, but they are no more so than learning "about themselves" or "about others," and they are in line with reasons given by our best thinkers for reading literature.

Novels open windows on various Sodoms as well as Edens, and English teachers cannot blindly trust in the perseverance of either saints or of civic virtues as they assign students to peer into various artistically rendered Gomorrahs to fulfil their English

requirement. They have no guarantee that some young man assigned *The Grapes of Wrath* to sharpen his social conscience may not pick up Jim Casey's morality ("There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do").

Does that mean avoid *The Grapes of Wrath*? Not necessarily, but it should mean that the book should be balanced by another book that tells some of the truth to which Steinbeck is blind. Eliot writes,

Everyone, I believe, who is at all sensible to the seductions of poetry, can remember some moment in youth when he or she was completely carried away by the work of one poet. What happens is a kind of . . . invasion of the undeveloped personality, the empty room, by the stronger personality of the poet. The same thing may happen at a later age to persons who have not done much reading. (25)

For this reason English teachers must select any semester's reading with genuine concern for the spiritual and emotional health of the student, and not incidentally, the health of society. If the English teachers of our country would select their literature with such consideration, literature might more fully meet the aims once stated for it so proudly, statesmen might not be crying in the streets about youth without values, and newspaper editors would not be scratching in the dust for a line between religion and virtue that never was or can be.

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