

AMERICAN DEMOCRACY AND THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

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When Matthew Arnold said that Poetry was properly a criticism of life, he was merely rephrasing what had passed for a truism for centuries. He found himself, as Professor Garrod has reminded us, in the sweep of a great tradition... one to which, by temperament and by training, he willingly intrusted his own belief. In thus stating his creed, therefore, he was not conscious of making any revolutionary pronouncement. Only to modern ears does this doctrine sound strange. It clashes, for example, with such a declaration as this: "I have been in quest of a sort of absolute poetry in which the intention is not so much to arouse an emotion, or to persuade of a reality, as to employ such emotion or sense of reality (tangentially struck) with the same cool detachment with which a composer strikes notes or chords." For my own part, I do not presume to say with what Fahrenheit degree of detachment Rachmaninoff attacks the "Prelude in C. Sharp Minor" but I do venture to assert that Matthew Arnold would have found such "absolute" poetry entirely lacking in the qualities he sought and approved.

Nor would he have fared much better if he had been restricted to the regimen prescribed in such a program as this: "Perhaps the time has come for somebody to ask if there is not more poetry in things than in ideas, and more pleasure in Gautier's "Tulipe" than in Wordsworth's ecclesiastical, political, and admonitory sonnets. My father used to admire the sonnet on Westminster Bridge, and I admired it until I could no longer escape from the suspicion that it was not the beautiful image of a city overhanging a river at dawn that detained the poet but the hope that he might once more discern a soul in nature. Having, I said to myself, discerned a soul in a primrose by a river's brim, it would seem to him parsimonious to

limit the habitation of the soul to a woodland flower, and he would soon begin to seek it in bricks and mortar. But what would he do with the soul when he got it? And after reading the sonnet again and considering the general tone of it, I discovered a carefully concealed morality in it. He would Christianize the soul in nature if he got it. I said; wherefore the poem comes under the heading of proselytism in poetry."

So there we have it, expressed in modern terms: the image for its own sake; "things" rather than ideas; aesthetic pleasure as the end to be sought; morality regarded as a kind of stowaway; and.....ultimate anathema.....the attempt to convert the reader to the Christian faith.

No, Matthew Arnold would not have felt any more at home in the rarefied atmosphere of "pure" poetry than in that of "absolute" poetry. He was extremely old fashioned. His faith.....and here once again I draw on Professor Garrod's words.....his faith was strong in the power of poetry to humanize, to moralize, to mold character, to inspire noble action. Horace, in his early day, testified to his own belief in the profitable discipline of poetry when he said: "The poet fashions the child's unformed and lisping speech, and early wrests his ear from all gross discourse. Anon, with rules of life which commend themselves of their own sweetness, he moulds his heart.....He recounts to him deeds nobly done, and with great examples arrays his dawn of youth." The substance of poetry and the expression as well, that is to say, contribute to the moral and cultural upbringing of youth. And so we hear Matthew Arnold's familiar phrases once again, echoing these precepts: "a criticism of life," "the grand style." They are age-old, these ideas, familiar, traditional. They are the ideas of those who set the greatest store by the humanizing of man.

The humanizing of man, I take it, is of immediate concern in America. For though we may not be quite so presumptuous as to assert that only in a democratic society will beauty, goodness, and truth be found to flourish, yet we may conscientiously affirm our

faith in the correlation that exists between the democratic tradition and the importance of man as an individual. And our democratic state, to quote from the "Statement" formulated by the Committee of Twenty-four of the National Council of Teachers of English, "depends for its existence upon the life within it of the largest possible number of richly endowed and self-reliant individuals, sensitive to the individual lives of their fellow men and to their own personal potentialities." If, then, we find ourselves as teachers in reasonable agreement as to the fundamental purpose that should activate our teaching of literature, if (to quote again from this same "Statement") "the task of the teacher then becomes not the sterile accumulation of bibliographical and biographical facts..... but the interpretation of literary classics," then surely in these dark days, when the wine of democratic life is oozing drop by drop, the time has more than ever come for us, as formerly it did for Matthew Arnold, to interpret as best we can the values of poetry and of literature in general.

The problem we face is not merely what values we should undertake to present and emphasize, but how to make these values acceptable to our students. There's the rub. And while we seriously ponder the matter, we hear again the words of Horace which I was quoting a moment ago: "Anon," he says, "with rules of life which commend themselves of their own sweetness, he moulds his heart." "Which commend themselves of their own sweetness." Are there any such, any longer? May we count on the youths and maidens in college to respond to what is lofty and noble and of good report? Is there still something so potent in literature that is resplendent with heroism or radiant with truth revealed that even our most emancipated undergraduates must needs acknowledge its virtue and must lift their hearts to its elevating summons?

I am sure there is. All of us know full well there is. The protective coloration of indifferentism on the part of our students merely stands guard against the specious, the sentimental, the crudely hortatory. It does not bar out the real thing. As teachers

we fail, and deserve to fail, if we adopt an admonishing, didactic, punishing attitude; but if we give great literature a chance, if only we do not stand in its way, it is bound to reach its mark.

Ancient or modern, great or even near-great, it makes no difference. Let me take a modern instance. The book is "Wind, Sand and Stars," translated by Lewis Galantiere from the French of Antoine de Saint Exupery, and the passage I quote speaks for itself:

I remember, for my part, another of those hours in which a pilot finds suddenly that he has slipped beyond the confines of this world. All that night the radio messages sent from the ports in the Sahara concerning our position had been inaccurate, and my radio operator, Neri, and I had been drawn out of our course. Suddenly, seeing the gleam of water at the bottom of a crevasse of fog, I tacked sharply in the direction of the coast; but it was by then impossible for us to say how long we had been flying towards the high seas. Nor were we certain of making the coast, for our fuel was probably low. And even so, once we had reached it, we would still have to make port.....after the moon had set.

We had no means of angular orientation, were already deafened, and were bit by bit growing blind. The moon like a pallid ember began to go out in the banks of fog. Overhead the sky was filling with clouds, and we flew thenceforth between cloud and fog in a world voided of all substance and all light. The ports that signaled us had given up trying to tell us where we were. "No bearings, no bearings," was all their message, for our voice reached them from everywhere and nowhere. With sinking hearts Neri and I leaned out, he on his side and I on mine, to see if anything, anything at all, was distinguishable in this void. Already our tired eyes were seeing things.....errant signs, delusive flashes, phantoms.

And suddenly, when already we were in despair, low on the horizon a brilliant point was unveiled on our port bow. A wave of joy went through me. Neri leaned forward, and I could hear him singing. It could not but be the beacon of an airport, for after

dark the whole Sahara goes black and forms a great dead expanse. That light twinkled for a space.....and then went out! We had been steering for a star which was visible for a few minutes only, just before setting on the horizon between the layer of fog and the clouds.

Then other stars took up the game, and with a sort of dogged hope we set our course for each of them in turn. Each time that a light lingered a while, we performed the same crucial experiment. Néri would send his message to the airport at Cisneros: "Beacon in view. Put out your light and flash three times." And Cisneros would put out its beacon and flash three times while the hard light at which we gazed would not, incorruptible star, so much as wink. And despite our dwindling fuel we continued to nibble at the golden bait which each time seemed more surely the true light of a beacon, was each time a promise of a landing and of life.....and we had each time to change our star.

And with that we knew ourselves to be lost in interplanetary space among a thousand inaccessible planets, we who sought only the one veritable planet, our own, that planet on which alone we should find our familiar countryside, the houses of our friends, our treasures.

On which alone we should find.....Let me draw the picture that took shape before my eyes. It will seem to you childish; but even in the midst of danger a man retains his human concerns. I was thirsty and I was hungry. If we did find Cisneros we should re-fuel and carry on to Casablanca, and there we should come down in the cool of daybreak, free to idle the hours away. Néri and I would go into town. We would go to a little pub already open despite the early hour. Safe and sound, Néri and I would sit down at table and laugh at the night of danger as we ate our warm rolls and drank our bowls of coffee and hot milk. We would receive this matutinal gift at the hands of life. Even as an old peasant woman recognizes her God in a painted image, in a childish medal, in a

chaplet, so life would speak to us in its humblest language in order that we understand. The joy of living, I say, was summed up for me in the remembered sensation of that first burning and aromatic swallow, that mixture of milk and coffee and bread by which men hold communion with tranquil pastures, exotic plantations, and golden harvests, communion with the earth. Amidst all these stars there was but one that could make itself significant for us by composing this aromatic bowl that was its daily gift at dawn. And from that earth of men, that earth docile to the reaping of grain and the harvesting of the grape, bearing its rivers asleep in their fields, its villages clinging to their hillsides, our ship was separated by astronomical distances. All the treasures of the world were summed up in a grain of dust now blown far out of our path by the very destiny itself of dust and of the orbs of night.

And Néri still prayed to the stars.

We must all of us be aware of what a passage of prose like that, so moving in sentiment, so incandescent in expression, may well do for the students who read it. It is an allegory, if we choose so to consider it, of man's life here on earth. It is a sermon, if we please, on the text: "What a piece of work is a man." It is, in any event, a complete refutation of the philosophy that bids puny man to make a cringing peace with a world utterly regardless of his crying needs. It exalts courage, steadfastness, faith. It bids us, as we read, suffer with man in his moments of peril, and it compels us to rejoice with him in the elemental restoratives of food, drink, comradeship, devotion.

Allegory, sermon, philosophy, human brotherhood...all these elements are to be discovered in this passage of modern prose. What are we, as teachers, to make of it? Shall we lecture instructively on allegory as a form of literature? Shall we sermonize on man's plight and place in this vale of tears? Shall we moralize on abstract human virtue? Surely not. Nor shall we, if we are wise, go to the other extreme and rhapsodize about the loftiness of mood

or the glowing cadences of the style. The passage itself being so admirably free from false heroics, it would be a pity for us to besmirk it with too much palaver. No, we must do none of these things; but we may do our best, each in his own fashion, to grant such work the opportunity to present its rules of life that commend themselves of their own sweetness. Only so will they mould the student's heart.

I would not here be misunderstood. I do not at all mean that our mission is fulfilled merely by assigning a piece of literature to be read by the members of the class and then for us to remain silent. What I do mean is that we must neither "take off" on a solo flight of mystical ecstasy, beating our luminous wings in the void in vain, or content ourselves with an analysis of the technique of the passage assigned. We may well do much better than either of these things. We may communicate to our students, if we have the will to do so, something of the spirit that throbs in the lines they read, the spirit that quickeneth. This much we can do by relegating to its proper subordinate position the necessary information about form and allusion and historical background.

What values shall we undertake to emphasize in the literature we teach? My answer is essentially simple. In a society like our own, dedicated to the principle that man is free to seek the truth wherever it may lead, no restrictions should be placed in the literature we teach or the values that literature contains, save one: it must be, first of all, the precious life-blood of a master-spirit. Whatever passions have deeply stirred the human breast, whether they be liquor, love, or fights...if only they be profound enough in themselves and excellent enough in their manner of revelation...those passions are properly our province. We should not rule out those values of life to which, as a democratic people, we ourselves do not subscribe. On the contrary, we should conscientiously try to understand the urgency of those appeals to human nature, however obnoxious to our way of thinking and of feeling they may be. We

should not, because we devoutly believe in peace, place the "Iliad" on the Index. Nor should we, because of our democratic faith, exclude from our study of literature some masterpiece instinct with the spirit of feudalism.

I am the more disposed to take this ground because I am in agreement with Professor Tinker's dictum that the cause of literature is not properly propaganda. As he has said, in his words on the work of the poet Housman, we do not read a poem by that author, one that represents its central character as more than half in love with easeful death, and forthwith set a pistol to our own head. Our use of the poem is properly confined to the imagination, not to the practical problem of immediate conduct. The cause of poetry, as Professor Tinker declares, is the enrichment of the spirit by means of vicarious experience, so enabling us to understand ways of life never to be actually ours.

We should indeed be hard put to it if this were not so. If we were to act impulsively on the recommendation of Housman when he says :

And if your hand or foot offend you,
Cut it off, lad, and be whole;
But play the man, stand up and end you,
When the sickness is your soul.

If we were to do that, literally, we should find ourselves in no position, alas, to accept with equal literal-mindedness the counsel he offers in another one of his poems, in which he says :

The troubles of our proud and angry dust
Are from eternity, and shall not fail.
Bear them we can, and if we can we must.
Shoulder the sky, my lad. and drink your ale.

What is true of the divided counsel of a Housman is all the more strikingly true when we turn from the reading of life of one major poet to that of another. We cannot hope to reconcile views so fundamentally divergent as the seductive philosophy of the

"Rubaiyat", on the one hand, and on the other the bracing and tonic challenge of "Rabbi ben Ezra". Some one view of life, some reading or other of life's inexplicable mystery, is bound to strike home to us more than another. But the better to consolidate our own position, whatever that may be, we should enter as imaginatively as we can into whatever vision of truth is offered us by the great writers.

This imaginative sympathy on our part need not, however, demand of us an indiscriminate acceptance of one and all of them. Far from it. As Americans, we welcome to our shores those whose hearts burn with an eagerness for freedom like our own. As members of a democratic society, we endeavor to make our conceptions of truth and justice prevail. As individual human beings, we esteem certain values of life more highly than we do others. As teachers of youth, as human beings, as members of a democracy, as Americans, we owe it to ourselves and to those in our charge not to shirk the difficulty and the danger of appraising and evaluating the passions, the idealism, the values of the literature we study together. That, it seems to me, is our obligation as teachers: to try to understand the spirit that animates a great work of literature, the view of life it contains, the revelation it gives of man's ruling passions; and then to cultivate in ourselves and to communicate to our students the power to approve those rules of life that may, indeed, commend themselves of their own sweetness, but that will surely suffer no impairment if we add our own word of sincere approbation.

All this means a special kind of teaching. It means that we must not think of ourselves as mere purveyors of information. It means that we shall not be content to subject the precious lifeblood of a master-spirit to an analysis of its blood count. We must make ourselves responsive, rather, to whatever throb of life it contains. It may be thought presumptuous of us to take upon ourselves critical decisions of this order...so much more profound in their

implications than the appraising of "literary" values alone. But if we do not undertake the task, who will?

Great literature molds the heart of youth. It always has. It must, still. If the teachers of youth rightly acknowledge their true mission and their high privilege, they will not shrink from a sincere consideration of "values," nor will they subordinate the spirit of the literature they teach to the letter. They will devote themselves to the interpretation of great works of literary art and also to the critical appraisal of the human values therein contained. So will they do their bit, in these days when the democratic ideal is more than ever something to die for, if need be; something to live for, if only we may.