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"Language is filled with more mystery than sense, more caprice than logic, more surprise and defiance than compliance and capitulation . . . language is the most compelling manifestation we have of our humanness."

Literature in the Revitalized Curriculum

JAMES E. MILLER, JR.

THE place and role of literature in contemporary education is best understood in the context of a simplified view of the recent history of American education. By taking a sweeping and somewhat arbitrary view of the last 100 years or so, we can discern four stages in American educational history. These four stages may be loosely labelled the Authoritarian, the Progressive, the Academic, and the Humanitarian.

The first of these stages, the Authoritarian, we identify with the arid classicism and rote learning of the nineteenth century; the second, the Progressive, with John Deweyism (something different from the real Dewey), indiscriminate permissiveness, and social adjustment, all running deep into the twentieth century. In more recent times, we have been witness to a revolution in our schools which we may, for convenience, date from Russia's Sputnik launching in 1957, and which I have arbitrarily designated Academic. In this stage we have seen the introduction of the new math, the new physics, and the new English in our schools, together with emphasis on intellectual grouping or tracking to identify and challenge the intellectually gifted—all rather much under the supervision of the academic rather than the education establishment, and all somewhat a reaction to the

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academically thin curricula of the schools awash in the back eddies of extremist progressivism.

We are now, in my view, on the threshold of the fourth stage, which I call the Humanitarian. If we pause for a moment and glance backward, we note that the stages I have described are not clearly defined historical periods but merely the slow swinging of a pendulum between two poles of emphasis which may be variously described as substance and psychology, subject matter and student, or intellectuality and society. The recent emphasis on the academic disciplines was, as I have suggested, brought to a focus and accelerated by Russia's Sputnik in 1957. Even before this date, the Supreme Court (in 1954) handed down its decision on racial integration of the schools. In some ways this launching of a social revolution, though slower felt, had more profound consequences than the Sputnik launching. And as this social revolution has gained momentum in the 1960's, it has definitely affected—and will certainly affect more deeply in the future—the trend of the 1950's toward academic emphasis (or, as some would charge, academic overemphasis) in the schools.

If we talk about trends or "new developments" in English, it is important to keep this historical context in mind. And though I have introduced the metaphor of the pendulum, I do not want to suggest that the schools have been simply moving back and forth between two extremes of educational theory. On the contrary, I think that there has been change and advance in educational theory, that the Academic stage of the 1950's is fundamentally different from the Authoritarian stage of the earlier time, and the new stage we confront now—the Humanitarian—is and will continue to be radically different from the Progressive stage before it. Perhaps it would be best to substitute the metaphor of the spiral in place of the pendulum, to suggest that successive stages veer away and return—but the return is never back but forward.

To talk about literature in the contemporary curriculum is to talk about a subject and a program both of which are in a state of flux. As I have indicated, there are at this moment revolutions and counterrevolutions in progress in the curricula and there are basic reconsiderations under way of the nature of language and literature and the ways they relate to learning. Before

turning specifically to the new look of literature in the curriculum, I need to describe briefly a new way of looking at language and literature.

A New Way of Looking

The old way of looking at language was to consider it as a logical system originated and elaborated primarily by man's rational faculty and learned by him basically for the purpose of communicating thought. It followed from this conception that literature was fundamentally embellishment and decoration, a nice refinement of the use of language, but not central to the pragmatic purpose of communication of thought. Many consequences have flowed from this bundle of misconceptions of language and literature, but I shall now only point an accusing finger at such English courses in the curriculum as Business Letter Writing or Grammar for Composition, "practical" courses frequently preferred over the "impractical" literature courses. We have known for a long time that such courses as these never achieved their aims, but we have been a long time finding out why. The reasons lie deep in the heart of our misconceptions.

How may we free ourselves from the constricting terms of such a narrow view of language? The way to such freedom is not long and not hard. If we would simply look honestly at our own experience with language, how we learned (and still learn) it and how we use it—how we are involved with it or entangled in it—we would discover quickly that language is filled with more mystery than sense, more caprice than logic, more surprise and defiance than compliance and capitulation. Language is not something we take or leave, learn or not learn; it is as inescapable and engulfing as the air which surrounds us, and like the air it is the substance by which we live our lives, by which we create and understand our nature and world. It is as vital to our nonphysical being as blood is to our body. In short, language is the most compelling manifestation we have of our humanness.

Another way to liberate ourselves from the utilitarian, reductive view of language is to listen to philosopher-scholars who have devoted their lives to speculative study and investigation of lan-

guage. Take, for example, the great linguist and philologist Otto Jespersen, in *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin:*

> The genesis of language is not to be sought in the prosaic, but in the poetic side of life; the source of speech is not gloomy seriousness, but merry play and youthful hilarity.[1]

Or note Edward Sapir's observation in *Language:*

> The autistic speech of children seems to show that the purely communicative aspect of language has been exaggerated. It is best to admit that language is primarily a vocal actualization of the tendency to see realities symbolically. . . .[2]

Or consider the philosopher Ernst Cassirer's statement from *Language and Myth:*

> It is language . . . that really reveals to man that world which is closer to him than any world of natural objects and touches his weal and woe more directly than physical nature. For it is language that makes his existence in a *community* possible; and only in society, in relation to a 'Thee,' can his subjectivity assert itself as a 'Me.'[3]

Or, finally, observe Susanne K. Langer's comments from *Philosophy in a New Key:*

> The fact is that our primary world of reality *is* a verbal one. Without words our imagination cannot retain distinct objects and their relations, but out of sight is out of mind. . . . The transformation of experience into concepts, not the elaboration of signals and symptoms, is the motive of language. Speech is through and through symbolic; and only sometimes significative. Any attempt to trace it back entirely to the need of communication, neglecting the formulative, abstractive experience at the root of it, must land us in the sort of enigma that the problem of linguistic origins has long presented. . . . One might say that, if ritual is the cradle of language, metaphor is the law of its life.[4]

Imagination Central

If we accept this new (but really very ancient) view of language, certain consequences for education are immediately evi-

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[1] Otto Jespersen. *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin.* New York: Macmillan Co., 1949; also New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1964 (paperback).

[2] Edward Sapir. *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1921.

[3] Ernst Cassirer. *Language and Myth.* New York: Dover Publications, 1946.

[4] Susanne K. Langer. *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957.

dent. This view places language at the center of human existence and experience, and it places the imaginative (creative or symbolizing) rather than the logical (signifying or communicating) faculty at the center of linguistic life and growth. It follows from this concept that language should be at the center of any defensible curriculum, and that imaginative verbal experience (especially literature) should be at the heart of the language sequence. Reduced to its barest terms, the English curriculum from beginning to end should have as its primary aim the education, development, and fullest possible extension of the linguistic imagination. The construction of the curriculum should emphasize the primacy of creativity and imagination in learning to live as a full participant in the vital world of language.

If there is a "new English," it is English that has placed literature, defined in the broadest terms, at the center of the curriculum, and that has taken the development of the imagination, conceived in the most liberating sense, as its ultimate aim. In a skeptical world of logical positivists, the very existence of a faculty labelled Imagination may be called into doubt. But we must insist on its existence because we know that we cannot live lives as human beings without it. Like the dream or the unconscious or even mind itself, we know the imagination exists because we have experienced it within us and have witnessed it in others. That is sufficient proof for all but the most material-minded and unimaginative. Most thoughtful people and many speculative writers have paid tribute, at one time or another, to the imagination as vital to human life. Wallace Stevens, in *The Necessary Angel,* has put the matter this way: [Imagination is] "an aspect of the conflict between man and organized society. It is part of our security. It enables us to live our own lives. We have it because we do not have enough without it . . . the imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos."

In this new conception of English, focusing on the faculty of the Imagination, there is a new realization that imaginative growth involves both receptivity and creativity, both witnessing and making, both intake and output. In short, there is realization that the creative impulse is an inherent part of the imagination, and that deep engagement with literature will naturally

involve the creative act. Every English teacher has long known that the world is full of secret poets. It is the shame of our profession that we have not before now nourished rather than suppressed this natural—and, indeed, even *vital*—impulse to imaginative creation. Every English course should be a course in the imagination in its dual capacity as receptacle and creator. Put another way, every English course should become a course in imaginative reading and creative composition.

Literature's Moral Dimension

Before turning to some practical aspects of English in the contemporary curriculum, we should for a moment contemplate the complexity of the job of educating the imagination of our students. The imagination is no narrow faculty, but filters through and colors every part, every corner of our lives. Let us take, for example, the matter of morality, or character, or ethical values. In order to provide dramatic contrast between the old and the new, consider the following quotation from a 1917 volume called *The Teaching of English in the Secondary School,* by Charles Swain Thomas: "The literary selection [to be taught] must breathe the right ethical and social message. . . . Our most important task in teaching is the building of character, and our most effective agency is the literary selection."[5] Noble as these sentiments ring, we as English teachers must forego them—first, because they represent a superficial view of literature as containing "message"; second, because they are presumptuous in assuming that English teachers know what ethical and social messages are "right" not only for themselves but for everybody; and, third, because English teachers are (or should be) committed to the higher aim of educating the imagination.

Now, in the "new English" the teacher will need to come to terms with something we may call the "moral imagination." Although it is reductive to conceive literature as sending ethical messages to readers, it is blindness not to see that there is a moral dimension (among many other dimensions) in literature. This dimension is more frequently implicit than explicit, more often pervasive than concentrated in single lines or sentences. However we may conceive of this dimension—whether as a system

[5] Charles Swain Thomas. *The Teaching of English in the Secondary School.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1917.

of values, a vision of the nature of things, a truth—we must somehow come to terms with it in the classroom. How we might come to terms with it honestly and with any measure of success requires careful consideration, along the following lines.

There are two ways to achieve a major failure: first, to treat the moral dimension as though it were the sole end of literature, to extract it, to encapsulate it, to divorce it from its material or dramatic embodiment and offer it to students as abstract truth; or, second, to avoid the difficulties and dangers of discussing the moral dimension by ignoring it and concentrating on formal, aesthetic, structural, or other elements. Both of these methods are reductive and lead to apathy and imaginative sterility in the English classroom. Nor can the teacher avoid these failures by selecting solely works of literature to teach that do not disturb, that are not "subversive" or upsetting—works that appear, in short, to be ethically or morally neutral (or neutered).

The curriculum should be open to books of a great variety of values and visions, including those that rub against the grain of society, that counter prevailing values as they are either preached or practiced. As the teacher is concerned with developing and expanding the student's total imaginative capacity, so he must be concerned with all aspects of the imagination, including the moral imagination. He should not become didactic and attempt to inculcate beliefs; rather he should question, discuss, and explore with his students. Such exploration will lead more frequently to complexity than to simplicity, to ambiguity than to precision, to paradox than to resolution. Literature so explored should open to the student a variety of possibilities of values and visions, confront him—like life itself—with a multiplicity of ethical systems or moral perspectives. This expansion and deepening of the student's moral awareness constitutes the education of his moral imagination.

It is perhaps useful to emphasize that the moral imagination is but one facet of the total imagination, which in some sense involves the whole person, the total personality. Other facets of the imagination will demand other strategies, other emphases, other approaches by the teacher. Although the concept of the education of the imagination as the aim of literary study is meant to be liberating for both student and teacher—liberating from narrowing notions of technical literary knowledge—it is

in no sense meant to suggest that there will be fewer demands on the teacher's ingenuity. On the contrary, the teacher will confront greater and more intricate challenges than ever.

With these basic principles of a new approach to literature before us, let us turn to a few more specific questions about literature in the English curriculum.

Methods in the Classroom

The terms most useful in describing the contemporary literature teacher in the classroom are *informality, flexibility, improvisation.* There is general recognition that a student's real or lasting education in language and literature goes on outside rather than inside the classroom; that is, the shaping linguistic and literary experiences are those provided by the general culture—at home, by trusted or admired companions, by the generally uncontrollable encounters in a sometimes rich, sometimes brutishly deprived life. It is in recognition of this overriding fact that today's alert English classroom is more likely to look like a classroom moving beyond (but not out of) the Academic phase and into the Humanitarian (but not sentimental) phase of recent American educational history, as outlined in an oversimplified way at the beginning of this essay.

The modern literature teacher will concentrate on two major goals that will be approached so obliquely as perhaps to appear hidden. He will try to meet each student wherever he is, to honestly engage his understanding, his interest, his imagination, his emotional energies. This may mean that we will have to connect with or build on some unapproved or even disapproved storyteller secretly indulged and admired. And after he has reached the student, the modern teacher will try every means at his disposal to provide the experience that will grow into the lasting commitment—whether with *Huckleberry Finn, Sons and Lovers, Catcher in the Rye,* or *Catch-22;* whether with Edgar Allan Poe or A. Conan Doyle, Ernest Hemingway, Flannery O'Connor, or James Baldwin. No genuine literary education was ever the sole or even the major work of the schools; it has always been primarily the work of the individual fired with curiosity, drawn to the world of books by a great or even terrible hunger.

In the Academic phase of our educational revolution, much emphasis was placed on saving our intellectual resources by

bringing together the brightest students into a single class and providing them with the most challenging and advanced academic program. In the current Humanitarian phase, there has come a recognition that such isolation and such accelerated programs can be damaging—damaging psychically in artificially separating students into status groups, depriving them of the stimulus of a wide range of associations; and damaging in encouraging phoney or sterile literary experiences in which complex books are intellectually analyzed but never emotionally felt or experienced. The modern literature teacher will welcome to his class students of a wide range of abilities, and he will encourage common experiences in language and literature—experiences to which all can contribute from their varied lives and from which all can benefit by a widening of linguistic and imaginative awareness. The teacher will see not one track but thirty individual tracks before him, all of them capable of sharing and contributing something to classroom experiences in the imagination, and each one following his own bent, interest, or enthusiasm outside the class.

Vitality an Imperative

In the modern literature classroom, three elements will be stressed more and more: vitality, drama, and creativity. It is imperative that the literature offered to students connect somehow, in meaningful and vital ways, with their lives. In some classes, this may mean throwing out *Julius Caesar* and *Silas Marner* and introducing in their place James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* or Edward Albee's *American Dream.* It will mean bringing the literature to life by involving the students emotionally as well as intellectually —that is, dramatically—in it.

A dramatic teacher, engaging his students immediately in the dramatic spectacle of literature, including direct participation in the living drama of it, will find his students involved in spite of themselves. And as their appetites for the imaginative life of literature mount, the creative teacher will encourage the production and sharing of the student's own works—poems, stories, or plays. Stultifying criteria of correctness or form or convention will be banned from the classroom; students will be emboldened to follow the lead of their liberated imaginations, to write hon-

estly out of the depths of inner experience and out of the perplexities of outer entanglements. By moving easily and naturally between their own lively imaginative productions and the literary experiences of classroom, library, and paperback bookstore, students should reduce that formidable distance between their everyday lives and the printed page, rendering the literary encounter as natural and necessary as other staples of life such as food and drink. In such a free and fluid environment, the imagination of each student will ideally develop to its full potential.

Close Reading and Critical Analysis

Connecting with, involving, awakening, and inspiring the student—these are the beginnings. But there are distances to go and the student must be transported as far as his abilities allow. Whereas the reading of a poem or story without emotional involvement is no experience at all, in any genuine sense, still the experience cannot honestly remain *only* a matter of the emotions. If the student is to carry out of the classroom into his other life a developing imagination that will lead to a continuation of vital literary encounter, his critical and analytical faculties must be developed through meaningful experience.

There is an intellectual as well as affective content to the literary experience, and to deny the one is as harmful as to deny the other. While an overemphasis of the intellectual response results in a tendency to glibness, abstraction, and sterility, an overemphasis of the emotional response may result in superficiality, muddlement, and gush. As in so many areas of life, a sensible balance needs to be struck. At this point we should remind ourselves that the Academic phase of the contemporary educational revolution significantly endures. Once our students are literarily "hooked," once they are imaginatively committed, it is our responsibility to lead or lure them to ever-deeper understanding of literature of ever-greater complexity and variety.

At some point, then, in the upper level of the literature curriculum, experiences in the close, detailed, line-by-line reading of texts, whether of a Sir Francis Bacon essay or a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem, are likely to appear. And this kind of experience will tend to merge with later experiences in the analysis and criticism of a variety of kinds of literary texts. In these more deliberately intellectualized approaches, the teacher must pro-

ceed delicately and with caution in order not to inhibit the uninvolved student and to avoid eliciting phoney responses and glib explanations. As in all teaching, the best methods are the inductive, and the student is most likely to be moved by a poem or story that he has discovered on his own, perhaps for an exercise in critical analysis.

When the student leaves school, it is hoped that he has developed a lifetime habit of reading books. But it is hoped further that he has developed the habit of reading with understanding books of real merit. For selection of books to read he needs a critical sense, an ability to see through the dustjacket blurb or the puff-review to the honest value of a book.

In developing a critical awareness in his students, today's literature teacher may turn his class into a lively session of critical controversy, arousing interest as well as passion in questions of value and how they might best be approached. As interest and curiosity grow, the teacher might introduce some of the more famous or notorious professional critical controversies over value or meaning—for example, the dispute over John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn"; or he might encourage individual students to investigate the various critical treatments of a work in which the student finds an attractive but puzzling enigma. Teacher and students will discover in these joint explorations that there is, of course, genuine critical disagreement. But they will also discover that what frequently looks like disagreement in criticism is really a difference of approach, the several approaches not in conflict but actually complementing one another. In developing a critical sense, the student will come to know that there are many ways of seeing, many ways of entering, and many ways of understanding any piece of literature.

Organizing Sequences

English teachers are in some degree the custodians of our cultural heritage, and in this role they are constantly in search of the key that will unlock the door for their students. Although it may be necessary in the beginning to select a contemporary book of minor merit in order to reach a student, ultimately the teacher will want to move the student, or provide opportunity for the student to move himself, into the great works of the literary tradition. It is vital that the teacher be aware of the rich-

ness and abundance of that tradition in order to select from its infinite variety the works that will lure students in. Any view that reduces the tradition to *Silas Marner* and *Julius Caesar* is niggardly and unworthy of the profession. Too often the literary tradition is presented in our classrooms in such a way as to alienate the students permanently from it.

The literary tradition must be presented as a living and vital thing, not there to be swallowed whole, but at hand to answer the wide range of interests or fill the astonishingly various needs of readers of all ages and kinds. When this tradition becomes embalmed in an unwieldy, blockbuster textbook (it may be titled *American Literature from Jonathan Edwards to Edward Albee,* or *English Literature from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf*), it is most likely to remain dead in the classroom and unread outside it. This is not to say that vital and exciting units of study cannot be constructed with a historical-geographical emphasis, but such units are more likely to emerge from and connect with teacher-student interests if they are free of the rigidity imposed by a curriculum-dictating anthology.

Today's advanced English class is likely to be cut loose from the single omnibus text, and will move from a unit on tragedy to a unit on "man's aspirations and dilemmas," to a unit on lyric poetry, to a unit on composition, to a unit on the novel, and so on through the year. And the literature will be American, English, and (in translation) Continental European, Asian, African, and South American. Emphasis will be removed from coverage—galloping through 40 authors in 15 weeks—and placed on understanding and responding in depth, and on the arousing of curiosity and interest that will lead each student to deeper and wider explorations. The teacher will be constantly experimenting, trying new works, discarding those that refuse to come to life, retaining the new or old that really connect with students. In short, the curriculum will be in constant flux and change, but revitalized throughout with the rich heritage of English, American, and world literature.

If we glance once again at the historical survey of education with which I began, we may see the weaknesses of each period. In the Authoritarian stage, we were trying to preserve an elitist culture for an elitist group. In the Progressive stage, emphasis shifted to democracy—but unfortunately also to mediocrity. In

the Academic stage, we have reintroduced the idea of an elite—an intellectual elite—but have, perhaps, lost ground socially. In the current Humanitarian stage, the challenge will be to preserve our schools as microcosms of genuine democracy, but at the same time to educate for excellence. The problem of balancing equality and individuality is an old, old one in America. Whitman summed it up thus:

> One's-self I sing, a simple separate person,
> Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

Perhaps the most important aspect of literature teaching today is the teacher's new view of the significance to the individual of language and imagination. It is through the linguistic imagination that the human being creates, orders, or comes to terms with his world, both inner and outer. In a fundamental sense, an individual's identity is achieved through the linguistic imagination. His all-important relations with other individuals are shaped by his linguistic imagination, and his role in the world is to a large extent created and determined by his linguistic imagination. Language shapes or symbolizes experience; imagination shapes or extends language; and literature shapes or liberates the imagination. Language, imagination, and literature are inseparably intertwined and are central to the human being and the educational process, from the earliest stages to the last. It is this enlarged view of the crucial significance of his subject that identifies the new or contemporary English teacher. And he will not be completely unfettered in his vital tasks until the public generally gives up its narrow notions that an English teacher is a policeman of propriety and correctness in language and accepts the view that an English teacher, in dealing with language and literature, is dealing with the precious stuff of life itself.

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