

The Place of Literature in General Education

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General education, by definition, asserts, among other things, that it is the unifying element of a culture and rests on the principle that deviation in thought or in act must be based on understanding of the purposes, values, and standards of society. It is then obvious that the humanities has a great deal to do with these aims of general education. The chief objective of a variety of courses in the humanities is said to be the development of an intellectual appreciation of the products of man's creative capacities as expressed in language, philosophy, and art.

Then it may be well assumed that literature, which is expressed in language, being the medium of literature as marble or bronze or clay are the materials of sculpture, finds its place first in the humanities, and the humanities in turn finds its place in a larger framework of general education.

Before we go any further, we have to take "the humanities" as such into consideration. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Ralph Barton Perry defines the humanities as follows:

The humanities is to embrace whatever influences conduce to freedom. ... The term "influence" implies that freedom ... is no inborn natural or metaphysical trait, but a possibility of human development which may or may not be realized through

growth and interaction with the environment. The degree of its realization ... lies within the range of those agencies by which men make men, or by which men make themselves, what they are. ... By freedom I mean enlightened choice. I mean the action in which habit, reflex or suggestion are superseded by an individual's fundamental judgments of good and evil; the action whose premises are explicit; the action which proceeds from personal reflection and integration. Perry (1938, p. 4)

If such is the humanities, all courses we can think of are capable of being so presented and so studied to promote freedom, which forms an essential part of the humanities. But there are some courses which can be more easily humanized or less easily dehumanized than others. We know that literature possesses an uncommonly strong humanities, though studies accessory to literature, such as phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax (which have established themselves as an independent discipline - linguistics) can be more easily dehumanized, probably, than the social sciences. Those dehumanized studies contain many elements which have to do with the natural sciences rather than the humanities. And the natural sciences, by definition, are dehumanized enough to become one separate division of the liberal arts. Here it is to be noted that the humanists are of the opinion that there is no unbridgeable gap between the humanities, the social, and the natural sciences. Indeed, the great humanists of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance would have been puzzled greatly by our modern partition of the liberal arts into these three divisions. But such a separation does exist at the present time.

Then, what is literature? This is a difficult question to answer. One of the less dehumanized linguists, Edward Sapir says:

Languages are more to us than systems of thought- transference. They are invisible garments that drape themselves about our spirit and give a predetermined form to all its symbolic expression. When the expression is of unusual significance, we call it literature. Sapir (1921, p. 221)

To these sentences he adds the other significant and disarming remarks:

I can hardly stop to define just what kind of expression is "significant" enough to be called art or literature. Besides, I do not exactly know. Sapir (1921, p. 221)

His positive statements of faith and of ignorance can be of help as we estimate the value of what has been written regarding the needs and purposes of literature. At the same time they clearly reveal the elusiveness of what is called literature.

David H. Stevens (1953, p. 173) defines literature as the culmination of human culture, based upon firm grounding in language, history, and philosophy. Therefore, literature is at the heart of liberal and humanistic studies. He goes on to say to the effect that literature on the one hand draws in the essential words and symbols, ideas, beliefs, and ideals for its own existence; and on the other, it sends its transmutations of human experience to workers in all the other mediums of cultural expression. Therefore it can be said that literature stands at the crossroads of civilization.

Stevens's definition of literature seems most desirable for our purpose, since it is well in conformity to the idea that general education is "the unify-

ing elements of a culture.”

How can we deal with literature which is the “final flowers of human culture” (Stevens, 1953, p. 173)? Traditionally there are at least four different approaches to the study of literature: (1) a historical approach, (2) a philosophical approach, (3) an artistic approach, and (4) a sociological approach.

(1). There is a very close connection between history and literature. If history is mainly a record of what man has accomplished or failed to accomplish, in literature we find a picture of what he dreamed of accomplishing, of his hopes, of his delusions, of his changing ideals. In literary works we can see how ideas originate, grow slowly and quite often irregularly, disappear or are ignored for a number of generations until they reappear, obtain a general audience and modify society. We can cite many examples even in the English literature alone. All this reminds us that man is not simply the product of his milieu and external circumstances, important as these elements may be in shaping human personalities and destinies. And we should think of the fact, as Allan Bloom (1987, p. 380) says, that “Human nature, it seems, remains the same in our very altered circumstances because we still face the same problems, if in different guises, and have the distinctively human need to solve them, even though our awareness and forces have become enfeebled.”

(2). No less important is the connection between literature and philosophy. It may be noted that the term “philosophy,” broadly conceived, includes religion as well. Indeed, literary works in some sense stand for something more than themselves.

(3). In literature we can observe our own emotional, imaginative, and creative life and power. Potentially, we are all capable of experiencing an enormous variety of emotions and aesthetic satisfactions. But the chances

are that this hidden treasure will remain undeveloped, unless some means be found for us to find it. Literature can furnish us with this important means. In short, literature increases our capacity for suffering as well as our capacity for enjoyment. Our inner life will be more abundant, more colorful, if we can perceive in literary creations a series of passions and feelings inarticulate in the average human being.

(4). Literature has never been and can never be an exact representation of society. As a social document it has obvious limitation. For lack of more precise information we have to resort to literary texts in order to reconstruct the life of people long disappeared. Thus, literature is necessarily an interpretation; but it penetrates further and deeper than any sociological investigation. It reveals not what people are doing, but their ways of thinking and feeling, their dreams, their moods, and their aspirations. It serves to remind the public that in the most scrupulous inquiries there is always an element which cannot be reduced into statistics and yet which has to be taken into consideration.

Today, the purpose of the study of English literature for example is something like this: Through the study of literature of England and America one may expect to enlarge and to discipline both the imagination and the emotions, to increase the understanding of human problems and character, and to gain aesthetic satisfaction through a participation in the ordered experience which the literary artist presents.

And the representative courses designed supposedly to meet this purpose can be:

Introduction to Literature: Short Stories and Poetry.

A study of modern short stories and of various types of poetry - narrative, lyric, and dramatic.

Introduction to Literature: Drama and Novel.

A study of representative dramas, including several plays of Shakespeare, and of representative English and American novels.

Shakespeare's Principal Plays. A study of ten plays designed to increase the student's critical appreciation and his understanding of the development of Shakespeare's art and thought.

Readings in English Masterpieces.

A study of from four to six major works representing different types and periods of English and American literature.

American Literature.

A study of the works of four or five major American writers such as Poe, Hawthorne, Emerson, Whitman, Mark Twain, and Hemingway.

But the all-important question is whether or not it is possible to satisfy the purpose of the study of literature by taking these courses separately in terms of history, philosophy, arts, and sociology, as we have outlined above. Unless all these approaches of literary study are harmoniously integrated, literary study makes little contribution to the humanities and ultimately to general education.

It is only by learning literature to the full that the student is able to find himself and learn how others think, feel, and believe. It is the duty and purpose of the instructor to reveal such meanings. (It is true that the qualifications of the instructor of general education are not confined to the teach-

ing of literature, but considering the diversity, complexity, and elusiveness of literature, its instructor must be qualified accordingly.) The instructor is of course expected to know intimately the physical and abstract environments surrounding the body and mind of each author, and then to interpret what he understands to men and women of his own times. If he becomes, by intense study, so much a part of the past that he is removed emotionally and intellectually from life about him, he becomes an antiquarian, in the extreme derogatory sense, and is not at all qualified to teach literature. His return to effective usefulness will be when historical, philosophical, artistic, and sociological perspectives bring him back to discover himself and those about him. Then he will be prepared to guide his students into the wealth of human imagination and emotions and those stated in the objectives of literary studies above.

I agree with Stevens when he says:

Whatever the language and period of time in which a literary work took its form, three circumstances were present - a matured form of language, a body of meanings that could be appreciatively heard or read in that language with some beauty of effect, and a person capable of giving life to words and ideas by the transforming power of personality working through a familiar art medium. Stevens (1953, p. 167)

By agreeing to this statement, we have less difficulty in choosing literary works not only for the courses in literature as such, but also for the teaching materials for language education. Who avoids learning and teaching "a matured form of language"? As Bloom (1987, p. 61) reminds us that "The refinement of the mind's eye that permits it to see the delicate distinctions

among men, among their deeds and their motives, and constitutes real taste, is impossible without the assistance of literature in the grand style.”

Whether or not literature can be taught in accordance with the purpose and ideas of the humanities depends solely upon the instructor who is supposed to teach it. And it is only when the instructor of literature is successful in his task and his students cooperate with him that literature can find its proper and comfortable place in general education and in language education.

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