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LITERATURE AS AN INTERPRETATION OF LIFE¹

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In the beginning I wish to state three propositions which my observation and investigation lead me to believe are true. You will apply to these propositions the results of your observation and experience and check my conclusions with your own. For these propositions are not, at present, capable of exact proof. They are, like most present-day literary and educational problems that are worth while, based upon conditions not yet fully realized. Difference of opinion there must be till certain basal facts are proved or disproved by consensus of opinion.

These three propositions have to do with what, to me, appear to be the three great modern intellectual changes, as these changes effect literature and the teaching of literature. They are:

1. That there is a new theory of what constitutes the method and purpose of education, and this new theory, rapidly being accepted by the masses of the people, is making valueless much of our educational method and practice.
2. That there is a new attitude toward literature on the part of the reading public that renders inefficient many of our critical standards and methods of teaching.
3. That the changes just stated, if true, make necessary a radical change in the method and purpose of teaching literature in all schools from the grades to the university.

The new theory of education, already taking form in the statutory enactments of several states, and revealed in the changing curricula of many schools, colleges, and universities, holds up both a new means and a new end for the educational process. Briefly stated the old theory was that education was the acquiring of mental discipline. It was held that a student took courses in

¹ A paper read before the College Section of the National Council of Teachers of English, at Chicago, November 27, 1914.

college, not because they gave him any direct hold upon the life he was to live, but because they gave him that complete mental development which fitted him to attack any problem of life. The student was told that classic languages, mathematics, a required curriculum, were the means to the end of that acquired mental strength and complete development which was education. Many, especially of the older educators, still hold this view. It may be the correct view. With right and wrong we have, here, nothing to do since we are tracing only the movement, not attempting to decide upon its pedagogical correctness.

The new theory of education holds that the end of education is to acquire familiarity with actual life and with the problems of a special vocation. The mental discipline theory is brushed away. It is boldly declared that a young man will not become a journalist by studying Greek, but rather by studying journalism. He will not learn to write advertising by studying the decadent drama. Education is to prepare the masses of the people for the actual conflicts of life and to make them familiar with our present-day problems.

This theory already has an enormous following, both here and abroad. Professor Kuno Francke, in his *German Ideals of Today*, published some seven years ago, says:

The increased struggle of life, the quicker pulsation of blood, the greater tension of will and intellect, all of which are characteristic features of modern society, are bringing about in Germany as much as anywhere else today a new type of man and of woman. We do not care—this is the instinctive feeling among the younger generation of parents—we do not care to have the life knocked out of our children with the old learning. . . . To demand of all of us a thorough knowledge of Greek and Latin grammar, of Greek and Roman history, to confine the best part of schooling to studies of direct import only to the philologist or the historian—this is intellectual tyranny.¹

And he sums up the whole situation in Germany by declaring:

The true and essential demand of a liberal education is that we should be made intellectually at home in our own country and people . . . and only after these requirements have been met the study of the older world should come in as an element in the education of the average man.²

The whole point of Professor Francke's study of conditions in modern Germany is that their ideals of education have changed

¹ P. 25.

² P. 27.

and that education now means fitting for life direct, laying emphasis upon our present problem of living rather than upon the older ideal of culture. Here in America secondary education has taken up this theory and pushed it rapidly to the front. The "Gary Idea" that has attracted such extraordinary notice in the last three years, and has led to the making of its originator, Professor Wirt, the highest-salaried secondary-school official, possibly, in the world, is a case in point. According to A. J. Nock, who writes of the Gary schools in the *American Magazine* for April, 1914:

A boy can become a carpenter or plumber at Gary, a bridge engineer or draftsman, he can learn to paint and plaster and forge and saw and anything else he likes. But all the time he is in the Gary schools he will be subjected to the most ingenious and insidious temptations to become a cultured plumber, a plumber with an appreciation for the moral and cultural values of life.

There is the same point again. This life and its needs first, and the other things, not as a matter of compulsion, but as a matter of "insidious temptation." In the last book by Walter Lipman, whom many critics hail as the most clear-sighted of students of modern society, we find the above point stated again. In *Drift and Mastery* Lipman says:

It is no accident that the universities have begun to create graduate schools of business administration. For it is no longer possible to deal with the present scale of industry if your only equipment is what men call "experience," that is, a haphazard absorption of knowledge through the pores. . . . Business requires a greater preparation than a man can get by being a bright, observant, studious ambitious office boy, who saves his money and is good to his mother.¹

Here is, by implication, the same theory of education. The schools, lower and higher, must take upon themselves the task of fitting men for efficient entry into business. And it is implied again that the old education of culture and discipline has not and cannot fit men for this special work.

Recall side by side with this fact that President Lowell of Harvard has joined President Butler of Columbia in stating that it is his belief that the college course must be shortened to two years, and you will see that the pressure of the public demand for a short and practical education is already being felt even by the greatest of our institutions of higher learning.

¹ P. 46.

This new attitude toward education has gone side by side with a new attitude toward English and English literature. The teachers of English composition have felt the pressure, and now there are few colleges that do not offer courses in public speaking, debate, journalism, business writing, advertising writing, while in the near present hover courses in secretarial work and other more specialized forms of writing and speaking. The high schools and even the grades find English composition a difficult task unless it is cast in the modern form of oral exercises, debate, interschool contests in oratory, etc. Everywhere the teachers of English composition have realized the call of the time and have responded to it.

On the other hand, I feel that teachers of English literature, and of all literature, for that matter, are often not awake to the changing conditions. In spite of the fact that the appeal of literature is broader than the appeal of almost any other subject in the modern curriculum, we have continued to teach it as if its appeal were aesthetic only. In spite of the fact that literature has more relation to life than any other subject and is capable of being approached from more points of view, we have laid all our emphasis upon the one relation and the one view, viz., that literature is an art and that its only appeal is aesthetic.

Granting that the aesthetic appeal is the greatest of all the appeals made by literature, there nevertheless remains the fact that the world today is laying the emphasis upon other values and points of view. The reader of present-day periodicals is driven to the conclusion that there is already a well-organized opposition to what is often called the professional attitude toward literature of our teachers and critics. Writers in the periodicals are insisting constantly that the criticism of the professional critic is of no value to the general reader. The fact that students in our colleges, especially young men, interested in sociology, economics, agriculture, engineering, construction, and business are taking less and less of literature is again a reflection upon the work of the professional critic as teacher. I talked recently with a group of students in engineering from one of our greatest technical colleges. These men were taking journalism and language in addition to their technical work, but no literature. Finally one of them said

scornfully: "We are here for work. We have no time for that woman's club stuff." The rest nodded their heads in affirmation.

In the October 31 number of the *Saturday Evening Post* was a typical piece of criticism written by the editor. He says: "What is a great picture or a great book good for? If it is not to liberate and exalt the human mind, giving it greater knowledge and command of human life, then it is only a sort of sublimated pudding, to be eaten with delicate relish by the privileged few."

There is much that is similar in the thought of the technical students and the editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Evidently both were thinking of that stress that is laid upon the technique of structure and form, the so-called elements of beauty, without the mastery of which it is often said it is impossible to appreciate art. The student believed that only women had time or temperament for that, and the editor called it "sublimated pudding" only for the few.

What, then, does the world see in art, in literary art, if you will? The editor of the *Saturday Evening Post* has stated it clearly: "that which gives knowledge and command of human life." Gathered from many sources these seem to me to be the elements of the new criticism, reflecting the newer attitude.

1. That is the greatest literature which makes the greatest appeal, for good, in the time in which it is read.

2. Universality, longevity, and technical excellence are not necessary to great literature.

3. No critical formulae have been devised that can be applied accurately to the literary output of distinct periods.

4. There is an increasing tendency to look upon literature as an interpretation of life, or the statement or solution of a problem of life, thus attacking the theory that art should not be consciously didactic.

The modern world desires to know, not how a thing was made, but what it means. To declare that a piece of literature is beautiful that carries no thought is to state what, to the modern intelligence, appears a paradox. That is the best art which yields its contained thought with the least possible effort on the part of the reader. It is manifestly ridiculous to call attention to that which

was not intended to be noticed. The simplicity of Thackeray and the ornateness of Ruskin and the crudeness of Scott are all equally bad when they are held up by criticism as things worthy of notice. The modern world that reads its magazine and gets its pleasure, its knowledge, and its inspiration therefrom has little patience with the statement that its taste must be cultivated. It is likely to insist that cultivated taste is perverted taste. It looks upon that man as something of an anachronism who in the day of wireless telegraphy, rapid transit, high explosives, and nervous tension declares himself as in love with a literary form that was made to appeal to the lazy, leisure-loving, aristocratic Greek. This modern man simply says, "A man can get used to anything," and looks with something of pity upon what he takes to be a pose. Behind this way of thinking are ranged the greatest men of today and yesterday. So thought Tolstoi, Ibsen, Kipling, Shaw, Maeterlinck, Hauptmann, Allen, Galsworthy, to mention but a few. They have been saying to the world that modern literature has its own problems and that in answering these problems it must not be expected to repeat the answers, either in thought or form, of other days. They have been saying, too, many of them, that the older literature is valuable now, only when it, too, answers the modern problem with either facts, historical basis, or inspiration.

Again let me remind you that there is, here, no question of whether this attitude is right, but only the question of whether it is.

If this new tendency in education and this new attitude toward literature exist, and I am confident they do, then it follows that we must examine our theory and practice of teaching literature in the light of these changed conditions. If the literary classics are worth while, and I am sure they are, then we must enter upon an active campaign to make these classics better understood and more effective with the constantly growing intelligence of the whole people. At present, literature, both ancient and modern, is losing ground. The man of the world cares nothing for it. The young men, students of our universities, are more and more leaving literature out of their curriculum. Young women are more and more taking literature, as they take music and French, because it is

recognized as the proper thing for a young woman to know. An examination of classes in English literature in a typical coeducational institution of the Middle West revealed the fact that on an average the less advanced classes were composed of 70 per cent women, and in the more advanced work of 80 per cent women. The men who were taking the literature expected, in almost every instance, to make definite professional use of it. They were to teach it; or they expected to write and believed they needed literature as a foundation for such work; or they were advised to take literature as supplementary to English composition. Very few were taking it for the real cultural value. It is probable that this situation, varying with the varying popularity and personality of the instructors, is found in most of our colleges. Of course traditions vary, but the more up to date the institution, the more journalism and debating and economics are pushed to the front, the more literature in its purely literary form languishes. In the purely technical schools and colleges literature is hardly known to the mass of the students.

Is it possible to make literature appeal more largely than at present? Is the lack of appeal due to the failure of literature itself to touch modern life, or to the way in which literature has been presented by teacher and critic? I believe that the appeal can be made much broader if the emphasis can be shifted from the rather narrow view to the very broad view. Today men worth while are interested in life and the problems of life—in business, politics, reform, society, and the hundred and one things that form our intellectual environment. To reach modern men it is necessary to project the thing that is to reach them into the circle of their intellectual interest. Literature taught as a “thing of beauty and a joy forever” will not reach the practical man, whether student or man of the world. Neither is he interested in the mute *e* in Chaucer, nor in Shakespeare’s relation to Aeschylus, nor in the prose style of Addison, nor in the metrical forms of Shelley. These things are valuable, but for the specialist, not the layman. Even the beauty of Tennyson and Shelley and Keats will pass him by if it be insisted upon as the thing for which Tennyson, Shelley, and Keats exist.

I believe that to appeal to boys, young men, and old men of the present day active and practical intelligence, literature must be related very definitely and closely to the intellectual life they live. Literature must do for them what Tolstoi declared was its aim and mission, make plain what in the form of argument and statement is not readily understood. I believe that if we are to save the older literature and make it a force in the life of the present, we must reverse our method of teaching the oldest first, and, using modern literature as a stepping-stone, lead the student to appreciate the literature of his own life and through that the literature of the life of other times.

I have found it possible to hold a class of young men whose chief interest was journalism, economics, law, medicine, the practical things, to the closest study of Tolstoi, Kipling, Hauptmann, Maeterlinck, James Lane Allen, by studying the relations of these men to the problems of life. Maeterlinck and his new theory of the human personality appeal inevitably to students of science and sociology, as do Moody and Hauptmann and Allen. Students of socialism, politics, and economics find in Tolstoi, William Morris, Galsworthy, and Zola tremendous intellectual stimulation. And when these authors have been read I have had no trouble in taking the same men back through Ruskin, Browning, Tennyson, Shelley, to Swift and Shakespere, by building constantly upon the appreciation of literature as an expression of life that they had acquired from the modern authors. And I have found that the subconscious appreciation of the best things in literary form, which I believe is the only true appreciation, has grown with the development of interest in art which was life, until Shelley's "West Wind" and Keats's "Grecian Urn" carried the double appeal of an expression of early nineteenth century spiritual unrest and the lyric cry of personal despair.

If literature is the interpretation of life, as has been variously insisted from Matthew Arnold to Barrett Wendell, then again is the teacher of the older literature badly handicapped. Since the student does not know the life of past times, the teacher is compelled to create a mental picture of the life itself and then give the literary interpretation of it. It will not do to say that old literature

is an interpretation of life today. Any literature written in a past age looks upon life from the standpoint of that age. The farther back in time the more nebulous, misty, and inaccurate is the interpretation of the present. It is only the blindness of the critic, his utter failure to appreciate the life of his own time, that makes possible the conventional statement that literature may be universal in its interpretation. It was the attitude of the academician who knew his book but not his time.

We are, I believe, not far from the time when the teacher of literature, like the teacher of advertising writing, of sociology, of business method, of history, must know both his subject and life as it is. If either is to be slighted, it is better that he know less of his subject and more of life. A knowledge of the evolution of the miracle play is no preparation for the interpretation of Galsworthy, or Ibsen, or even Shelley. A course in the evolution of metrical forms is not one-half so good a preparation for the teaching of Shelley and Keats as a course in the economics of the early nineteenth century.

If we are to bring the older literatures back to the attention of the people, we must learn, not more of their technical forms, but more of the life for which they stand and of the relation of that life to the life of our own day.