

EDITORIAL comments

If the readers of the Minnesota English Journal are interested in teaching literature and composition--and how can we doubt that they are--this issue should be of interest. All of the articles are concerned with the problems involved in teaching students either how to get into a work of literature or how to write lucidly, clearly, cogently. Some articles are concerned with both. And however we define the discipline of English most would agree that reading and writing are at its heart, whatever else it may include.

So if you are interested in how to get into the literary work, rather than remaining on the outside, in giving wings to a student's soul, in teaching the students by having them do instead of talk about doing, in helping the student who has difficulty writing the English language, in helping him improve his diction, in challenging his imagination with test questions designed to bring out his flights of fancy, this issue is for you. And all of us need occasionally, perhaps more than occasionally, to know how others teach. While we may not be able to use the exact technique, much of what we read can be modified for our own purposes, whether we teach in the elementary school, high school or college. What is here may even help us to write a little more effectively.

It has become apparent, after a year as editor, that it is dangerous to announce a focus for a particular issue. Something always blurs the focus. Certainly if this issue is, as announced earlier, on reading, it would be difficult to see how except in a most general way. Articles on the announced subject do not always appear, and they cannot be ghost written for the issue. It is perhaps just as well. Sometimes articles fall into a pattern, as these did, after they come in. Teachers do not like to write on specific assignments any more than some students do. For the moment, therefore, I do not intend to announce a specific focus for subsequent issues but simply allow the focus to take shape as the articles come to the editor's attention.

This means that any article that you have that is concerned with some aspect of literature is welcome. If it is good, there will be a place for it. So I urge you to send in your articles on whatever subject. They will be carefully read, appreciated, and, more often than not, published.

Where Three Roads Meet; Or, Reminders For Our Journey From The Oracle

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Theodore M. Green in "The Three Aspects of Criticism" has defined for us the historical, the re-creative, and the evaluative aspects of criticism; and I have adopted his terms for three ways into literature. Although the methods, which I suggest here as ways into literature, seem to me distinctly separate, they do overlap and enfold one another. Indeed, one leads to another. Certainly they may all be used to find a way inside a single piece of literature. Many of our difficulties read from a position outside the literary work, where all our notions about identifying with a character of feeling the situation or recognizing landscapes do not help us. However valuable these notions, we still are talking about ourselves and not about the literary work. Some sort of entrance is necessary for the reader to stand inside the work of art whether or not he thinks it comfortable.

We should consider at this point an even more ambiguous and therefore more difficult distinction than that between reading inside and reading outside the literary work. It occurs at the point where a method is no longer a tool but becomes an escape from the job to be done. Imagine the do-it-yourselfer who so busies himself collecting and caring for tools that he never makes or repairs anything. We may wonder what he is escaping from and in any case why a reader would want to "escape" from understanding and enjoying literature or even from a particular story, poem, or play. Our imaginary do-it-yourselfer may unconsciously wish to escape not his finished product but the risk of failure. "Here I am," we say to ourselves or to anyone nearby, "an intelligent, mature reader. I have always been able to under-

stand and enjoy what I read." And already we have begun to intimidate the work that intimidates us. When we do not give up so easily, off we then go into the biography of the author, the history of a literary period, or critical summaries from learned journals. I believe it is this kind of escape T. S. Eliot meant when he said he regretted "having sent so many enquirers off on a wild-goose chase after tarot cards and the Holy Grail."²

Keeping in mind these distinctions, we eschew the historical anecdote, the verbal enigma, and the witty epithet as provinces of the historian, the linguist, and the graduate student. Let T. S. Eliot again state the position for us:

We must not confuse knowledge--factual information--about a poet's period, the conditions of the society in which he lived, the ideas current in his time implicit in his writings, the state of the language in his period--with understanding his poetry. Such knowledge, as I have said, may be a necessary preparation for understanding the poetry; furthermore, it has a value of its own, as history; but for the appreciation of the poetry, it can only lead us to the door: we must find our own way in.³

Perhaps only a reader himself knows when he transgresses; but because information is often very interesting and exciting for itself, he needs a reminder about losing touch with the literary work. The test is, of course, as Eliot implies, whether the information points the way in--to understanding and appreciation. By such a test I do not mean to belittle the labor expended in gathering seemingly trivial minutiae, labor that most of us feel superior to because we have not the patience for it. Eliot himself has said that at any time a critic of genius may appear who would know of what use to put some such detail as Shakespeare's laundry list.

The hardest requirement for the critical reader is to know when he is escaping into information. Honesty alone is not enough, for we can set ourselves to gathering information with the best will in the world to gain entrance to the frustrating work to understand it and appreciate it. Thus we must ask ourselves constantly of any fact we find, "Does it matter?" Dylan Thomas with some humor characterized the shocked reader whose image

of a poet has been destroyed by biography:

How could such a man write such marvelous devotional poetry? I saw him fall downstairs yesterday in his suspenders!

and

...Logan Pearsall Smith...saw, of all people, Matthew Arnold in a restaurant; and Matthew Arnold talked and laughed much too loud.⁴

The delightful anecdote, too, must suffer the same scrutiny as the disillusioning one. Constantine Fitzgibbon relates of Dylan Thomas that the headmaster of the grammar school in Swansea while walking to the school one morning saw Dylan, age about 11, hiding in a bush. He asked Dylan what he was doing there in the shrubbery.

" 'Playing truant, sir,' he replied.

" 'Well, don't let your father catch you,' the headmaster remarked, shook his head, and walked on."⁵

A reader may find this anecdote helps him to an appreciative attitude towards Thomas's poems and stories; but he also may misuse it as an explanation, say, of Thomas's "Do You Not Father Me." The question is still, "Does it matter?" and still must be answered with caution.

These examples illustrate the dangers of the literary misuse of biographical or historical details, but the danger also exists for other methods. I remember with what pleasure I noted that Thomas's hundred line "Author's Prologue" rhymed backwards, the last line with the first, and so on. Many well-known critics had pointed it out long before I had even read the poem; but my special pleasure arose, I think because at the time I had been attending to David Holbrook and Geoffrey Grigson and critics of their sort accusing Thomas of carelessness. This detail about the rhyme restored my faith in the poems and kept me reading. Yet it belongs to that class of detail that often makes us think we entirely understand the work. "Now that I have mastered the craftsmanship," we say, "I know what the work is all about." Although the rhyme scheme in Thomas's poem extends the image of building an ark important to the poem, it is obviously not the meaning of the poem. There is always something left, once

the lines are laid out, Thomas said, "to creep, crawl, flash, or thunder in."

The ways into literature as aspects of criticism seem fairly obvious and as methods of critical analysis also ought to be fairly obvious. The historical method does primarily involve gathering data somewhat extraneous to the literary work, which, we learn afterwards, has often contained the data all along. Further, the method attempts to make the reader a contemporary of the work by revealing the critical climate of the time. To avoid taking such an assertion too simply or too strictly, however, we must again be mindful of Eliot:

For the purpose of acquiring such knowledge...is not primarily that we should be able to project ourselves into a remote period, that we should be able to think and feel, when reading the poetry, as a contemporary of the poet might have thought and felt, though such experience has its own value; it is rather to divest ourselves of the limitations of our own age, and the poet...of the limitations of his age, in order to get the direct experience, the immediate contact with his poetry.⁷

Thus the historical approach leads into and becomes part of the re-creative approach.

In Book XXI of The Iliad Achilles chooses twelve young men of the Trojans "to be vengeance for the death of Patroklos":

These, bewildered with fear like fawns, he led
out of the water
and bound their hands behind them with thongs
well cut out of leather,
with the very belts they themselves wore on
their ingirt tunics,
and gave them to his companions to lead away
to the hollow ships,
then himself whirled back, still in a fury
to kill men.⁸

Information about Greek funeral customs or about laws of vengeance has never helped me digest this incident and the subsequent immolation of these twelve youngsters. In fact, greater horror arises from learning that neither custom nor law required this act of Achilles. Nonetheless, as we

assume more and more the values of the Greeks and Trojans both from reading The Iliad and for reading The Iliad and take on the customs and laws as a way to enter the poem, and as we forgive and even desire the ordinary vengeance of soldier for soldier (without, I mean, in any way adopting these particular values as our personal ones untranslated), we can understand that extraordinary Achilles craves also extraordinary vengeance for the death of his friend. The very horror we feel for Achilles' murdering the young noble Trojans--and Homer contributes to that horror with his "bewildered with fear like fawns"--helps us to understand and interpret the extreme grief of Achilles, who is capable of extreme kindness and sympathy as well as of cruelty, grief revealed by what a modern reader thinks a war atrocity. Understanding Achilles' act illustrates the blending of the historical with the re-creative that can give us "the direct experience, the immediate contact."

The re-creative method, although it sometimes seems the technique we use exclusively to examine contemporary literature, allows us to discover what is contemporary in older works; but partly because we do the historical work unconsciously, modern and contemporary literature does supply the best examples of the re-creative approach. John Updike's Rabbit Run is set in the very recent past in a small Pennsylvania town, and a reader therefore easily transforms it into his own town today. Reading the book requires little effort of the historical imagination. Yet I saw on first reading it, mostly manifest failure on the part of its characters to assume responsibility for their actions. Rabbit seemed especially repulsive. His insistence on making love to his wife a week or so after childbirth was particularly revolting. One statement in that episode stands out as the ultimate conceit. His wife asks him to imagine how she feels, having just had a baby. "I can but I don't want to," Rabbit tells her; "it's not the thing, the thing is how I feel."⁹

A second reading brought a different response. As the grandfather of a friend has so often said, "The badder they are the more you need to love them." Rabbit is a young man in trouble and knows it. He does not know what to do about it. There I sat saying he is irresponsible and conceited. Rabbit, however, is right, what matters is how he feels. He certainly cannot feel what others tell him to feel; he certainly does not have to be what others tell him he is. He liked being told he was the star, but he no longer hears that. We say that he should forget basketball and face up to his responsibilities; and as long as the advice to run

means to run away, we are right. Running in basketball means to find a new and better position and sacrifices neither means to ends nor ends to means. What is important is how Rabbit feels; for that is what he is, a human being of some worth. As long as he feels of no worth, no one has any worth to him. His mistakes in the entire novel occur because of his struggle to have worth. Thus his statement, which any of us or any of the characters in the book can make, is transformed from a selfish statement into a statement of self. The line of distinction is very fine, I admit; but Updike is too good an artist to make it easy for us. Even Gulliver does not leave the flying island of Laputa because Swift wants to make fun of The Royal Society, but because nobody there pays him any attention and anybody who is anybody thinks him worthless.

Putting Updike in juxtaposition with Swift as having a similar concern for human worth already anticipates how evaluative methods, Green's third aspect, may help us find our way in. Comparisons have more to do than to construct charts of greatness whereon one writer receives a higher rank than another. It is not very helpful to say that Updike is not so great an artist as Swift, or Chaucer, or Shakespeare. It helps, however, to see Rabbit belonging to a tradition extending at least from Ajax to the Underground Man, men with the common human characteristic of refusing to accept the self that others would bestow upon them.

The evaluative method does not require complete trust in the critical opinions of others. Nothing, it seems to me, should be greeted with more scepticism. The method requires, though, some faith in the tradition. We need not swallow everything critics say about great writers of the past, but what makes critics return again and again to those writers suggests that something substantial and serious is there whether the critics succeed in saying what it is or not. I think we have no easy way of saying what it is. "Universal," a term frequently employed, seems inadequate. I once had a very good teacher who said that the theme of Macbeth is "Unwise ambition leads to destruction." I would call that universal since we might apply it to many literary works from "The Pardoner's Tale" to Hedda Gabler to What Makes Sammy Run? It was something to put down in our notebooks and perhaps start us talking about Macbeth. In any case, it fails to focus what I mean by the serious and the substantial, since we do not know whether an ambition is unwise until it leads to destruction.

In spite of the difficulties of achieving a critical

language or set of terms, we may still see the relative worth of a contemporary poem, story, or play by holding it up to an older work that has worth for us as well as for many others. Liking a poem because it was written yesterday or two hundred years ago makes no sense at all. The comparisons I mean give us "the direct experience, the immediate contact" with both the old and the new. The task of the evaluative method is not to assign rank to various ancient or contemporary authors but to find out whether their work confronts human problems and struggles with them. We have enough problems of our own without taking up fake problems the answers to which the author or a character has had in his pocket and whips them out for display at the end.

If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,
Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:
One must be so careful these days.

With these words of Madame Sosostriis we come back to the historical, since her horoscope is an effort to plot the future as we do the past. Eliot's The Waste Land is already an older literary work for most readers today and therefore one a diligent reader may attempt to enter by all three methods. If we cannot learn how to stand with that narrator in the waste land, even looking up all the references, translating all the foreign expressions, and reading Eliot's biography will not put us inside. Nor will comparing Eliot to other poets of the past make us less afraid of the Chapel Perilous:

Dry bones can harm no one.