PREAMBLINGS

Those of us who are involved in teaching English to undergraduates and in preparing undergraduates to teach English in high school will recognize the forebodings expressed by Anna Lee Stensland in her article on cross purposes in the presentation of literature. The student teacher gets out there in the classroom, exhilarated to be doing something real at last, and terrified by the imperturbable faces that confront him. He thinks of the books he enjoyed reading, he remembers best what he has just finished studying as a senior English major, and unless his critic teacher takes him firmly in hand and explains that "The Rape of the Lock" is not a good poem to try to teach to a basic eleven class, in spite of its suggestive title (but what does such a title promise anyway to a generation of "Easy Rider-Midnight Cowboy" viewers?), the student teacher is in trouble right away. He discovers that the poems, novels, plays that meant something to him, Chaucer, Milton, King Lear, Jane Austen, Dickens, Conrad, Yeats, haven't the same meaning for his high school students -- some will not take on this meaning until his students, no longer his to teach, are older. The student teacher feels quite simply that he has been betrayed by the classics and his Methods teacher. It is at least reassuring that he rarely blames his high school students.

Another factor besides his discovery that the "classics" aren't relevant contributes to the eventual disillusionment of the student teacher. The emphases that he puts on the study of literature tend to be on structural analysis and the kinds of information that feed directly into understanding the work as a work of art. He talks about the Aristotelian theory of the tragic, about the use of the persona and the omniscient narrator, about archetypes and myths, about literary traditions, sources and analogues. He knows about critical devices for taking the measurements of a work of art, he's got the information in his notebooks, and he is therefore on well-charted ground. But most of his students have a different turf where they bed down to wait him and their "education" out. Their turf is called the now and all its problems, and they are willing to let him in to talk about, or better yet listen to them talk about, what's happening. If books can shed some light on this, so much the better -- enter and freely pass. The trouble is that the student teacher, the young teacher, is in the now too, grappling with his own problems -- he doesn't know much more about the now

than his students, though he ought to be able to think more efficiently than they can. Discussions have a way of getting away from him. At the end of the period he isn't sure anybody learned anything (nobody took notes). He asks himself whether group therapy is what he became an English major for.

The solution lies, of course, somewhere between the two extremes, as educational solutions have a way of doing. It would be a mistake, perhaps even a dangerous one, to allow the student teacher to slip into the role of guidance counselor, either in a passive or active state. It would be equally mistaken to encourage him to teach literature out of his college notebooks. To us the solution lies in teaching him to approach any text, whether old and venerated or new and uncanonized, as a set of problems perfectly resolved or not by its author. For example, let him ask his students to assume that they want to describe the people of their community to a stranger. He might then go on to ask: In what ways can such a description be organized? by vocation? by social class? by dominating characteristics? how else? The path stretches out here into sociology and psychology, into mass media and soap opera, and also into the "Prologue" to the Canterbury Tales, the Spoon River Anthology, Our Town, Lord of the Flies, Animal Farm, and so forth. He can ask his students to try their own hands in the manner of Chaucer and Orwell; he can talk about the Wife of Bath brought up-to-date as a leader in the Women's Liberation Movement, or Swift's horses, Orwell's pigs, and the modern use of animal characters and epithets to suggest ideas and attitudes. He can continue on to ask how a writer's success can be measured in solving this particular problem: by range? by accuracy? by the realism of presentation? by suggestive power? by complexity? What he is doing is using books to get into and out of current subjects, and to discipline his students' intellectual powers in many ways, and especially into seeing likenesses between dissimilarities, or discovering relevance. This is the stuff of education. And it is also what experienced high school teachers have been doing for a long while.

Colleges have been changing their course structure in order to meet the demands of this age. Along with the standard period, genre, author courses, there are plenty of thematic and cross-disciplinary courses in the catalogues. And there ought to be such courses. But the center of instruction in literature is the work of art as a unique source of power to develop the intelligence, stir up the imagination, and produce in the reader a heightened pleasure at being alive. All this does not come from any other source, nor does it come from a fragmented study either ("Discovering Yourself"; "The Hero in American Literature"; "Exploring Cultural Diversity," and so on). It comes as the end of study that may involve all or some of the questions connected with genesis (social, political, and

literary history, biography), structure (genre, rhetoric and poetic), and meaning (instruction and delight) of a work of art. The work becomes as much a part of the student and student teacher as his remembrance of things past, to flash upon his inward eye as he begins to think of planning lessons for his classes. He has to know the whole work well, and he has to know how to approach all works, so he can take them apart and reassemble them suitably for each new context his students' needs suggest. The high school is the place for exploration and discovery; the college is the place for rigorous, concentrated study.

Obviously we don't mean to exclude concentrated study from the high school or discovery from the college. What we are suggesting is a matter of emphasis. Perhaps a way of expressing this emphasis practically in the high schools would be to set up courses in which works of literature were studied intensively. Such a course in Creative Reading would be elective (like Creative Writing, Journalism, and Speech), and would coexist with the normal English curriculum and its varied emphases in the other patterns, traditional and innovative.

Were the colleges to shift their emphasis from the formal study of the work of art to accomodate the needs and objectives of instruction in the high schools, their special strength in the educational continuum would be diluted, and the graduate schools would then have to take on this role in addition to their own function of training scholars. We have already observed uneasily that today's college freshman seems to require more mothering, more inquiries about how his work is getting on, more advice and reassurance about how to bring the different parts of his education together than he ever wanted before. Whatever the causes of change, and, we're sure the explanation will be a complex one, liberal arts colleges are adapting themselves to these needs, willingly whenever they can outside their core, worriedly whenever their definition seems to be involved.

The intermediary between the college and the high school is the Methods teacher. He can and should convince his student teachers that college methods and subjects are not uniformly appropriate to high school students. He ought to offer, and probably does offer, his students chances to make translations from what they already know to what they want their high school students to know. The Methods teacher undoubtedly needs more time to do all the things he has to do nowadays. Ways to give him this time with his student teacher should be found. We'd rather see him on the spot though, strengthening his character by meeting impossible demands, than see the weakening of the unique character of college English courses or the establishment of a separate program of study for prospective high school English teachers.

In the next issue we'd like to offer you a report on our use of tape recorders in a freshman writing program. We've collected student reactions ("The tape recorder helped when I had a vague idea of what I wanted, because I could talk those vague ideas onto tape, and then listen to what I had said and build from there"; "It's amazing how horrible essays sound when read aloud, and how much more quickly the ear picks up a better way to say something than pen and paper does -- unfortunately I may have made my discovery too late"; "The tape recorder bothers me for the most part. Its mechanical problems are too cumbersome, its whir is too imposing and its unflagging infallibility is much too awesome"), and we'd like to put them into context and arrange them in patterns. One early observation: our students have generally found tape recording helpful. Set into the right frame, Talk-Write opens up the composition student's view.

On the subject of composition, the Spring issue will also present substantial articles by the teaching team of Tom Bacig and Donald W. Larmouth, at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, on "A Humane Rationale for Composition" and "Models in Remedial Composition"; and by Paul Grawe, at Winona State, on parody and the teaching of composition; and a statement of progress by Naomi Chase, of the University of Minnesota, about her work on the Creative Writing Project for Elementary School Children.

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We hope to get a discussion going about violence in children's books, with the publication of Tom Walton's research with his own elementary school classes. Alarm about the effects a preponderance of violence in books, films, and T.V. programs may have in conditioning children can express itself first in outcries, next in presidential commissions, and finally in various forms of control, openly or indirectly censorious.

Censorship, in particular the kind likely to be produced by the current backlash, was one of the subjects of the last meeting of the Advisory Board of the MCTE. A committee of the Council is being formed to serve as an investigatory group for our colleagues who find themselves called to account because of their use of controversial texts or films. Let us know your feelings about the subject, keep us informed about episodes in which you think arbitrary action ought to be questioned.

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An interesting collection of films made by Northwestern is now available from Northwestern University Film Library, 828 Custer Avenue, Evanston, Illinois 60202. Among the offerings are collections of films made by high school and college students. Rentals range from $7.50 to $35.00. The American Film Institute, 1815 H Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006, has a "Guide to College Film Courses, 1969-70," available for one dollar.