CHAPTER 3

The Setting for Spontaneity

DURING A REORGANIZATION of education on the Indian reservations some years ago, it was discovered that in some classes the Indian boys and girls were being required to read Restoration comedies. It seems ridiculous that these children, whose past experience had been only the conditions of the reservation village and the vestiges of their native culture, should be plunged into reading the sophisticated products of a highly complex foreign country remote in space and time. Can it be doubted that the children could "make nothing of it"? Any show of "understanding" a Restoration play would undoubtedly be only a parroting of empty words and phrases to satisfy a teacher's demand.

The plight of these Indian children probably differs only in degree from the average American child's relation to much of the literature he reads in his classroom. The relevance of literary materials has too often been measured in terms of purely verbal operations. To demonstrate "understanding" of a work has been primarily a matter of – paraphrasing, defining, applying the proper rubrics. This can be accomplished even when the work presents nothing that awakens an intimate personal response. Too often, the average student might utter Coleridge's lament in "Dejection" when he gazed at the sky and the stars, and could only "see, not feel, how beautiful they are!" The teacher is concerned with making the student "see" what in the work of literature has made others deem it significant. Whether the student himself "feels" this is an entirely different question, and one that is rarely considered.

Undoubtedly in many English classes today the student functions on two separate and distinct planes. On one plane, lie learns the ideas about literature that his teacher or the literary critic presents to him as traditional and accepted by educated people. On the other plane, lie reads the literature and reacts to it personally, perhaps never expressing that reaction or even paying much attention to it. Only occasionally will there be a correlation of these two planes of activity, Teachers frequently approach a book or a poem as though it were a neatly labeled bundle of literary values to be pointed out to the student. If the consensus of critical opinion recognizes certain virtues in a given work, the critics' direct experience of it has led them to perceive those values. The student's repetition of that critical opinion would have validity only when he himself had lived through an experience similar to the critics'. When the images and ideas presented by the work have no relevance to the past experiences or emotional needs of the reader, only a vague, feeble, or negative response will occur.

It is not at all surprising that so few of even our college graduates have formed the habit of turning to literature for pleasure and insight. The novel or play or poem has been made for them too much something to know "about," something to summarize or analyze or define, something to identify as one might identify the different constellations on a star map or define the qualities of a particular chemical element. For is there a great difference, after all, between the process of memorizing the properties of hydrogen or its peculiar reactions to changes in temperature, and the process of memorizing that the romantic movement was a reaction against eighteenth – century classicism, was concerned with the individual, and produced a great deal of "nature poetry"? How many students have reeled this off for an examination and yet never have felt the full impact of a romantic poem! Literary history has its values as have the various approaches developed by literary critics and scholars, But all the student's knowledge about literary history, about authors and periods and literary types, will be so much useless baggage if lie has not been led primarily to seek in literature a vital personal experience.
Far from helping the student in this direction, much literature teaching has the effect of turning him away from it. He is to a certain degree insulated from the direct impact of the work. He comes to it with the idea that lie should see in it first of all those generalized values or kinds of information that the "literature class" stresses summaries of plot and theme, identification of certain characteristics that mark its period or genre, certain traits of style and structure. Much of even the best literature teaching is analogous to typical American "spectator sports." The students sit on the sidelines watching the instructor or professor react to works of art. Though the student may develop a certain discrimination in the appreciation of professorial taste, this often tends to obscure the need for the student himself to develop a personal sense of literature.

The great value of the various scholarly and critical approaches to literature in their proper place will be considered later. But they can be very easily transformed from useful aids into preoccupations that claim the center of attention and crowd the student's personal experience with literature into the dim outer fringe of vision. One could, for instance, become quite proficient in the history of Italian literature without knowing the language and without having read any Italian work even in translation. One would be able to sketch the sweeping lines of literary change, to discourse glibly on the special characteristics of the different periods, to name the contributions of its great writers, and to recount their biographies. It would be possible to learn summaries of the so-called content of their works, as for example, the story and the philosophy of The Divine Comedy. One might even hold forth on its relations to the dying medieval culture and the dawning Renaissance, Without acquaintance with the works themselves, all this information would lack essential substances Much of the activity concerning literature with which the average student busies himself in school and college has Something Of this character. The frame is elaborately worked out, but there is a blank where the picture should be. Missing are the personal experience and understanding of the literary works which historical and biographical information should enhance.

The problem that the teacher faces first of all, then, is the creation of a situation favorable to a vital experience of literature. Unfortunately, many of the practices and much of the tone of literature teaching have precisely the opposite effect. They place a screen between the student and the book. The solution of this primary problem is therefore complicated by habitual attitudes and academic practices. The majority of English teachers still need to concentrate on this problem, for in many English classes today the instructor never even glimpses the student's personal sense of the work discussed. The teacher may be interested in, let its say, Pride and Prejudice from the point of view of the history of the novel form in England, or lie may be eager to discuss the relation of style and theme. The student, however, may be impressed by the revelation that then, even as now, the business of finding a mate was no simple matter, and that then, even as now, personality clashes and the gap between generations were important. In many cases there is an unbridged gulf between anything that the student might actually feel about the book, and what the teacher, from the point of view of accepted critical attitudes and his adult sense of life, thinks the pupil should notice.

This often leads the student to consider literature something academic, remote from his own present concerns and needs. He recognizes a traditional aura about literature, but discards it when his school days are past. (We all know the student who says, "but I have had Shakespeare," as though it were something to suffer through and forget, like the measles.) Thus he does not learn to turn spontaneously to the literature of the past or to the comparably good literature of the present; such works, lie feels, must be approached only in full dress and with all the decorum of critical method handed down by the teacher. He is cut off from the personal value they might have for him. Instead he turns to the pseudo-literature of the "pulp" magazines, comic books, or lurid drugstore paperbacks.

For many students, the only thing approaching a personal literary experience is provided by such "trashy" writings. This is certainly not because there is no good literature that could arouse their interest and fulfill their needs. Obviously, one reason for this situation must be the frequently defensive attitude toward "good books"
built up in the mind of the student in school and in college. He has been given to understand that there are proper ways to react, there are certain things to look for — that be must be ready to discuss the "characterization" or to analyze "plot and subplot" or to talk about the author's "choice of words." To some extent this is a reflection of that might on our educational system, its emphasis on the attainment of good marks rather than on the value of the work or the knowledge for its own sake. Instead of plunging into the work and permitting its full impact, lie is aware that he must prepare for certain questions, that his remarks on the work must satisfy the teacher's already crystallized ideas about it.

The teacher of college freshman literature courses is often perturbed to find this attitude affecting the work of even the most verbally proficient students. They read literary histories and biographies, criticism, introductions to editions, so-called study guides, and then, if there is time, they read the works. Their interest in the author's life is often on a par with the Hollywood gossip column; or they have learned at best to view the work as a document in the author's biography. Their quest is for the sophisticated interpretation and the accepted judgment. If they have learned techniques of close analysis, they tend to look upon the work as a means of displaying their analytic virtuosity. They seem shut off from the personal nourishment that literature can give. Hence they are often insecure and confused when given the opportunity and responsibility to express their own honest responses to the work.

1. A. Richards published the classic documentation of this point in 1,929. He asked his class at Cambridge University to write comments on unidentified poems giving no clues to title, authorship, period, school, or literary value. As lie reports in Practical Criticism, the students found it extremely difficult to make up their minds about the poems or even to work out possible opinions from which to choose. They set forth an extraordinary variety of views, and the "reckless, desperate" tone of many of their comments revealed their bewilderment. Instead of being able to apply to the poems neatly ticketed interpretations and judgments appropriate to their authorship and their literary period, the students were forced to base their comments on their own intimate reactions. In most cases, their training in literary history and their fund of critical dicta on good poetry were of very little help in handling their unvarnished primary personal responses. They were thus at the mercy of personal obsessions, chance associations, and irrelevant conventional opinions about poetry. Hence they often failed to understand the poems or to discriminate differences in literary quality.

Evidently, in most cases an unprecedented demand was being made upon these students. Yet during the whole course of their literary training they should have again and again been given the opportunity to handle their primary responses to the text. A secure approach to poetry would have utilized the "background" they possessed; but it would have been a tool, not a crutch.

Surely the majority of American students, subjected to similar experiments, would not yield a different picture even today, after several decades in which "close reading" has been increasingly stressed in colleges and secondary schools. The average American student probably would not reveal as much "literary background," let alone the ability to utilize it. We insist that students should not consult histories of literature or works of criticism in order to find out what to think about an author, but we have usually not sought to discover why they are so lacking in self-reliance.

Few teachers of English today would deny that the individual's ability to read and enjoy literature is the primary aim of literary study. In practice, however, this tends to be overshadowed by preoccupation with whatever can be systematically taught and tested. Or the English program becomes what can be easily justified to parents and administrators, whose own past English training has produced skepticism about the value of the study of literature. The professional preparation of the English teacher, moreover, often has little relation to

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actual conditions in the classroom.

HOW THEN CAN STUDENTS be enabled to have such vital experiences with literature that they will indeed come intimately and lastingly into their literary heritage? This has always been the concern of the teacher who is also a lover of literature. He has known that without this all his conscientious lecturings and questionings, all his "techniques" are valueless. To attempt a comprehensive answer to this problem would, of course, be fatuous. The following discussion will naturally tend to emphasize those, aspects that seem to have been most generally neglected. The purpose is not to set a pattern or formula for any one teacher or class to follow, but to underline general considerations that should influence practice.

Unless the teacher himself values literary experience, revision of his aims or his methods will be futile. By implication, any definition of the ideal relationship between the student and the literary work applies also to the teacher. As long as an artificial and pedantic notion of literary culture persists, students will continue in their indifference to the great works of the past and present.

The teacher's personal love of literature, however, has not always been proof against the influence of routine, pedantic notions concerning teaching methods. lie is dismayed at the results indicated by the low level of taste about him; lie undergoes constant frustration, or he consoles himself by focusing on the rare student who seems to possess the divine spark. To develop many such students the 'teacher must liberate himself as well as his pupils from self-defeating practices. He should not relinquish his own zestful sense of literature as a living art.

The persistence of many of the routine procedures in literature teaching makes it necessary to phrase some primary duties in negative terms. First is the necessity not to impose a set of preconceived notions about the proper way to react to any work. The student must be free to grapple with his own reaction. This primary negative condition does not mean that the teacher abdicates his duty to attempt to instill sound habits of reading or sound critical attitudes. Nor does this imply that historical and biographical background material will be neglected. The difference is that instead of trying to superimpose routine patterns, the teacher will help the student develop these Understandings in the context of his own emotions and his own curiosity about life and literature.

The youth needs to be given the opportunity and the courage to approach literature personally, to let it mean something to him directly. The classroom situation and the relationship with the teacher should create a feeling of security. lie should be made to feel that his own response to books, even though it may Not resemble the standard critical comments, is worth expressing. Such a liberating atmosphere will make it possible for him to have an unselfconscious, spontaneous, and honest reaction.

When the student feels the validity of his own experience, he will cease to think of literature as something that only a few gifted spirits can enjoy, and understand in an "original" way. flow often, when urged to speak out for himself, a student will respond, "But I'm not literary, the way Jane or John is!" Nothing is more conducive to this than the attitude of the instructor that he is one initiated into the esoteric mysteries of art, suffering with amused tolerance the Philistine reactions of the class. His function is to help the student realize that the most important thing is what literature means to him and does for him.

Another negative means of furthering a spontaneous response is to avoid placing undue importance upon the particular form in which the expression of the student's reaction should be couched. He should be able to express himself freely. Nor should there be constant insistence on summaries or rehashes of the work. That may become as artificial and inhibiting as any of the other routine methods. The young reader should feel free to let his comment take the form dictated by what he has lived through in reading the book. To set up some stereotyped form will probably focus the student's attention on what is to be required of him after he has read the book, rather than on the work itself as he evokes it from the text.

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The effect of such assignments is illustrated by a father’s report of his twelve-year-old daughter’s experience with *Great Expectations*, which she had selected for individual reading. Her reaction was intense. She said to him, "This is a very, very deep book. You're thinking about the story, the strange things that happen to Pip -- and all of a sudden You see another meaning back of it." She groped toward a phrasing of those "deeper" symbolic meanings and offered an unusually mature interpretation of the book. Later, her father found her at her desk, in despair before a blank sheet of paper with only the title of the book written on it. To his remark that surely she had much to say, she replied that none of those ideas would serve; she had to write a book report--summarize the plot, sketch the setting, describe any two characters, write a brief opinion or blurb. The little formula provided by the teacher as a guide had instead divorced the youngster from her actual experience of the novel. The book report she finally ground out revealed none of this response. Fortunately, her involvement in this powerful work had made her temporarily forget the assignment. The next time, she would be on her guard, less likely to pay attention to much beyond what would be useful for the book report. Conscientious teachers often thus unwittingly defeat their long-term aims by classroom methods, day today assignments, and devices for evaluation.

An experience reported by a teacher documents this point: "As I was leafing through a tenth-grade poetry text, I found myself drawn into rereading the old Scottish ballad 'Edward, Edward' with its step-by-step revelations of a crime and its fearful aftermath. In the dialogue with his mother, you recall, lie reveals that the blood on his sword is that of his 'fadir deir.' He utters his desperate decision to do penance wandering over the seas, leaving his halls to fall into ruin, his wife and children to wander the world as beggars. And then there is that final stanza:

’And what wul ye leive to your ain mither deir,
Edward, Edward?
And what wul ye leive to your ain mither deir?
My deir son, now tell me O.’
’THe curse of hell frae me sall ye beir,
Mither, mither,
The curse of hell frae me sall ye beir,
Sic counseils ye gave to me O.’

"As I finished the poem, it was as though I had been participating in a Greek tragedy in capsule. Associations with Oedipus and Orestes were a measure of my involvement. And then I turned the page -- 'What is the name of this kind of poem? What characteristics does it share with other poems Of this type? What is the effect of the refrain?"

The shock of these questions drew me away from all that I had undergone in reading the text -- the structure of feeling called forth by the pattern of events, my darkening mood as I saw the destruction of the family by the son's desperate crime and desperate penance, the horror of the final interchange. For the moment, I was the student, rudely torn from all this by the textbook editor's questions."

Is this not typical of what often happens in the classroom? Out of misguided zeal, the student is hurried into thinking or writing that removes him abruptly and often definitively from what he himself has lived through in reading the work. It therefore becomes essential to scrutinize all practices to make sure that they provide the opportunity for an initial crystallization of a personal sense of the work.

Although all students should not be required to give the same sort of expression to their reaction, in most cases a personal experience will elicit a definite response; it will lead to some kind of reflection. It may also lead to the desire to communicate this to others whom the boy or girl trusts. An atmosphere of informal, friendly exchange should be created. The student should feel free to reveal emotions and to make judgments. The primary criterion should not be whether his reactions or his judgments measure up to critical traditions, but rather the genuineness of the ideas and reactions he expresses. The variety and unpredictability of life need not be alien to
the classroom. Teachers and pupils should be relaxed enough to face what indeed happened as they interpreted the printed page. Frank expression of boredom or even vigorous rejection is a more valid starting point for learning than are docile attempts to feel "what the teacher wants." When the young reader considers why he has responded in a certain way, he is learning both to read more adequately and to seek personal meaning in literature.

There is no formula for giving students the assurance to speak out. One experienced teacher has found that his students are encouraged by mention of comments made by other students in past discussions. Another finds that classes that are accustomed to the traditional recitation pattern may be reluctant to engage in spontaneous discussion but will welcome the chance to write brief anonymous comments on a work at the beginning of a meeting. Some of these comments selected at random will serve to elicit further frank reactions and interchange. This teacher sometimes analyzes the written comments and later reports on trends and contrasts as a way of focusing on problems of importance to the group. Sometimes a general "unstructured" question, to borrow a term from the psychologist, will be enough to open the discussion. The teacher needs to maintain the conviction that it is important to place the discussion of the text in this matrix of personal response. He will also need to develop the security to permit a rather free-flowing discussion to begin with, before the group can be helped to focus on problems and skills of interpretation relevant to them.

A situation conducive to free exchange of ideas by no means represents a passive or negative attitude on the part of the teacher. To create an atmosphere of self-confident interchange he must be ready to draw out the more timid students and to keep the more aggressive from monopolizing the conversation. He must be on the alert to show pleased interest in comments that have possibilities and to help the students clarify or elaborate their ideas. He must keep the discussion moving along consistent lines by eliciting the points of contact between different students' opinions. His own flexible command of the text and understanding of the reading skills it requires will be called into play throughout.

One of the most valuable things the students will acquire from this is the ability to listen with understanding to what others have to say and to respond in relevant terms. If they have thus far been subjected to the typical school routine, the tendency is at first for them to address themselves only to the teacher; the conversational ball is constantly thrown to the teacher, who then throws it to another student, who again returns it to the teacher, and so on. In a more wholesome situation, the ball is passed from student to student, with the teacher participating as one of the group. This interchange among student!-, must be actively promoted.