REPORT RESUMES

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READING, WRITING, REALITY, UNREALITY.

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THOUGH MANY ENGLISH TEACHERS SPEAK OF THE RELEVANCE OF LITERATURE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHARACTER, IMAGINATION, AND RESPONSIVENESS TO LIFE, THEY TEACH AS IF THE GOAL OF ENGLISH STUDY IS TO KNOW LISTS OF AUTHORS, DATES, HOW TO SPELL, ETC., AND AS IF STUDENTS BENEFIT FROM LECTURES ON ARCANE LITERARY HIERARCHIES OR ANALYSES OF STRUCTURAL DESIGNS TAUGHT WITH NO AIM OF EFFECTING A RETURN TO AN EXPERIENCE. DISCUSSIONS AMONG 50 PROFESSORS OF ENGLISH WHO MET AT DARTMOUTH IN THE SUMMER OF 1966 AT THE ANGLO-AMERICAN SEMINAR ON THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH INDICATE THAT EVEN AMONG ACCOMPLISHED MEMBERS OF THE PROFESSION THERE ARE MANY WHO FORGET THE PURPOSE OF ENGLISH. IN ONE DISCUSSION OF HOW TO TEACH A POEM, THESE TEACHERS NEVER CONSIDERED THE USES OF THE POEM, HOW TO PLACE IT IN THE CLASSROOM, OR HOW TO SET UP VITAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE STUDENT AND THE LINES OF POETRY. BEFORE TEACHING A POEM, FOR EXAMPLE, THE TEACHER SHOULD FIRST INTRODUCE THE STUDENTS TO IDEAS AND SITUATIONS SIMILAR TO THOSE IN THE POEM HE IS GOING TO TEACH. HE SHOULD TREAT THE POEM AS A THIRD VOICE IN THE ROOM--THE OTHER VOICES ARE HIS AND THE STUDENTS'. HIS OBLIGATION AS A GOOD TEACHER OF WRITING IS TO MOVE THE STUDENT CLOSER TO THE THING, AND TO FIND THE TALK THAT WILL CREATE A SUBJECT FOR THE STUDENT, A NEED FOR UTTERANCE, AND AN EAGERNESS TO NAME A TRUTH BEYOND THE TRUTH BEGUN WITH. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "EDUCATIONAL RECORD," VOLUME 48, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 1967, PAGES 197-205. (BN)

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Reading, Writing, Reality, Unreality . . .

Benjamin DeMott

LET ME BEGIN with a market report: This is a moment for provocative comment about the teaching of English or the humanities. One combative magazine article complaining against the teaching of literature in the graduate school can transform a sane, right-minded professor into an educational statesman. (I think of the example of Mr. Arrowsmith.) Or, for another example: the famous Tufts Conference on Innovation in Undergraduate Teaching recently published a first account of its doings—the author is nothing less than a "White House aide." And when the man in question turned to the teaching of arts and humanities, he dwelt long on a slogan—"Throw out the Art Part"—that plainly was meant to enrage (or, as they say it in innovatese, to *stimulate*).

And there are other events, equally near at hand, confirming that opportunities, Marketwise, go on multiplying. A few months ago, at a meeting of English teachers rather too dominated—for a minute or two—by the gospel according to Northrop Frye, the present writer rose to propose that a relation between books and beings might exist, and, further, that closing out such relations might do dirt on our subject. The remark was picked up by the secretary of the Modern Language Association, rubbed and slightly inflamed for the social columns of PMLA, and has since piqued a publisher into offering cash in advance for a tiny treatise about "The Scandal in English Teaching."

Should we tire ourselves explaining this situation to each other? Of course not. The market exists partly because the tide of slobbism in the culture at large—the force we call the democratic surge—hasn't significantly weakened either with the passage of years or with the onset of the culture boom. And partly it exists because the voice of the literary subculture that most often reaches the public is that of the critical redskin or downright life-monger, a character who for some reason positively delights in the approach of an age of men without art.

But if there is, as I admit, no urgent need for explanation of the situation, there is a need—at least for people with notions about teaching that are as homely as mine—to make their assumptions unusually explicit, even if that means bringing forth ponderous, self-regarding credos, even if the impression left is that of a neurotic preoccupation with objections, blows, charges of philistinism and the like.

Autotelic worlds

My first assumption is that it's by no means fatuous to attend to poems as real objects, autonomous, autotelic, free-standing. Everyone who reads decently knows the extraordinary experience of raptness, selfless joy, tranced involvement in the movement of a poem or story. Everyone who teaches decently knows that this experience—the entrance into the story as a world—in some significant sense "is" art, and that the moment we turn our backs on it and chatter about courtly love or the Elizabethan world view, there is no return to the spell, no fresh habitation of the work of art as "a world." And everyone also knows that there *are* ways of acknowledging the fact of a spell or an illusion. When we ask our questions about internal organization, point of view, rhetorical modes and the rest, we do show forth to our students our own fascination with the texture of the seizing hand on our wrist, our own interest and wonder at the ways in which we have at once been worked on and have ourselves worked in the encounter with the poem or story. And the uses of such acknowledgments aren't inconsiderable; students and teacher are elevated by them. They are momentarily privileged to care for something beyond themselves, they are seeking to actualize (I apologize for the cant word) the range of humanness which flows from the capacity of men to investigate their own delights and to arrive at the mode of consciousness that gives birth to standards. The critical redskin who doubts the worth of such activity is, among other things, a man out of touch, someone unaware of the evidence about what repeatedly happens to human beings as a result of their effort to speak in acknowledgment of the spell or illusion of a work of literary art. Several times a year, each of us reads an essay about poem or book or *oeuvre* proving in itself that a human being can be ennobled by such effort. Nor is it true that you invariably have to look hard for such work: Last year, for instance, two successive issues of one literary magazine provided just the sort of proof I have in mind. (I am thinking of the issues of the *Sewanee* that carried Mr. Ransom on "Gerontion" and Mr. Donald Pearce on the Nightingale Ode.)

But to say this isn't to say that in most classes about structure and design (nature of the speaker, relations among images, linguistic continuities, interplay between dramatic units, etc.) that the aim of effecting a return to an experience, a reenactment, is sufficiently clear. Rather, these classes often resemble efforts to touch the bones of an object that never was alive, that never had laid a hand on anyone. The laws of anatomy are brought into the center of the classroom, and the humanness and livingness of lyric and narrative cease to count. And the English class becomes a place distinguished chiefly by total obliviousness to Whitman's great words:

> The process of reading is not a half-sleep, but, in highest sense, a gymnast's struggle . . . the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay—the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or framework. Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does.

A commitment to trivia

That such obliviousness can become a rule seems to me symptomatic of the English teacher's forced retreat to the periphery of his subject; his frequent inability to escape a community- and profession-imposed obligation to triviality—an obligation to names not things, apparatus not inquiry, the window rather than the view. When I speak of

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IN A SHARPLY CRITICAL APPRAISAL *of English teaching, Benjamin DeMott, Chairman of the Department of English, Amherst College, argues that the values of education in the humanities demand less attention to the mechanics of the subject matter and more to the "particulars of humanness."*

a "retreat," I am simply saying that I believe the English teacher isn't usually and primarily engaged in the activity of encouraging students to find the bearing of this book and that poem and this "composition" on their own lives; he is not using the authority of art, the actualities of the imagination, as they can be used. I believe the English teacher is inhibited about giving himself to the labor of drawing men into an effort to reflect upon and understand their own experience (a labor that art—and student composition—make much easier). I believe that while he declares allegiance to traditional slogans about his subject, while he goes on announcing the supreme relevance of literature to the development of character, imagination, responsiveness to life, goes on declaring that books truly do "connect," he, nevertheless, concentrates in his day-to-day teaching on other matters. He busies himself introducing students to arcane literary hierarchies—the mystique of Great Books, etc. (Take a book, any book, *this* book.) The high school teacher and the college teacher function here in much the same ways. They assign on opening day a reading list—*Silas Lapham* or *Marner* or James Joyce or *Hard Times* ("You must have the trad, you see") or whatever. Everyone takes in, by implication, that this *is* the Subject: the first fact about literature is that there is high art and low and teacher knows the high. (The low is what other people read.) And teacher will tell you which is which even if you don't ask. The key illumination he offers is that the low—often the student's own or "natural" choice—is beneath mention, does not organize life, does not lay an order over against experience, cannot be usefully attended to with an eye toward discovering *its* relevance to human life.

He, the teacher, introduces students to arcane literary hierarchies, and, in addition, introduces them to "objective" structures, designs, and effects. And, he introduces them to the history of literature, the history of language, the lives of the great writers, their "philosophical outlook," and the development of literary form. (Shakespeare liberated the sonnet from Petrarch, John Donne liberated the sonnet from Shakespeare, then came the heroic couplet as released from Milton and soon the Romantic poets protested against the heroic couplet on behalf of the sloppier quatrain and then we have Ezra Pound.) And, the teacher sees himself always as the enemy of a slovenly enterprise known throughout the trade as "identifying." He is bound by professional convention to oppose student involvement with the text, "identification with the hero," and the like. The student may "identify," God forgive him, on his own time, but please to keep the muck of your life out of my classroom. Yet, simultaneously, the teacher is telling himself that *of course* he's concerned with the relation between literature and life. But there is a "field" to be "covered," isn't there? We do have a discipline, a design to be held in view? And "they" do have to be shown what good books and spelling really are, do they not?

English emasculated

For an inkling of the meaning of the situation I describe, I believe you have only to consider for a minute what the teaching life of men in other fields would be, were they placed in a relation to their subject comparable to that of many present-day English teachers. The professor of chemistry would be a professor of test-tubes, the professor of fine arts would be a commentator on paint and brushes, the physicist would be an authority on bouncing balls. Heat, light, electricity, organic compounds energy in the one case, images of man and God and nature in the other—these would vanish as matters of inquiry, if an emasculation comparable to the emasculation of English were accomplished elsewhere. In place of a subject, an area of life, a portion of nature, or existence, the disciplines would be empty—contentless, dimensionless, insubstantial.

How much can be said about English before it was emptied of content? (I am still setting forth assumptions, and it will be over in a moment.) What is its lost dimension, its lost substance? The substance of English is dramatic and presentational, a fullness, an embodiment, a wholeness, not an isolate or a swiftly nameable concentrate: not energy, not heat. But, as already indicated, a way toward a true sense of this subject does exist—one that leads through negatives. "English" is not centrally about the difference between good books and bad. It is not centrally about poetics, metrics, mysteries of versification, or the study of balance and antithesis in the Ciceronian sentence. It is not centrally about the history of literature, not centrally about changes in moral and philosophical systems as these can be deduced from abstracts of selected Great Works. Still more negatives: the English classroom is not primarily the place where students learn of the majesty of Shakespeare and alas for Beaumont and Fletcher. It is not primarily the place where students learn to talk about the structure of a poem or about the logic of the octave and sestet, or about the relation between the narrator and author and speaker and mock-speaker and reader and mock-reader of the poem. It is not primarily the place where students learn to mind their proper manners at the spelling table or to expand their vocabulary or to write Correct like nice folks. It is not a finishing school, not a laff riot with a "swinging prof," not an archeological site.

The human experience

It is the place—there is no other in most schools—the place wherein the chief matters of concern are particulars of humanness—individual human feeling, human response, and human time, as these can be known through the written expression (at many literary levels) of men living and dead, and as they can be discovered by student writers seeking through words to name and compose and grasp their own experience. English in sum is about my distinctness and the distinctness of other human beings. Its function, like that of some books called great, is to provide an arena in which the separate man, the single ego, can strive at once to know the world through art, to know what if anything he uniquely is, and what some brothers uniquely are. The instruments employed are the imagination, the intellect, and texts or events that rouse the former to life. And, to repeat, the goal is not to know dates and authors and how to spell *recommend;* it is to expand the areas of the human world —areas that would not exist but for art— with which individual man can feel solidarity and coextensiveness.

So much for rough assumptions and opinions about where we are. If they are obnoxious opinions, they aren't so because held by an art-baiter. Their root is the simple sense that the teaching of writing and reading can become an enclosed, sealed-off enterprise in danger of being locked into terms of discourse which, whether identified as those dominantly of historicism, aestheticism, professionalism, or technicism, are too unrelentingly self-referring to be worth praise.

I come now to my examples, intending to show what I complain against is visible in public reality.

Late last summer at Hanover, New Hampshire, some 40 or 50 English professors from England, America and Canada sat together, under the auspices of the Carnegie Foundation, the National Council of English teachers, and MLA to attempt to arrive at some good and just assumptions about English teaching. After a week or so of attitudinizing and speechmaking, people came to realize that they were being self-indulgent. The way to establish what one felt about teaching was to do some teaching, expend energy each before the other. So a committee chose a poem; our group was divided into classes of six or seven, and we were asked to brood about the chosen poem and then to suggest an age level or grade for which the poem seemed particularly suitable. With this grade in mind, we were to speak to: "What objectives would you hope to move towards in your classroom handling of the poem, what methods and approaches would you use?"

Ornamental concerns

The Hanover crowd was not undistinguished, by and large; some citizens were well known throughout the profession. But the episode in question was, in my view, a disaster. Talk about classroom objectives degenerated almost instantly into rancorous dispute about Taste. How good was the poem? "I hate it." "It's bad Hardy, ekshly." (I shall come in a moment to "the poem itself;" the paradigm is what matters here.) "Don't you think something a *little* better could have been found? I mean, can't he *tell* the difference?" etc. Next: a question about the relation between the poem and the genre, dramatic monologue: What other poems might be put into the equation? Next: Would the poem be read in class, when, by whom, how? So, there were demonstration readings, and it was agreed by the group that two of our number read well. But the question of the uses of the poem, the question how to place it in the classroom, how to set up vital relations between the student and these lines: Those matters seemed more or less without interest. Here was a bit of poetry which, like many another bit of poetry, would strike an inexperienced reader as "clipped out" from somewhere, torn from context, quite mystifying at first glance, a kind of uninvited guest, all unexpected. Yet, even the probable surprise of the poem to inexperienced students wasn't enough to shake the discussants out of the vacuum of taste and genre talk. Before I come back to the poem itself and make a commitment about proper classroom objectives, let me deal, in similar paradigmatic manner, with a classroom situation involving writing.

We are at the same conference. A successful high school English teacher from Cheyenne, Wyoming, presents a paper about grading compositions—in particular, about how to teach young people to revise. The teacher's exhibit is a paper written on the theme of "an important decision." The answer in the unrevised and revised theme that we are asked to consider draws on an uncommon experience from the world of sport. It is, at bottom, a world not only of sport but of cruelty—cruelty which the student, because of his closeness to a local culture, is unaware of. The instructor, calling for revision, directs his energies not to the task of awakening the student's consciousness to the cruelty of which he is oblivious; instead he deals with the problem as one of "technique," and calls for more colorful, precise "details"; as though the use of writing isn't to seek deeper comprehension of experience but to tart up "theme topics" with Timese.

The third voice

But, of course, from this distance the rights and wrongs of both episodes aren't visible. Let me first quote the poem just mentioned, Hardy's "The Man He Killed."

Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!

But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

I shot him dead because—
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although

He thought he'd 'list, perhaps
Offhand like—just as I—
Was out of work—had sold his traps—
No other reason why.

Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown.

What should one *care* about when one is teaching this poem? I must change the question quickly in order to fit it to my classroom, for I think it is probably a mistake to begin flatly with any poem, to begin any class as though the prime aim were to "do justice to the poem." I would say that the teacher does well to remind himself that the poem is the third voice in the room, and that he himself is not merely the servant of the poem, but the defender, interpreter, even perhaps celebrator, of the life and world of feeling. Saying it again: Only in his classroom are details of immediate, living, individual thought and feeling and response legitimate areas of interest and speculation. Well and good if he wants to say to himself: How can I show the organization of this poem? But he should add other words in the line of self-exhortation. He should remind himself that most men don't know what they feel, hence sometimes feel nothing; and the literature teacher and the writing teacher are men whose gifts and sensitivities are means by which others can be awakened to contrarieties and puzzles of ordinary response. The map of human relations and feelings known to the young is all Sahara usually; few marks on it except what the culture (or the rebel-culture) scratches—love of parents or hatred, pride in nation, pride in self, ambition, dutifulness, loyalty, unfocused cynicism. Flat counters, simplicities, socializing abstractions. Again and again, the work of imaginative literature populates the desert spaces, fills the blank tracts with probabilities of feeling.

At an interesting, though not primary level, "The Man He Killed" is a poem about meetings, about strangers encountering each other, establishing ways of acting toward each other, controlling the terms on which they will be known. But the poem is first of all a small rendering of a single man's experience of fathoming for himself the relation between bits of his own behavior and feelings, and the grand impassive concerns of the machine of is-ness beyond him—state, nation, army. Hardy is always brilliant at imagining and revealing the responses of relatively simple minds to enormous events or issues. As John Wain recently noted, Hardy's eye looks straight enough into homely, normal, workaday reactions to permit his reader to see how little truth there is in the notion that homely, normal, workaday reactions truly exist. A teacher with ability to retain control of his class while moving freely from conversation to text and back to conversation might decently and honorably begin with a question about how we place ourselves in relation to the state or nation. Do you ever have a citizen-feeling? When? Can you say much about it? Describe it? The Lincoln Memorial at night? Leaving New York harbor, returning? Watching an Inauguration on TV? What is it like to be a loyal citizen, do you think? What are the elements of this experience? Have you ever been in a quandary about where you are in relation to an Official Policy, a Public Decision, the Country itself? "This is my country"—how much ownership do you feel in the "my"?

Moving to consciousness

I would think a teacher beginning this way would want to turn away after five or ten minutes, proposing a poem as another voice in this conversation. There need not be endless agonizing about a perfect reading, or about the goodness or badness of the poem. Neither item matters as much as our opportunity to move with young minds to consciousness of how people go about making a sense of themselves as related in significant ways to the public weal, public choices, issues, wars.

But we won't move at all, will we, if we fail to do justice to the third stanza, sounding it as it should be sounded. More questions here. Shall we read it as though the man were answering confidently? No? Why so? Why is he not confident? How does he answer? You might say, with a sort of faintly over-acted concentration, frowning bemused overacted cudgeling of brains, "I am taking this problem very seriously, because I happen to be (within my limits—and do not think I'm without pride, I've got as much of that as the next man!) a serious, independent, thoughtful person." The questions here seem to point us not only at the man's way of working out a quandary, but at the art of the poem as well. For a great part of the latter does, after all, lie in the strained turning of the lines to follow simple hesitation and pauses on to the release of a wry, hand-lifted shrug. The movement of the words does indeed register the movement of a mind, a simple man seeming to think it out, seeming to "work something out for himself."

But we must get to the central point. How does the man "solve" this problem? Does he solve it? Here is somebody trying to fathom a public mystery: Why do I shoot and kill another man, under the sponsorship of the state? What does this fathoming amount to? Well, it amounts to a gesture and a tag: Life is paradoxical, "quaint and curious." The man meets his need by acting in a certain way. By doing a kind of homely philosophical turn. By making a kind of profundum-sound. By lifting a shoulder in a manner that says, We're not so dumb, y'know. We at least know we don't know anything and when we say that, we at least know a lot more than your super-educated blokes—them what thinks they know bloody well everything.

Lingering within mystery

How shall we "finish" our class? Perhaps not with homage to a poem. We may trail off asking whether, now that we are all familiar with the way in which questions don't get answers, we ourselves will be less inclined to accept our own pseudo-answers, our own postures of reconciliation, etc. Are we not protected? Will we know enough to press on to "real" answers? Why? Why not? And then at the end, what will the teacher tell himself? All I did today "in English" was show forth a little of the manner in which human beings face their puzzles, bridge the gap between their slim certainties and the complicated rationale of events, bridge it by accepting their socially imposed obligation to behave as though everything does finally add up. I have asked some questions that might oblige somebody, at some future moment when he is saying: Well, we all know life is a racket—or a paradox—or a joke—that might oblige such a man to stay a minute longer inside the mystery, instead of cutting it off with the word "paradox."

And, I say defensively, in these actions, I haven't much defaced the poem. The stillness in Hardy's stanzas, the part of the organization where for an instant the poem becomes quite good, is the moment at which the poem bodies forth in a speech rhythm a certain expressive curve of hesitation, followed by release toward "comprehension." The achievement of the poem is to give formed substance to a human effort to comprehend what is beyond comprehension. The triviality the mind offers in such efforts is carried in the silly-rote patness of the sounds—foe, so, foe, though. The small messy cluster of rhymes introduces words as words into the equation at just the instant when the man is discovering a word as a word—*foe* is "just a word," somebody's taught word. Just a foe, just so. Right. Foe's the right word. It is "right" because there is no way to move out of the suspension of thought in cliché, empty sound, or half-smiling gestures of reconciliation.

But we are not teaching the poem in order to celebrate a snippet of craft. No, no more than we are teaching it in deference to "life" or to "experience." Our deference is to the formed substance that the poem has made—the reality of one single man's particular way at a particular time with a particular companion of masking incomprehension as "understanding of a sort," the sense of what it is like to inhabit the skin of someone at the moment when he behaves as though he believes he "understands" what in truth is beyond his power of understanding. Our class hasn't precisely been "taught a poem." It has been in a conversation about understanding and blindness; and while the best voice in the conversations is the poem's voice, it is that only because *we* took it in, we showed ourselves what it created and how that creation comments on gestures of our own. And (one last point here), the teacher's art, if the conversation comes to anything, doesn't lie in his mastery of the poem alone. It lies in his or her approach to the great vision of the humanistic investigator found in Kierkegaard's *Concept of Dread*:

> . . . just as the psychological investigator must possess a greater suppleness than a tightrope walker, so that he can install himself within men's minds and imitate their dispositions: just as his taciturnity during periods of intimacy must be to some degree seductive and passionate, so that reserve can enjoy stealing forth, in this artificially achieved atmosphere of being quietly unnoticed, in order to feel relief, as it were in monologue: so he must have poetic originality within his soul, so as to be able to construct totality and orderliness from what is presented by the individuum [student or poet, I want to add] only in a condition of dismemberment and irregularity.

Bullriding

Less needs to be said about the other instance I cited: the writing episode. I want only to say that it doesn't seem to me that the good teacher of writing can see himself as a tutor in the craft of adding details, color, vividness, etc. His obligation is to move the student closer to the thing, to find the talk that will create a subject for the student, create a need for utterance, an eagerness to name a truth beyond the truth begun with. Here is the original paragraph which the Cheyenne teacher read to us. It is about bullriding:

> I had been riding bulls for 2 summers and wasn't doing too bad at it, when I was chased up a fence by a bull in Thermoplis. This didn't seem to affect me and I went right on riding; however, in Douglas this summer I rode a bull, and bucked off; and the bull came at me, hit me, then tried to bury me. After that I swore I wouldn't ride bulls again. In the same rodeo my buddy was riding a bareback horse and he fell under it getting kicked several times. Then I swore I would never ride horses or bulls again.

And here is the revision, produced after the teacher asked for more details.

> The day was on the chilly side. The sky was overcast and the wind was strong. Most contestants wore jackets when not up. Bull riding was the first event, and I was second out on a good spinning bull named Cork-screw. He was a big blue-grey brama with long horns protruding from his head like his big sagging ears.
>
> I nodded my head and the chute gate sprang open, and I then knew that this was going to be no picnic. He jumped high and began spinning to the left as if he was going to screw himself into the ground. I was just getting with the spinning bucks when he ducked out from under me, throwing me hard on my left shoulder. As I was rolling over from the force of the fall my eyes caught the huge animal throwing up dirt with his front feet, preparing to charge. I jumped to my feet and didn't waste any time getting to the fence, but my ton and a half friend was right on my tail. His head was lowered and snot was streaming out of his reddened nostril.

The snot in the nostril does not, I think, change the bull. It is one more bit of objective timese, one more "balding" or "blue-eyed" or whatever, one more pretense that the viewer does not affect the object viewed. The right question to ask the bullrider was, perhaps: What about the canvas strips wrenched up under the animal, crushing his scrotum? How can you think of them? Have you thought about why the animal bucks? Why does the animal not shriek?Why do we do this to them? Have you imagined this pain? Why do you yourself and I myself not care very greatly about it? Here is a dreadful, needless affliction of torment—a creature backing, rocking, tearing itself apart in air—and we are oblivious to the shrieking in these motions. Why so?

Questions of this sort seem to me to be analogous to the questions I wish to ask about the poem. They seek to remake a situation for the reader and the writer; they seek to shift the relation between the writer and the subject, edging him closer to the thing, pressing for the human response.

Someone tolerant of looseness but, nevertheless, troubled by all this asks: What makes you believe every teacher doesn't do exactly what you've just been talking about? I would instance, in answer, the papers I have read in the bound volumes of the last few Yale conferences of English teachers; I see no point in quoting passages, and I do not mean to set up against literary criticism, but these papers are presented as aids to teachers, and they seem to me by and large to speak to English teaching in different terms from those just set forth. And then, too, there are the episodes I cited, two among scores, from a recent and reputable international conference of teachers of English.

Study the thing

Someone else may ask: How could teachers with a subject as exhilarating in its contemplation as English let it slip from their hands? Especially when so many great voices, not mere doctors of philosophy like you, Professor D., have said loud and bold: study the *thing*. (Do not talk to me of artistry: Van Gogh. Tell me about the mudbank over there. Or Turgenev: If you want to know my stories, then know my *things*. "All the images rose up before me as things:" Coleridge.) Why should things—objects, feelings, situations—not stand in better with English teachers than they do? Nothing short of a book suffices to tell that story. There are enormously complicated community pressures toward innocuousness and toward a bootless "mastery of mechanics" (the citizen with no ideas, no vision of himself worth punctuating, but with a clear grasp of "punctuation mechanics" is the desiderated product).. And, there are a number of intellectual influences that are scarcely less important. One of these is the advent of special traditions of professionalism among literary men and teachers —first, the cult of historical research, later, the cult of design and structure. Another is the powerful thrust (coming partly through the Symbolist aesthetic) toward dismissal of the referential nature of works of literary art: The poem became a set of relations within itself, a fascinating clockworks that told no time. For different reasons, the student composition had already become something analogous—a lesson in the mastery of a particular progression of paragraphs, rather than a raid on the unexpressed. Still another distraction was the noisy, pointless dispute between historicists and new critics—an argument in which both parties were in agreement on a fundamental principle: Students should not be encouraged to study poems and novels as discoveries or clarifications or embodiments of life itself. (The teacher who chose up sides in this dispute had the illusion of opting for something "concrete"; in fact, he merely took on another abstraction.) There is, in addition, the tendency of some literary men of positivistic cast to aspire to the condition of scientist; in other words, clear out the human junk. Above everything, perhaps, there is the widespread and ignorant conviction that only the mindless can speak with interest about details of feeling. But, what person who has ever sought intensely and responsibly to know his own feelings in a particular situation could accept an account of that enterprise as intellectually unchallenging? The surest proof of the excruciating difficulty of achieving consciousness of one's own or another's responses is the rarity of effort toward that end. It is much easier to settle for public cant and private self-deception than to reach for the innerness of a man.

But the present need, as I said at the start, isn't for etiological surveys. Neither is it for long ponderings on the possibility that teaching which recovers a decent interest in the life embodied and represented in works of literary art (and in student composition) will lead to loss of taste, critical inexactitude, ignorance of our literary heritage, dumbness before the wonder of language. (The love of a melody cannot be lessened by attention to what the melody expresses, the pieces of life set in order and related one to the next within the tune.) Nor is it useful to agonize about the possibility that to deal with substantive matters to the English classroom means decreasing the distance between teacher and student and accepting, as a normal classroom event, face-to-face, abrasive encounters of assumptions, doubts, and longings.

For the truth is that the gains that could come from releasing the English teacher and student into the living world of their subject hugely outweigh any possible losses. These gains can even be fairly expressed in terms of significant national interests. It is the free man's awareness of himself as possessing a distinct life of feeling, a singularity of response, an individual tendency of time, that alone gives meaning and relish to the idea of freedom. And, in the contemporary state, there are massive forces ranged against every small encouragement and stimulation of that awareness, forces blandly denying the dream of individuality and the dream of self-knowledge. The English classroom is, ideally, the place where the latter dream is set under scrutiny, understood, valued, and interpreted. To reduce the classroom to a lesser place, to evade the substance of English in the name of stylistics, correctness, acquaintance with the classics, taste tests, colorful composition, is therefore to deny youth a good defense against the fate of mass men.

Not for salvation alone

What is being said here can be mocked, I must admit now at the end, as amounting to a merely therapeutic conception of the study of literature and composition. But there is nothing on earth, after all, that cannot be defaced with a *merely*. The argument that the right course for English studies or humanities courses is one that prizes the poem and the play as windows opening on a livingness that would otherwise be unseen and dead to the human eye, need not run into extravagance. There is no implicit claim that any man can be "saved" simply by such views and visions, simply by talking about his own relation to the state before meeting a poem embodying perplexities in that relation, simply by being pressed to consider the torment of the bull as well as the "need for lively detail." The argument holds only that the teacher and student who speak together of the things that books make palpable, who tell each other what they see and why they believe or disbelieve their eyes, can awaken in each other a stronger consciousness of humanness than that issuing either from an absorption in metrics or design or the hierarchy of taste. Is it not a fact that whatever serves the interest of that consciousness—the interest of a man's awareness of the immediacy of himself—also serves the highest interests of the highest art as well?