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Literature can play a prominent part in revitalizing the teaching of English because it can provide students with both immediate and future rewards. As an immediate reward, literature allows students to imaginatively experience situations which they have not yet encountered. It thus acts acts as a liberating force for young people from the confines of limited experience and inadequate knowledge of human nature. The "ultimate reward" of literature is obtained "through the chemistry of experience and verbal symbol." Through the metaphoric, imaginative language of literature, men can identify and indirectly come to terms with their fears and sorrows. Another reason why literature should figure prominently in the English curriculum is that the study of literature can be significantly related to the study of composition and language. The oral reading of literature, as well as dramatic activities, can not only provide an additional dimension of experience with literature but also help students gain further comprehension and appreciation. Also, three basic kinds of writing can grow out of the study of a literary work: interpretative and critical, imitative, and writing that derives from ideas, meanings, or literary elements. (SW)

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The RANGE of ENGLISH

NCTE 1968 DISTINGUISHED LECTURES

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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The Centrality of Literature in the English Curriculum

Dwight L. Burton

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Dwight L. Burton

When I argue the centrality of literature in the English curriculum, I do so not as apologist or lobbyist for the subject literature but as one concerned that the potential of English has not been realized in the education of youth and that, in fact, we may be on the brink of a massive failure in the subject we have required of students each school year from the first through the college freshman year.

In a talk at the convention of the NCTE in 1961, I said that the prevailing atmosphere of the English classroom in the public schools is one of boredom, and I think that this is still true, that except perhaps for verbally talented middle- and upper-class girls, among students generally the English course is regarded as basically jejune and feminine, a garden not populated by real toads.

My basic argument stems from the belief that if the English course is to attain greater stature in the minds of students, attain the significance it truly can have, it must offer immediate rewards as well as rewards which supposedly will come later when the student advances to the next school level, goes to college, or has leisure time at his disposal. The most important road to immediate rewards and the most profitable in the English class, I think, lies through contribution to the life of the imagination in which literature can play such an important role. Full-bodied study of literature, including the audio and visual as well as printed forms, can vitalize the English curriculum.

In the publication *Growth through English,* John Dixon writes that "English is a quicksilver among metals—mobile, living, and elusive. Its conflicting emphases challenge us today to look for a new coherent definition." [1] The use of "quicksilver" may give us pause. Is English a phony, not really as valuable as we have maintained? Certainly we have sought for a coherent definition as the profession has struggled for years with the question "What is English?" and as we have sought for a unifying element in the curriculum. Perhaps the most fashionable conclusion has been that the English language is this unifying element. But this is really not a very helpful conclusion. Where do we go from it? What forms or uses of English will receive the major emphasis? What kinds of involvement with language are most important for students?

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[1] John Dixon, *Growth through English* (Reading, England: National Association for the Teaching of English, 1967), p. 1.

Addressing himself to these questions in a recent essay, James E. Miller concludes that language is "at the center of human existence and experience, and it [Miller's view] places the imaginative (creative or symbolizing) rather than the logical (signifying or communicating) faculty at the center of linguistic life and growth." Further, "It follows from this concept that language should be at the center of any defensible curriculum, and that imaginative verbal experience (especially literature) should be at the heart of the language sequence." [2]

A bolder, perhaps startling, statement comes from the poet William Stafford in his *Friends to This Ground,* a statement for the Commission on Literature of the NCTE: "The decline of real religious commitment among the leaders and probably the mass of society forces a need onto other institutions as integrating factors in our social order. Two of the most appropriate integrating factors are education and literature." [3]

In quoting these sources out of context, I may be opening myself to a comparison with the drunk who leans against the lamp post for support rather than illumination. But I find these statements heartening not only because they support my argument but also because they indicate that the profession, and literary artists themselves, may be modifying the attitude that to speak of what literature can do for students, for people, is somehow unsophisticated. To say something like "the function in literature is to remain true to itself" is not enough to convince many people that what we have to offer is important.

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[2] James E. Miller, "Literature in the Revitalized Curriculum," *Bulletin of the NASSP,* 18 (April 1967), 29.

[3] William Stafford, *Friends to This Ground* (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1967), p. 3.

The English teaching community seems to have passed through three prevailing attitudes toward study of literature in the past three decades. In the later thirties and early forties, as the country emerged from an economic depression and entered World War II, teachers of literature displayed a marked inferiority complex, covertly admitting that literature was not, after all, very important in the school program. Practicality and immediacy were everywhere in the air. Literature did not seem to contribute much to the aims of secondary education then identified. Writers of textbooks on the curriculum assigned to literature a vague place in the esthetic development of the student or viewed literature as a kind of recreational dessert capping the solid nutriment of the really important components of the curriculum. Literature study as such disappeared in many junior high schools and in some senior high schools, as "core" programs or "common learnings" became widespread; and in the resulting "bloc," literature appeared only as ingenious teachers could drag it into units on "Modern Transportation" or "Home and Family Problems."

The era of the inferiority complex was succeeded by one characterized by a lofty, rather precious attitude toward the values of literary study. Literature, many teachers felt, offered a moral guide to life. There was a preoccupation with theme and idea. Slogans were legion. "Literature as Equipment for Living" was a phrase by the eminent critic and scholar Kenneth Burke. The author of this book wrote an article entitled "Literature and the Heightened Mind." The slogans were titillating but the sour fact was that in many classrooms literature study was not equipping for living nor heightening minds.

A period of reaction naturally followed, representing a delayed response in the high schools to the influence of the "New Criticism." Now literature was made a discipline and there was much emphasis on "close reading" of individual works. The function of literature was to be true to itself—whatever that meant to individual teachers. To be specific about the rewards of literature was to be somehow unsophisticated. Fear of "going outside the text" frequently resulted in overconcern with technique, and students groaned under the process of meticulously picking selections apart.

The profession at present seems to be in a period of synthesis and rapprochement in which the favorite word attached to literature study is "engagement." Reporting on the Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching of English held at Dartmouth College in September 1966, Herbert J. Muller wrote that a favorite theme of the seminar was that "The immediate object of the teacher should be to get the child actively 'involved' or 'engaged.' . . . In simpler terms, the teacher should make or keep literature alive, as it naturally is for little children."[4] There is concern, obviously, with getting students involved, intellectually and emotionally, with a work on its own terms so that a full literary experience will ensue. What is a "full-bodied" literary experience? What are its rewards or effects? Presumptuously, I offer a partial answer.

The humanistic critic Lionel Trilling, in his monograph *Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture,* says that "the function of literature, through all its mutations, has been to make us aware of the particularity of selves, and the high authority of the self in its quarrel with its society and its culture." This statement suggests that literature is liberating in the sense that it helps to free us from the inherent shackles fastened upon us by our society. Crucial in the quest for identity, as opposed to a deadening relating to the crowd, is the ability to shake off, when necessary, the emotional censors of society. One can do this in the literary experience, and therein lies the great enduring value of literature. Northrop Frye says something similar when he distinguishes among three levels of the mind which also represent three levels on which words are used: 1. The level of ordinary experience and necessary public self-expression. 2. The level on which language is used in the practical world to convey knowledge and information, the level on which language is used, that is, in organized bodies of knowledge and doctrine—philosophy, history, religion, etc. 3. The level of the imagination represented by the use of language in literature. These uses of language represent, to Frye, the dual categories of living, "what you have to do and what you want to do—in other words, necessity and freedom." The imaginative use of language, Frye says, allows a person to construct a "vision or model in your mind of what you want to construct."[5]

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[4] Herbert J. Muller, *The Uses of English* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 79.

It is a mistake, then, to view involvement in a selection of literature as merely a momentary escape from reality. Experience with literature enables the reader to build a level of imaginative living which is very real in itself and which lies somewhere between dead-level literalness and hallucination. Even in so-called escape reading, for example, one comes to terms with experience at the same time that he is escaping from it. An ingredient in growing up is the haunting trepidation about one's adequacy to play roles demanded by successive stages of life, and a lifetime is a long time to wait to find out what life is like. Thomas Bailey Aldrich notes at one point in *The Story of a Bad Boy* that "I certainly would have committed suicide if I could have done so without killing myself." And Tom Sawyer, at a low point in his romance with Becky, rues that fact that he can't die *temporarily.*

If I could only know what it is like to be in crucial situations, the young person agonizes, before I get into such situations! In a real sense, he can find out through literature. One reason, then, why imaginative literature is so important in the quest for the "I," for identity, is that it serves as pre-experience on the imaginative level. Thus the thirteen-year-old girl may enjoy reading a novel about a seventeen-year-old girl's first serious love affair more than may the seventeen-year-old. And the teen-aged boy's interest in war stories does not necessarily indicate a morbid zest for blood and violence but affords him a vicarious tryout in the most crucial of all human situations, the facing of death.

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[5] Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1964), pp. 17–21.

It seems appropriate to the writer to note here that there is, in general, a need for greater permissiveness and flexibility in school libraries and classrooms. Teachers and librarians are sometimes too concerned with the quality of books made available to students. By all means young people should be introduced to works of high literary quality, but it is important to realize, too, that there is a vital developmental dimension in enthusiasm for reading.[6] Studies show that adults who are enthusiastic readers of mature works almost invariably went through an undiscriminating, voracious state in their reading in which they devoured tons of frequently trashy and juvenile pages of the vintage, for example, of the Bobbsey Twins, Nancy Drew, Tom Swift, or the Joseph Altsheler books.

It has become clear that many of the restrictions on the kinds of books and other reading materials to be placed in libraries and classrooms have crippling effects on reading interest. There is sometimes an invidious, and often unconscious, censorship on reading imposed at the very points where restrictions of the right to read should be resisted most vigorously, represented by teachers who insist that students should spend their time reading only "great" books, literary masterpieces, and by policies of not stocking certain kinds of books in school libraries or not permitting some books to be in general circulation—though one must be sympathetically aware of the complexities surrounding such policies. Frequently, though, adults underestimate the power of emotion on the part of young people and their potential for coping with powerful emotion in what they read.

The general point I am making is that literature is a liberating force. For young people, especially, it liberates first through helping to free them from the emotional and intellectual blockings that result from inadequate knowledge of human nature. A book or a story or a play or a poem may help to ease what James Street called "just the damn hurt of youth, which I contend is not a happy time, but a rather terrifying time of doubts."

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[6] Daniel Fader, *Hooked on Books* (New York: Berkley Publishing Corp., 1966), furnishes an object lesson

A book such as James Street's own *Goodbye, My Lady,* for example, can do for youngsters what all literature can do—illuminate beauty. And the youngster is more likely to associate beauty with a dog and the natural sounds of the swamp than with, say, a field of daffodils; but the beauty of the daffodils or a Grecian urn or a stand of birch trees or a brickyard by moonlight may become real later, through the chemistry of experience and verbal symbol.

The chemistry of experience and verbal symbol bears repeating, not for any lyrical value it may have, but because it is the key, probably, to the ultimate reward of literature. Literature brings insights into human experience because of some of the properties of its subject matter. Certain other disciplines, however—psychology, sociology, ethics, for example—have some of these same properties and furnish certain kinds of insights, too. But the unique way of knowing to which literature leads—call this "felt knowledge"—arises from the particular functions of *language* in imaginative literature, the particular interplay of language and content.

It is a unique power of literature to help us, as Wallace Stevens phrased it, "not to fear to step barefoot into reality." The language of literature gives us the metaphors before which our most toxic fears dissolve. Each person, consciously or unconsciously, for example, feels at his back "Time's winged chariot hurrying near." Fear of death is a human legacy. It is impossible for most people to think of death in any but a metaphorical way, religious or otherwise. Browning in the poem "Prospice" finds his metaphors: "the snows begin and the blasts denote I am nearing the place . . . the press of the night . . . the fog in my throat . . . the mist in my face." Tennyson chose other metaphors: "Sunset and evening star, and one clear call for me."

To identify metaphorically the fears that obsess one is to experience the power of tragedy "in which all man's knowledge, wisdom, joy, sorrow, triumph, despair—and even the awareness of death's inevitable hour—may come together in a pattern of rhythm, imagery, reason, and emotion." [7] Tragedy as represented in the total metaphor of a *Moby Dick* or *King Lear*, for example, is a realistic conquering of evil, I think, for evil to me is represented by the debilitating fears and temptations that beset one.

But one need not talk only about high tragedy in this connection. There are lesser fears and confusions against which the power of metaphoric language is a major defense. Thomas Wolfe, in his archetypal wanderings in the dead of the Brooklyn night or through the dream-laden streets of his boyhood town, concluded in the last words he wrote for publication, "I believe that we are lost here in America, but I believe we shall be found . . . A wind is rising and the rivers flow." [8] In the symbolism of rivers and winds, with their timelessness and inexorable movement, Wolfe found the stay of anguish so essential in the separate peace everyone must negotiate. Archibald MacLeish, knowing that he could not grasp, as Omar Khayyam put it, "this sorry scheme of things entire," wrote during the confusions and inchoate yearnings of his expatriate years, "America is West and the wind blowing/America is alone and the gulls calling."

It is sometimes through the ironic metaphor that one finds comfort as did Toulouse Lautrec when he declared sourly that "Marriage is a dull meal with the dessert at the beginning," or as did the children in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* as they viewed their not-too-welcome aunt: "Like Mt. Everest, she was cold and she was there."

This relationship of imaginative language to the preoccupations that lie below the threshold of expression is a particularly important one to young people, for whom the emotional conflicts of adulthood are still amorphous. To look over the brink into the abysses of life and to return unafraid is a catharsis literature provides.

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[7] Albert Upton, *Design for Thinking* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1961), p. 219.

[8] Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1960), pp. 669, 671.

When I speak of the centrality of literature in the English curriculum, I do so then because of the inherent values of literature study per se but also because literature study can be related significantly to the study of composition and language, though I do not feel that all the students' experiences in composition or language can or should be related to literature. I am concerned that the rather wide acceptance of a "tri-component" curriculum of literature, language, and composition may lead to compartmentalization of these components and a resultant dehumanization of the curriculum in which language study smacks of the scientific, composition is solely skill oriented, literature is the "esthetic" component, and mass media are ignored.

All of these components can represent humanistic study in themselves, but when they are related at appropriate points the sum is something greater than study of each part in isolation can produce. I want to discuss now some of these points of relationship.

Let me turn first to the integration of literature and oral and written communication. There is a recognition today—and I think a very healthful one—both in England and the U.S. of the need for greater attention to spoken language in the classroom. I would refer you, for instance, to the pamphlet *Some Aspects of Oracy*, published by the National Association for the Teaching of English in England in 1965. One result of the increased interest in oral language is an acceleration of attempts to integrate oral language activities with the study of literature, and there seem to be two major points of contact—oral reading of literature and dramatic activities.

Oral reading of literature long has been a feature in elementary and secondary English classrooms, but sometimes, it seems to me, it has been put to the wrong uses: for example, the teacher has the students take turns reading a selection aloud, sometimes as a substitute for prepared teaching; or there is a word-by-word oral reading of Shakespeare or some other author because the students have difficulty reading the selection silently. These procedures are a sure safeguard against enjoyment, but oral reading can be a valuable concomitant of literature study and has two major functions, I think, in contributing to the literature program. The first is the esthetic function of providing another dimension of experience with literature; the second is the practical function of helping students to gain further comprehension and appreciation.

It seems important to give students the opportunity to read literature orally and to hear skillful reading of prose and poetry because language is a source of enjoyment. Little children are keenly aware of the esthetic properties of language as they chant and gabble, and this awareness can be capitalized upon in the early school years through oral and choral reading. I have heard elementary groups virtually raise the roof with their rendition, say, of "The Pirate Don Durk of Dowdee." If it is to have esthetic promise, oral reading usually should be prepared in advance, for impromptu stumbling through a selection can be agony for both reader and class. The teacher who himself is a skillful reader of literature has a real advantage, as do his classes, and there is some tendency, which I hope will be accelerated, to give prospective teachers some training in oral interpretation. There are also rich opportunities for students to hear professional readers and literary artists themselves on records or tapes. The NCTE and various commercial agencies have made available a great array of recordings of readings of literature, and every teacher should have some of these at his disposal.

But there is the practical function of oral reading, too—that of increasing comprehension and appreciation. It is helpful sometimes, for example, for students to hear a recorded reading of a selection while they follow the printed text. This may be especially beneficial with groups of lesser ability. Oral reading of selections or passages may be important sometimes, too, in making students aware of the effects of literary devices. Certain poems, for example, must be read aloud if some students are to sense the effect of particular types of rhyme or meter or if such devices as onomatopoeia are discussed, and the significance of certain patterns of syntax in prose may become clearer sometimes when passages are read orally.

Dramatic activities, the second major point of contact between literature and oral language, long have been prominent in elementary schools but have had little place in English programs at higher levels. Some educators now are demanding that at all levels emphasis be put on dramatic activities; and they cite various purposes, among them provision of imaginative experience, promotion of fluency of expression, and therapy for the pupil. The major contribution to literature study, apparently, is again in aiding comprehension. On this point, the Englishman J. W. Patrick Creber writes in a book on teaching English entitled *Sense and Sensitivity*:

> . . . many novels offer situations that may lend themselves to dramatic treatment, but it is worth noting that this is essentially a two-way process, for the acting out of such situations may be expected to modify and deepen the actor's comprehension of the novel whence they were taken. Furthermore the children's receptivity to a particular play may sometimes be notably improved by dramatic improvisation on some of the situations, themes and characters it contains, before the play itself is read. Occasionally the understanding of the bias of the play may be helped by enacting a scene on the same lines as one actually in it, but concentrating upon the feelings of characters who achieve no such prominence in the original. Devices such as these are particularly helpful when working on plays where the language constitutes an initial barrier that is often never effectively overcome when the text is studied *in vacuo*.[9]

Like Creber, James Moffett in the recent NCTE monograph *Drama: What Is Happening* assigns important contributions to dramatic improvisation:

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[9] J. W. Patrick Creber, *Sense and Sensitivity* (London: University of London Press, 1965), p. 93.

> Before a child can enjoy drama in script form—play reading—he can do so by creating the imitative actions of which scripts are a blueprint. Later, his power to bring a script alive in his mind is constantly recharged by his continued experience in inventing dramas. . . .
>
> . . . improvisation can be used as an entrée into a literary work soon to be read: the teacher abstracts key situations—say, Cassius' efforts to persuade Brutus to join the conspiracy—and assigns this as a situation to improvise before students read the work, so that when they do read it they already have an understanding of what is happening or of how differently the characters *might* have behaved. This kind of prelude also involves students more with the text.[10]

I suppose that when I turn now to the relationship of literature study and written composition, most of you, especially those who teach in the high school and college, will feel that you are on more familiar ground. Much of the writing program, though not necessarily all, may grow out of the study of literature to the advantage of both strands of the curriculum. There are three basic kinds of writing, I think, related to study of literature which we can consider: (1) Noncritical writing for which ideas or literary elements in a selection serve as springboards; (2) Interpretative and critical writing; (3) Imitative writing.

Writing that stems from ideas or meanings in a work is common in English classrooms, writing triggered by literary elements much less so. In the first type, literature serves as motivation and furnishes preparation. Students may have studied *Antigone,* for example, and identified the conflict of allegiances which was Antigone's dilemma. They are asked then to write about similar conflicts of allegiance which contemporary life may present.

Writing and literature can be brought together, though, in a more reciprocal relationship when writing activities are designed to clarify or reinforce understanding of literary structure and technique. A tenth-grade class had read Pierre Boulle's ironic novel, *Face of a Hero,* for example, and had worked with the concept of irony. They were then assigned a paper in which they were to describe a scene or event or relate an incident which was ironic, thus reinforcing their understanding of irony and allowing the teacher to assess their level of understanding.

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[10] James Moffett, *Drama: What Is Happening* (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1967), pp. 27, 28.

Interpretation and criticism of literature continues to be today, as in the past, the most frequent type of writing about literature and may take many forms, of course, but the objective of any form is again to deepen student understanding and appreciation.

The major criterion for student assignments in interpretation and criticism, I think, is that they be addressed to specific points about a work. Overall commentary on a selection, as in the traditional "book report," is usually of little value to the student in sharpening his perception. Among the most appropriate kinds of critical and interpretative writing in the elementary school, secondary school, and junior college are these: analysis of actions of characters; discussion of the ways character is developed in a work; interpretation of specific passages, events, or symbols; comparison of works on specific points; discussion of the ways theme is developed in a work; criticism of specific techniques; support or refutation of a generalization about a work.

Imitative writing, a stock-in-trade of the English class earlier in the century, apparently is the object of a minor revival today. Its value to literary study long has been debated and still is not clear. The argument for it often has been based on analogies with other activities: for example, that one will watch a bowling match with greater enjoyment and understanding if he has tried his hand at bowling. Yet evidence that imitative writing contributes to greater ability to read literature is wanting, probably in part because of the difficulty of establishing such evidence.

Aside from its possible contribution to literature study, though, imitative writing may have inherent values in providing another kind of imaginative experience and in injecting some variety into the classroom. Certainly pupils should be given a chance to try their hands at imaginative forms from fable to *haiku*, but imitation of stylistic and syntactic models apparently is the major direction of imitative writing today. One teacher, James McCampbell, explains in the *English Journal* that he has his students read a given passage or selection and analyze its patterns. They then invent their own substance to fit the patterns. McCampbell maintains that "The structural conventions of our language are a key to understanding literature as well as improving composition, a theory to be proved." [11]

When I turn to the connections of language study and literature, I have less to say because I am less sure of the significance of the connection than I am of that between literature and composition. Literature is language used in certain ways and in certain forms so that, in the basic sense, study of literature *is* study of language. Obviously literature can become involved in any aspect of language study from history of the language to phonology. Interest has quickened in linguistic analysis of literature, though linguistic approaches are probably not very profitable with students below the college level. How to develop approaches that will exploit relationships to the benefit of both language study and literature study is frontier work that needs doing. One such viable relationship, I think, is in the field of dialects where students can study the use of dialect in literature as they study dialects in general. The recent NCTE booklet, *Discovering American Dialects* by Roger Shuy, has a useful section on dialects in literature which includes suggestions for specific approaches and student activities.

I stated at the beginning a belief that we may be on the brink of a massive failure in the teaching of English unless a way can be found to real revitalization of the subject. A curriculum in which full-bodied study of literature is central can be the way to revitalization. The position of English today suggests the story of Damocles. You recall that he was invited by Dionysius the Elder to a sumptuous feast, during which he looked up to see a great sword suspended above his head by a single horsehair. Will the sword of student and public impatience fall, bringing oblivion to the subject English? Or will the subject survive?—for school subjects have a way of surviving long after their real significance is gone. Or, to carry on the Faulknerian metaphor, will English prevail because of its potentialities? To this challenge I direct your attention.

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[11] James McCampbell, "Using Models for Improving Composition," *English Journal*, 55 (September 1966), 772–776.