Teaching Humane Literature in High Schools

In many American high schools, the teaching of literature is in the sere and yellow leaf. One reason for this decay is the unsatisfactory quality of many programs of reading; another is the limited knowledge of humane letters possessed by some well-intentioned teachers, uncertain of what books they ought to select for their students to digest well.

In this brief essay, I propose to suggest, first, the sort of literature which ought to be taught; and then to list certain works of imaginative letters, poetry, novels, plays, philosophical studies, and other branches of letters not embraced by the natural sciences or by social studies, especially commendable for this purpose. T. S. Eliot remarked that it is not so important what books we read, as that we should read the same books. He meant that a principal purpose of studying literature is to give us all a common culture, ethical through the works of the mind. There exist a great many good books, Eliot knew: of these many commendable books, we need to select for general study a certain elevated few for particular attention, that nearly everyone may share in our cultural patrimony. This is my purpose here, though I claim no sovereign authority, and stand ready to have other people substitute books of equal merit for some or many of the titles I suggest.

What is wrong with the typical high-school anthology or program of literature nowadays? I am of the considered opinion that the usual courses in literature, from the ninth grade though the twelfth (also, generally, in lower grades), suffer from two chief afflictions. The first of these is a misplaced eagerness for ”relevance.” The second of these is a kind of sullen purposelessness, a notion that literature, if it has any end at all, is meant either to stir up discontents, or

else merely to amuse. Let me touch briefly here on both troubles.

Literature certainly ought to be relevant to something. But to what? Too many anthologists and teachers fancy that humane letters ought to be relevant simply to questions of the hour. the latest political troubles, the fads and foibles of the era, the concerns of commercial television or of the daily newspaper. Such shallow relevance to the trivial and the ephemeral must leave young people prisoners of what Eliot called the provinciality of time: that is, such training in literature is useless to its recipients within a few years, and leaves them ignorant of the enduring truths of human nature and of society.

Genuine relevance in literature, on the contrary, is relatedness to what Eliot described as ”the permanent things:” to the splendor and tragedy of the human condition, to constant moral insights, to the spectacle of human history, to love of community and country, to the achievements of right reason. Such a literary relevance confers upon the rising generation a sense of what it is to be fully human, and a knowledge of what great men and women of imagination have imparted to our civilization over the centuries. Let us be relevant in our teaching of literature, by all means, but relevant merely to what will be thoroughly irrelevant tomorrow.

As for the second affliction, purposelessness, the study of literature would not have been the principal content of formal schooling for many centuries, had humane letters seemed to offer only a kind of safety-valve for personal discontents, or else merely a form of time-killing, the filling of idle hours. In every civilized land, literary studies were taken very seriously indeed until recent decades. Literature and related arts usually were called ”rhetoric,” in times past; and this word ”rhetoric” means ”the art of persuasion, beautiful and just.” Literature, in short, was and is intended to persuade

people of the truth of certain standards or norms. Literature has been regarded as the peer of theology and philosophy because literature's real purpose is quite as serious as the purposes of theology and philosophy. But literature's proper method differs from the methods of theology and philosophy. Unlike these disciplines, literature is supposed to wake us to truth through the imagination, rather than through the discursive reason. Humane letters rouse us to the beautiful and the just through symbol, parable, image, simile, allegory, fantasy, and lively example. The purpose of literature is to develop the moral imagination. If human beings do not feel the touch of the moral imagination, they are as the beasts that perish.

Or, to put it another way, the aim of humane letters, of our courses in "lit" or (hideous phrase) "communications skills," is to form the normative consciousness. That I may make myself clear, indulge me here in a digression directly related to this general topic of what books to study in literature courses.

Until very recent years, civilized folk took it for granted that literature exists to form the normative consciousness: that is, to teach human beings their true nature, their dignity, and their rightful place in the scheme of things. Such has been the end of poetry, in the larger sense of that word, ever since Job and Homer.

 The very phrase "humane letters" implies that literature is meant to teach us the character of human normality. This is an ethical discipline, intended to develop the qualities of manliness, or *humanitas*, through the study of important imaginative books. The literature of nihilism, of pornography, and of sensationalism, arising in the eighteenth century and stronger still in our time, because of the decay of the religious understanding of life and of the Great Tradition in philosophy, is a recent development. Or rather, it is a recent

disease.

This normative end of letters has been particularly powerful in English literature, which never succumbed to the egoism that came to dominate French letters at the end of the eighteenth century. The names of Milton, Bunyan, Dryden, and Johnson, or, in America, of Hawthorne, Emerson, Melville, and Henry Adams, may be sufficient illustrations of this point. The great poplar novelists of the nineteenth century, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, all assumed that the writer lies under a moral obligation to normality: that is, explicitly or implicitly, he is bound by certain enduring standards of private and public conduct.

Now I do not mean that the great writer incessantly utters homilies. With Ben Jonson, he may scourge the follies of the time, but he does not often murmur, ”Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever.” Rather, the man of letters teaches the norms of our existence, often rowing with muffled oars. Like William Faulkner, the writer may write much more about what is evil than about what is good; and yet, exhibiting the depravity of human nature, he establishes in his reader’s mind the awareness that there endure standards from which we may fall away; and that fallen nature is an ugly sight. Or the writer may deal chiefly, as did P. Marquand, with the triviality and emptiness of a smug society which has forgotten norms. The better the artist, one almost may say, the more subtle the preacher. Imaginative persuasion, not blunt exhortation commonly is the strategy of the literary champion of norms.

This principle prevailed almost until the end of the eighteenth century. Since then, the egoism of one school of the Romantics has obscured the primary purpose of humane letters. And many of the Realists have written of man as if he were brute only, or, at best, brutalized by institutions. In our ownÂ time, and especially in America, we have seen the rise to popularity of a school of writers more nihilistic than

ever were the Russian nihilists: the literature of merde, of disgust and denunciation, sufficiently described in Edmund Fuller's mordant study *Man in Modern Fiction* (1958). To the members of this school, the writer is no defender or expositor of norms: for he fancies that there are no standards to explain or defend; a writer merely registers, unreservedly, his disgust with humanity and with himself, and makes money by it. (This is a world away from Jonathan Swift, who, despite his loathing of most human beings, detested them only because they fell short of what they were meant to be.)

Yet the names of our twentieth-century nihilists will be forgotten in less than a generation, I suspect, while there will endure from our age the works of a few men and women of letters whose appeal is to the enduring things, and therefore to posterity. I think, for instance, of Gironella's novel *The Cypresses Believe in God* (1951). The gentle novice who trims the hair and washes the bodies of the poorest of the poor in old Gerona, though he dies by Communist bullets, will live a long space in the realm of letters, while scantily disguised personalities of our nihilistic authors, swaggering nastily as characters in the best-sellers, will be extinguished the moment when the public's fancy veers toward some newer sensation. For as the normative consciousness breathers life into the soul and into the social order, so the normative understanding gives an author lasting fame.

Malcolm Cowley, writing a few yeas ago about the recent crop of first-novelists, observed that several writers he had discussed scarcely had heard of the Seven Cardinal Virtues or of the Seven Deadly Sins. To these young novelists, crimes and sins are merely mischances; real love and real hatred are absent from their books. To this rising generation of writers, the world seems purposeless, and human action meaningless. And Cowley suggested that these young men and women, introduced to no norms in childhood and youth except the vague attitude that one is entitled to do as one likes, so long as it doesn't

injure someone else, are devoid of spiritual and intellectual discipline, are empty, indeed, of true desire for anything but notoriety.

This sort of aimless and unhappy writer is the product of a time in which the normative function of letters has been badly neglected. Ignorant of his own mission, such a writer tends to think of his occupation as a mere skill, possibly lucrative, sometimes satisfying to one's vanity, but dedicated to no end. Even the "proletarian" writing of the twenties and thirties acknowledged an end; but that has died of disillusion and inanition. If writers are in this plight, in consequence of the prevailing "permissive" climate of opinion, what of their readers? Comparatively few book-readers nowadays seek normative knowledge. They are after amusement, sometimes of a vicariously gross character, or else purser a vague "awareness" of current affairs and superficial intellectual currents, suitable for cocktail-party conversation. Nature abhorring a vacuum, into minds vacant of norms must come some force, sometimes force of diabolical bent.

Literature can corrupt; and it is possible, too, to be corrupted by an ignorance of humane letters, much of our normative knowledge necessarily being derived from our reading. The person who reads bad books instead of good may be subtly corrupted; the person who reads nothing at all may forever adrift in life, unless he lives in a community still powerfully influenced by what Gustave Thibon calls "moral habits" and by oral tradition. And absolute abstinence from printed matter has become rare. If a small boy does not read *Treasure Island* (1883), odds are that he will read *Mad Ghoul Comics*.

So I think it worthwhile to suggest the outlines of the literary discipline which induces some understanding of enduring standards. For centuries, such a program of reading, though never called a program, existed in Western nations. It strongly influenced the minds and actions of the leaders of

the infant American Republic, for instance. If one pokes into what books were read by the leaders of the Revolution, the Framers of the Constitution, and the principal men of America before 1800, one finds that nearly all of them were acquainted with a few important books: the King James version of the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678-84), Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, something of Cicero, something of Virgil, perhaps the *Book of Common Prayer*. This was a body of literature highly normative. The founders of this Republic thought of their new commonwealth as a blending of the Roman Republic with prescriptive English institutions; and they took for their models in leadership the prophets and kings and apostles of the Bible, and the great Greeks and Romans of antiquity. Cato's stubborn virtue, Demosthenes " eloquent vaticinations, Cleomenes" rash reforming impulsem these were in their mind" eyes; and they tempered their conduct accordingly. "But nowadays," Chateaubriand wrote in nineteenth century, "statesmen understand only the stock-market, and that badly."

Of course the understanding of the framers of the Constitution was formed by more than books. They learnt the nature of reality in the business of life, as well as in family, church, and school. Yet great books counted for much with them.

For we cannot apprehend enduring standards of conduct or of taste if we rely only on personal experience. Private experiment with first principles frequently is ruinous, and at best time-consuming; while, as John Henry Newman wrote, "Life is for action." Therefore we turn to the bank and capital of the ages, the normative wisdom found in literature, if we seek guidance in great concerns. Ever since the invention of printing, the printed page has had a large part in molding opinions. Sometimes this is no better than what D. H. Lawrence called "hewing the newspapers." Courses in literature are supposed to lift us above mere newspaper-chewing.

For some fifty years, in America, we have been failing to

develop the normative consciousness of young people through the systematic and careful study of great literature. We have talked about ”education for life”and ”training for life-adjustment;” yet many of us seem to have forgotten that literary disciplines are a principal means for learning to accept the conditions of existence. Moreover, unless the life to which we are urged to adjust ourselves is governed by norms, it must be a wretched life for everyone.

One of the faults of the typical ”life-adjustment” curriculum has been the substitution of ”real-life” reading for the study of truly imaginative literature. A young teacher of high-school English tells me that her tenth-grade pupils do not take to the stories of virtuous basketball players, dutiful student nurses, and other ”real-life” idols thrust upon them. These pupils turn, instead, to what they may procure at the corner drugstore: Ian Fleming, Mickey Spillane, or worse. If we deprive young people of imagination, adventure, and heroism, they are not likely to embrace Good Approved Real-Life Tales for Good Approved Real-Life Boys and Girls. On the contrary, they will sort to the dregs of letters, rather than be bored. And the consequences will be felt not only in their failure of taste, but in their misapprehension of human nature, lifelong; and, eventually, in the whole temper of a people.

Nowadays the advocates of life-adjustment education give a little ground sullenly, before their critics. The intellectual ancestor of their doctrines was Rousseau. Although I am no warm admirer of the notions of Rousseau, I relish still less the doctrines of Gradgrind, in Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1845). So I hope that life-adjustment methods of teaching may not be supplanted by something yet worse. A mistaken zeal for vocational training in place of normative instruction; and emphasis upon the physical and biological sciences that would push literature into a dusty corner of the curriculum; and attempt to secure spoken competence in foreign languages at

the expense of the great works of our own language, these might be changes in schooling as hostile toward the imparting of norms through literature as anything which the life-adjustment folk have perpetrated.

What I have written here ought to be commonplace. Yet these ideas seem to have been forgotten in many quarters. This normative endeavor ought to be the joint work of family and church and school. As the art of reading often is better taught by parents than it can be taught in a large schoolroom, so a knowledge of good books comes from the home at least as frequently as from the classroom.

Whether one's reading tastes are developed in the school, the public library, or the family, there are certain patterns of reading by which a normative consciousness is developed. These patterns or levels persist throughout one's education (whether it is school-learning or self-instruction). We may call these patterns fantasy; narrative history and biography; imaginative creations in prose of verse; and philosophical writing (in which I include theology).

With these levels or patterns in mind, I have arranged a sample program of reading for the concluding four years of secondary schooling. I list only works in the English language (or translations which have become part and parcel of English literature) both because my space is limited and because really "foreign"' literature should be taught in classes in French, German, Spanish, and the like.

I repeat that I do not insist on the particular books suggested below, although I thinkÂ them excellent ones; all I am trying to do here is to suggest the general tone and quality of a good program in humane letters. I have included some old school favorites because their merit and importance have not diminished; on the other hand, I have excluded some old chestnuts (like George Eliot's *Silas Marner* [1861]), because they were never first rate.

Because style and wisdom did not expire with the nineteenth century, among my selections are a number of our better recent authors. Students between the ages of thirteen and eighteen ought to be treated as young adults, actually or potentially capable of serious thought; therefore this is not a list of "children's books." But neither is it an exercise in pop culture and contemporaneity.

These are books calculated to wake the imagination and challenge the reason. None ought to be too difficult for young people to apprehend well enough, provided that they are functionally literate.

Ninth-grade Level

For this year I emphasize fantasy, in the larger sense of the abused word. If young people are to begin to understand themselves, and to understand other people, and to know the laws which govern our nature, they ought to be encouraged to read allegory, fable, myth, and parable. All things begin and end in mystery. Out of tales of wonder comes awe, and the beginnings of philosophy. The images of fantasy move us lifelong. Sir Osbert Sitwell, when asked what lines of poetry had most moved him in all his life, replied candidly, "Froggie would a-wooing go, whether his mother would let him or no."

So here are my fantastic recommendations,

John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678-84)

William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1596-96)

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) or (perhaps preferably) *The Marble Faun* (1860)

Robert Louis Stevenson, *Kidnapped* (1886) or one of his volumes of short stories

Ray Bradbury, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962) or *Dandelion Wine* (1957) (Bradbury is something far better than

an accomplished ”science fiction writer;” he is a man of remarkable ethical insights and great power of style.)

Walter Scott, *Old Mortality* (1816) or *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818), (These are much more important romances than is *Ivanhoe* (1819), so commonly taught).

Select poems of Spenser, Burns, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson, Whittier, Longfellow, Chesterton, Kipling, Masefield, Yeats, Frost, and others, selected with and eye to the marvelous and the mysterious.

Tenth-grade Level

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe (1719-20)*

William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607-08); *Henry V* (1509-99)

Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail* (1847); or *History of the Conspiracy of Pontiac* (1851)

Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn* (1884); or *Life on the MIssissippi* (1883)

Plutarch, select *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* (1914-28), (probably in the Dryden-Clough translation)

William Makepeace Thackeray, *Henry Esmond* (1852)

Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography* (1771-90)

(These choices, like those for ninth-grade students, range widely in time and approach; but all are very readable. They offer something to every educable student.)

Eleventh-grade Level

Here, as ”imaginative creations,”I recommend for the third year of high school certain books which require serious interpretation and discussion.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667)

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*(1726) (only two or three voyages thereof) (Need it be remarked that Gulliver was not intended for the amusement of children?)

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851); or selected short stories

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1860-61); or *Bleak House* (1852)

T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) (No drama is more relevant to the conflict of loyalties in the twentieth century.)

George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (1945)

Select poems of a philosophical cast-George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Andrew Marvell, Samuel Johnson, Oliver Goldsmith, Alexander Pope, and others chiefly of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

(Fiction is truer than fact: I mean that in great fiction we obtain the distilled judgments of writers of remarkable perceptions, views of human nature and society which we could get, if unaided by books, only at the end of life, if then.)

Twelfth-grade Level

This is the year for developing a philosophical habit of mind through close attention to humane letter. "Scientific" truth, or what is popularly taken for scientific truth, alters from year to year, with accelerating speed in our time, but poetic and moral truths change little with the elapse of centuries; and the norms of politics are fairly constant.

Select *Epistles* of St. Paul (King James version), taught as literature (I assure you that this is quite constitutional, even in public schools.)

William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (1605-06); or *Coriolanus* (1608-9)

Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas* (1759)

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (preferably in Long's translation)

C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (1942); or *The Great Divorce* (1946)

Christopher Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus* (1604)

Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim (1900);* or *Nostromo* (1904)