

FORUM

JUSTIFYING LITERARY STUDY IN AESTHETIC TERMS BY DAVID V. HARRINGTON

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Would it be a distortion of recent trends in MCTE activities and policies to say that the values in literary study are more nearly taken for granted than openly defended? In the past ten years or so, the leaders of the NCTE as well as our state leaders have emphasized the need for more emphasis on linguistics and rhetoric, the need for more systematic attention to composition teaching, to the point where just about any conscientious classroom teacher might feel ashamed of himself for devoting most of his time to the study of literature. In fact, we devote very little time to discussion of the values of literary study.

Nobody connected with our profession is actually opposed to literary study. We are not told to give it up or neglect it or even minimize it. But, on the other hand, nobody is advocating more emphasis on literary study, exalting it, urging its necessity for all students. It is this negative trend which strikes me as peculiar for such a large and sophisticated group of English teachers. It seems to me that most of us are attracted to the field of English through the experience of literary study. I doubt whether many English teachers are capable of defining in clear logical terms what there was about the appeal of literary study which drew them into the fold at the moment of their decision to major in English, or to teach English, but it was the appeal of literary study. The more practical motive of a general shortage of English teachers may cause many people to be English teachers, but usually these people if opportunities were equal would prefer to do something else. I am speaking only of those people who are committed to English. The decision in each case, as explained by people who have confided in me, was largely the result of an intuitive response, a semi-conscious need, which is fulfilled through literary study.

To be sure, any student of English when pressed for a reason for his engaging in such study can offer commonplace answers, all of which have an ancient

pedigree in the history of culture: works of art, including poetry, are worthwhile; the greatest poems stand the test of time; they are worth preserving as records of our cultural heritage and justify strenuous study for one to perceive their full value; beauty has its own reward; art is autonomous, not subordinate to other values--social, theological, practical, philosophical, political. But it is very difficult to state a simple, unassailable definition of the value of literary study.

One can admit this difficulty; but the English teacher must nonetheless face up to the responsibility of defining the values of literary study. My impression is that students in their schooling at any level, high school, college, or grade school receive little guidance in formulating such definitions. In spite of the enormous amount of critical writing and scholarly lecturing about literature, few people go to the trouble of trying to define why literature should be studied. In any of the major schools of criticism--historical scholarship, the "new criticism", myth-archetypal studies, even romantic aesthetics--one can gain countless insights into the structure, the ideological content, ambiguities, subtleties of all kinds, an awareness of recurring themes and patterns. But many of the simplest and most basic aesthetic questions are not answered. The critics and the scholars rarely anticipate the students wondering "Why should one read this?" "What is of value in poetry?" "Does one learn anything from such study which is transferrable into common experience?" As I remember my own years as an undergraduate and then as a graduate student, the question "Why should one read a poem?" never occurred. The typical English major's response to literature is initially intuitive. One recognizes nearly all the works traditionally included in courses in literature to be satisfying, more or less immediately. Through consideration of critical approaches which illuminate parts of the poem, pointing out interrelationships, subtler implications, historically relevant assumptions, one learns to like most poems even better. But the teacher of English majors does not face all the problems that one faces in teaching non-English majors in a required literary course. The student who has never been much attracted by reading, and whose motives in entering college (whether we admire these motives or not) are basically practical if not brazenly mercenary, is naturally suspicious of a required course in literature. Even some people from pious, moralistic backgrounds appear dubious about some kinds of poetry. How do we anticipate the questions about literary art: "What is the value of literature if it won't necessarily make a person healthier, wealthier, more

comfortable, or more virtuous?" "Is it a frill?" "Is it conspiracy on the part of English teachers to gain employment?" "Is there any reason why a student should receive instruction in literature rather than in income tax laws, accounting, or some kind of handicraft?" Stupid as such questions might seem to the person who has long ago devoted his life to literary study, we should nonetheless recognize that such questions are fundamental. They are not asked all the time. Depending upon how awesome an image of himself the teacher manages to project, one may not hear questions resembling those I have suggested for years at a time. I wish to point out, however, that such questions as these may very well be at the root of some students' antagonism towards literature.

It simply isn't enough to fall back upon the simple answers that poetry is of value because it gives pleasure or because it is fun or because it is commonly considered by most competent critics to be beautiful; even though each of these statements may be true. These are not sufficiently convincing answers to the student who does not immediately derive pleasure or fun or an aesthetic response from the poem placed before him. We have all seen the suspicious look on the face of an unsuccessful literary student whenever we have told him that he will enjoy the poem after he has scrutinized it longer or after he matures.

The object behind this review of problems is to suggest a need for greater attention to fundamental aesthetics. This is not to recommend another required course for all English teachers. Heaven forbid that, in view of how aesthetics is usually taught, with hair-splitting arguments over terminology. Even the traditional historical survey of literary criticism, from Plato to Cleanth Brooks, is of dubious value for solving the questions I posed earlier in this essay. Rather this is to encourage concentrated reading in the works of those aestheticians who come closest to solving basic problems concerning artistic values. As one of the few leading philosophers to pay systematic attention to aesthetics, Benedetto Croce deserves primary consideration. His Aesthetic is not easy reading, but his distinguishing intuitive or particular knowledge is a good start.

If one can convince the student that there is a genuine value in looking at specific things to see what makes them distinctive, singular, individual, or unique, one has a chance to clarify the difference between aesthetic and logical knowing. A clearer,

more systematic reading text than Douglas Ainslie's translation of Croce's Aesthetic is the article by Croce on "aesthetics" in the 14th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, 1929, recently retranslated by Cecil Sprigge and included in Croce's Philosophy, Poetry, History (Oxford, 1966). One should go on from Croce, however, and read Susanne K. Langer's major works on the subject. Her germinal study Philosophy in a New Key (1942) is available in paperback as a Mentor book; but this study should be passed over in favor either of Feeling and Form (Scribner's, 1953), clearly her best book, or Problems of Art, a popularized collection of lectures in Scribner paperback, 1957. Langer emphasizes the importance of art as a form of knowledge. In her terms, "art is the creation of forms expressive of human feeling." Her studies emphasize the complexity and non-discursive character of knowledge about feelings.

All of these works need more popularizing to mean much to students. They are essentially tools for the teacher. But no matter which major school of modern aesthetics the teacher enrolls in, he should recognize his obligation to teach literature in such a way that the lectures and discussion questions are aimed at answering the fundamental questions about the nature and value of art. We should teach the student to focus his impressions through literary study, to refine his sensitivity, by recognizing that works of art are expressions of complex feelings by unusually varied people. By comprehending the inner emotional life of man as it is given formal, emphatic expression in works of art, one comes a good bit closer to realizing his potentiality as a fully developed human personality. It is by encouraging this kind of awareness that we can justify the study of literature as a vital academic course.

A Selective Bibliography

Croce, Benedetto. Philosophy, Poetry, History. Oxford, 1966. \$16.80. Expensive but very big, giving us glimpses in 1135 pages of Croce's remarkable range of achievements in philosophy, criticism, history. Good for inclusion of both aesthetic theory and practical literary criticism.

Langer, Susanne K. Feeling and Form. Scribner's, 1953. \$4.95. The best book for a definition of those qualities which all the arts have in common; combined with careful analysis of the distinctive character of each major art form.

Recommended Paperbacks

- Cary, Joyce. Art and Reality. Anchor Book. 1st pub. 1958. \$.95. An interesting study by a distinguished novelist, partly autobiographical, partly critical, of what is involved in the creative process.
- Collingwood, R. G. The Principles of Art. Oxford Galaxy Book. 1st pub. 1938. Very closely related to, and derived from, Croce's aesthetics. Perhaps more systematic.
- Croce, Benedetto. Aesthetic. Translated by Douglas Ainslie. Noonday Press. 1st pub. in Italian 1902. \$2.25. A pioneering study, clumsily translated. The first part, "Theory of Aesthetic," is basic but superseded in many respects by the encyclopaedia article referred to previously.
- Fry, Roger. Transformations. Anchor Book. 1st pub. 1942. \$1.45. By an art critic, very much a Brahmin of the old school, but deserving respect for arguing that art has value because it points out relationships, not merely because it depicts objects.
- Langer, Susanne K. Philosophy in a New Key. Mentor Books. 1st pub. 1942. Her first important book, which paved the way for Feeling and Form. Analysis and definitions of symbols lead to a definition of art.
- Langer, Susanne K. Problems of Art. Scribner paperback. 1st pub. 1957. \$1.25. Wordy, repetitious, and uneven, it is nevertheless the best introductory text for mystified beginners.
- Langer, Susanne K. (ed.) Reflections on Art. Oxford Galaxy Book. 1st pub. 1958. \$1.95. A collection of essays by a variety of aestheticians and artists. More useful for experts in the field.
- Shahn, Ben. The Shape of Content. Vintage Books. 1st pub. 1957. \$1.25. By a painter. Very good for explaining the artist's need of freedom, problems in evaluation, the inexhaustible subject matter of the arts.

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