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On Teaching Literature

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On Teaching Literature

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

Many teachers find it difficult to teach literature. They find it comparatively easy to teach grammar, or mathematics, or history, or the sciences. And even in the field of literature itself, many find it easier to teach the classics of some foreign language (Latin, Greek, French, etc.) than English literature to English-speaking students.

The reason, perhaps, is not far to seek. Teaching consists principally in explaining something less known in terms better known to the student. A grammatical rule may be explained by examples; a scientific law may be demonstrated by experiment; a historical thesis may be proved by facts, or a philosophical by principles; a passage in a foreign tongue may be translated into the vernacular. In all these things, it is easy to see what the less-known element is which needs explaining in terms of the better known. But how elucidate English literature for English-speaking students? What is the less-known element, and what the better known?

The answer to those questions might be a part of the key to good teaching.

The inexperienced teacher's quandary may be illustrated by an incident which the present writer has had occasion to describe in greater detail elsewhere.¹

In a public high school in America, a young lady teacher was introducing her class to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. The students opened their books to Act 1, Scene 1. One boy was told to read, then another, then a third—all of them haltingly, as might be expected. Finally, both class and teacher having become thoroughly bored, the next day's assignment was announced: to write out a summary of one of the speeches, and to read what the Introduction had to say about Shakespeare's life and the Elizabethan drama. Is it any wonder that students leave school with an implicit vow never again to read Shakespeare or any other classic?

But the young lady could hardly be blamed. In her education classes at some teachers' college, she probably had been told all about democracy and education, but never how to teach *Julius Caesar* in third year high school. How *does* one go about teaching Shakespeare, anyway?

Many years ago, while this writer was prefecting a roomful of boys at evening study, a lad in first year high school came to ask permission to be excused from study. The permission was readily granted, but as the lad had offered to "recite" his lesson as evidence that he knew it, and as I was curious to know what this young man meant by "knowing" his lesson, I asked him to "recite." He did. He recited from memory an entire canto from Scott's *Lady of the Lake*. He recited it pell-mell, words slurred, emphases distorted. Asked about the meaning of a word here and there, he said he did not know, nor could he explain the metaphors implied. His teacher had apparently assigned the piece for memory without first explaining the passage. No wonder that it is sometimes said that Scott or Dickens, or some other author, is "too difficult" for boys in first year high school. They might be, unless properly "prelected."

In college, the difficulty seems less, but is actually greater. It seems less because there are many tangen-

tial questions which can engross the attention of both professor and students, without their coming to grips with literature itself. The professor could always talk (brilliantly or boringly, as the case might be) about the sources of the text, the date of composition, the social or economic milieu in which it was written, the author's neuroses (or his love affairs), or the particular brand of psychoneurotic "complex" which the hero of the tale is supposed to be suffering from (Hamlet being the chief sufferer). All of which could be interesting, informative, even important for the understanding of the text: yet a student could have all this information in his head (or in his notes) without a genuine taste for, or understanding of, good literature.

Or instead of teaching literature, a professor may discourse learnedly on literary theory. This writer has chanced upon students who had completed only the equivalent of the sophomore year of college, who held very decided opinions on the nature of poetry, the superiority of "imagination" over "fancy," the supposedly "correct" proportions in which such ingredients as "imagination" and "emotion" are to be mixed in a poem—who, at the same time, showed very little acquaintance with Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Wordsworth, Keats, Hopkins, or T. S. Eliot. Would it not be better to know literature than know how to define it?

Again, this writer has chanced upon students who held very definite opinions on the "sincerity" (or lack of it) of "Lycidas" (merely repeating what Johnson, or some other critic, had said on the subject), who yet could not give a rational exegesis of such lines from that poem as:

Oft till the star that rose at evening bright
Toward heaven's descent had sloped his westering wheel;

or who could announce with calm assurance that "Satan is the real hero of *Paradise Lost*," but who would

be at a loss if asked to identify (or to explain) the prayer to Light in that great work. Again, would it not be better to know the literary masterpieces themselves, than merely to know what the critics have said about them?

Hence the need of formulating some technique for the teaching of literature to students in high school and in the first years of college. And it seems to this writer that the basic principle of such a technique should be the nature of literature itself.

THE NATURE OF LITERATURE

Literature might be described as memorable thought memorably expressed. That may not be a scientific definition, nor may it be altogether valid: but for the purposes of this paper, it might perhaps be accepted as a useful, working definition.

By "memorable" we do not necessarily mean "great." If great, so much the better. But short of greatness, there exists a vast body of writing in which the authors have something to say, and say it strikingly well. That is literature.

Many factors can render a thought memorable. It may be that the idea itself is great, like the oft-quoted line from Dante: *La sua voluntade e nostra pace*. Or it might be intriguing, like Prospero's half-reverie: "We are such stuff as dreams are made on." Or it may epitomize some deeply-felt conviction arising out of experience, like the sober comment of the Chorus at the tragic end of *Oedipus Rex*: "I call no man happy till he is dead." Or it may be some vague, indefinable notion which strikes a chord in the memory:

Blank misgivings of a creature
Moving about in worlds not realized,
High instincts before which our mortal nature
Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised.

Or the idea may be expressed in some dramatic situa-

tion, in which an insight is afforded into the workings of the human soul, like the great weariness of life that comes upon Macbeth when informed of his wife's death:

Life's but a walking shadow . . .
 it is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.

Or finally it may be some apparently trivial idea, which is lifted above triviality by its context or by the manner in which it is expressed:

What female heart can gold despise?
 What cat's averse to fish?

Trivial or great, the memorable thought must be memorably expressed, and the expression is memorable if it is in some way striking—through that magic blend of diction and rhythm, tone and imagery, thought and feeling, which defies analysis while inviting it. It is this combination of thought and expression which makes us remember Homer's rosy-fingered dawns, long after we have forgotten many a fuller description by many a second-rate poet.

All of which, of course, is to be understood analogously of the various forms of literature. In lyric poetry, thought and expression are compressed into a few lines. So are they in a brief essay. But in longer works—the epic, the drama, the novel, the short story—thought and expression assume larger proportions. In these cases, the idea is expressed in terms of epic or dramatic structure; and the work as a whole stands or falls as literature in proportion as every shred of description or every snatch of dialogue is galvanized into a great whole by some architectonic idea.

Memorable thought expressed memorably: the critics might find fault with that definition, but it seems safe to assume that any alternative definition

of literature must take into account these same two elements: thought and expression. Expression without notable thought is "sound and fury signifying nothing"; thought without memorable expression might be good journalism, or good legal jargon, or good scientific exposition, or simply good pedestrian talk; but memorable thought memorably expressed is literature.

THE PEDAGOGICAL CONSEQUENCE

The pedagogical consequence of all this should be obvious. If literature is the memorable expression of memorable thought, then it is the teacher's business to help his students understand it as *thought* and savor it as *expression*.

The fact, however, seems to be that literature is often not taught that way. A literary masterpiece is studied in school merely as an instrument for grammatical drill, or as a hunting ground for rhetorical devices, or as a text for sociological or archaeological disquisitions, or as a case-study in psychiatry, or merely to furnish models for composition, or to suggest topics for debate. All of which is good, and has its place; but these peripheral approaches do not lead to the heart of the matter, and the heart of the matter is memorable thought expressed memorably.

From this basic principle, several others would seem to follow as corollaries.

THE FIRST COROLLARY: *Pronuntiet*

Among the educational classics of the world is a little handbook which, after several trial editions, saw definitive form in 1598. It is a code of rules for the administrators and the professors of various disciplines in Jesuit colleges throughout the world, and is entitled: *Ratio atque institutio studiorum Societatis Iesu*. Among other things, it contains rules for the "prelection" (that is to say, previous explanation in class) of the Greek and Latin authors. And among these

rules, is one little recommendation, seemingly trivial in itself. It is this: when the professor is explaining a passage of literature, he must read the passage aloud to the class.

A very elementary rule, surely, but it could mean the difference between appreciation and non-appreciation of literature.

Even the Latin word used in the rule is significant: *pronuntiet*—which means not just to “read” but to “read interpretatively.”

It is our impression that today too little reading is done by teachers in class. Questions are asked, discussions are held, opinions are voiced and disputed; perhaps a student reads a paper on some aspect of the work in question; or the teacher reads his own lecture while the students yawn or take notes. But where are the teachers who hold their classes spell-bound by their reading of passages from Homer or Vergil or Horace or Cicero, or from Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth?

Yet literature has always been addressed to the mind through the ear as well as through the eye. Indeed, one might say, *principally* through the ear. Homer's lines were sung long before they were committed to writing. The great orators spoke to their audiences, and spoke to them in such a manner as to be faultlessly pleasing to the ear. Many a work has become a classic because many a child has listened to it with delight when read aloud in the nursery. And the highest praise that one poet could give to Milton was to call him “organ-mouthed.”

It is true that great literature need not be heard with the “sensual ear.” It is possible to hear the organ-like qualities of Milton's verse with the ear of the imagination alone. But this is not easy to the untrained, and it seems safe to presuppose that students in college and in high school are in this respect untrained.

How is it possible for a student to appreciate the perfection of Ciceronian word-harmony until he has quite literally *heard* some such passage as the following:

Domuisti gentis immanitate barbaras, multitudine innumerabilis, locis infinitas, omni copiarum genere abundantis: sed tamen ea vicisti, quae et naturam et conditionem ut vinci possent habebant. Nulla est enim tanta vis quae non ferro et viribus debilitari frangique possit. Animum vincere, iracundiam cohibere, victoriam temperare; adversarium nobilitate, ingenio, virtute praestantem non modo extollere iacentem, sed etiam amplificare eius pristinam dignitatem—haec qui facit, non ego eum cum summis viris comparo, sed simillimum deo iudico. (*Pro Marcello*, 3).*

That is splendid sound, and also splendid sense—one of the hardest things to learn being forgiveness of one's enemies.

A modern master of both politics and prose, Sir Winston Churchill, has referred to the difficulty of mastering what he calls "that noble thing, the English sentence." Churchill's own mastery of that "noble thing" bespeaks an ear delicately attuned to the prose cadences of the masters. How can a student be expected to write or speak harmonious prose, who has not, in mind or ear, heard such rhythms as those of Newman?

Each hour, as it comes, is but a testimony, how fleeting, yet how secure, how certain is the great whole. It

* You have subdued nations, savage in their barbarism, countless in their numbers, boundless, if we regard the extent of country peopled by them, and rich in every kind of resource; but still you were only conquering things, the nature and condition of which were such that they could be overcome by force. For there is no strength so great that it cannot be weakened and broken by arms and violence. But to subdue one's inclinations, to master one's angry feelings, to be moderate in the hour of victory, not merely to raise from the ground a prostrate adversary, eminent for noble birth, for genius and for virtue, but even to increase his previous dignity,—they are actions of such a nature, that the man who does them, I do not compare to the most illustrious of humans but I consider equal to a god.—Tr. by Young.

is like an image on the waters, which is ever the same, though the waters ever flow . . . The sun sinks to rise again; the day is swallowed up in the gloom of the night, to be born out of it, as fresh as if it had never been quenched. Spring passes into summer, and through summer and autumn into winter, only the more surely, by its own ultimate return, to triumph over that grave towards which it resolutely hastened from its first hour. We mourn over the blossoms of May because they are to wither; but we know, withal, that May is one day to have its revenge upon November, by the revolution of that solemn circle which never stops,—which teaches us, in our height of hope ever to be sober, and in our depth of desolation never to despair. (*The Second Spring.*)

What student could fail to be enthusiastic about Newman, once he has really listened to Newman's rhythmic prose? And incidentally, a student who has such glorious cadences ringing in his ear can be expected to write passable prose himself.

And if that is true of prose, it is all the more true of poetry where music is of the very essence of the verse. This writer remembers his first introduction to Greek literature. That was many years ago, before he had learned any Greek. The teacher read aloud a hundred lines or so from the first book of the *Iliad*. The words were unintelligible, but the lines were music: and this writer remembers saying to himself, "I don't know what those lines mean yet, but I'll find out."

Perhaps one reason why there is not as much enthusiasm for Greek and Latin literature as there ought to be, might be found in the fact that few students ever get the chance to *hear* Latin or Greek read intelligently. Many teachers do not read at all; many others read very poorly. Yet such word-masters as Caesar, Cicero, Tacitus, Horace, or Vergil would speak for themselves if interpreted aright.

Hence the reasonableness of the recommendation: *pronuntiet*. Let the teacher read the passage aloud, and with suitable interpretation.

We say "suitable" because there is a kind of inter-

pretation that has little place in the classroom. Unless the teacher is a consummate actor (and few teachers are) he had better not attempt histrionics in class. But short of theatricality, there is a kind of quiet, effective interpretation demanded by the sense, and which even a teacher of very mediocre histrionic talent could supply.

Nothing can ever take the place of a good oral rendition of a passage. The accurate phrasing, the changing tempo, the dramatic pause, the delicate emphasis, the voice raised in climactic crescendo or lowered to a whisper—what a difference all this makes to an otherwise inert series of printed lines! No wonder that Hopkins insisted on his poems being read aloud.

But how read Shakespeare aloud? one might ask. It can be done, and in various ways. A scene can be read collectively, parts assigned, with the teacher supplying corrections in pronuntiation or interpretation as needed. Or the teacher can read the entire scene (or portions of it) himself, dramatizing it to some extent, and giving a running commentary on text, characters, stage-business, etc. The important point to remember is that Shakespeare's plays are *plays*, and plays are intended to be both seen and heard. The "seeing" can be easily imagined, but the "hearing" less easily so.

The modern student, of course, enjoys many advantages over his predecessors. One of these is the phonograph record. Shakespeare, Poe, T. S. Eliot, and many other classics are now available on records. The student can listen to Evans as Prospero, or to Olivier or Evans or Barrymore as Hamlet, or Guinness as Macbeth, or Gielgud as Cassius, or to Guinness again as the mysterious psychiatrist in *The Cocktail Party*, or to Sidney Webb in *The Cask of Amontillado*. The use of such recorded transcriptions for the study of great literature has shown palpable results in some places, notably in the speech laboratories of the Ateneo

de Manila. An ultra-modern technique, seemingly, yet really only an electronic application in this electronic age of an ancient rule: *pronuntiet*.

THE SECOND COROLLARY: *Metaphoras Devolvere*

Our second principle is also taken from the *Ratio studiorum*: In "prelecting" (i.e. explaining beforehand) a passage of literature in class, the professor is to see to it that later on, when the students read the passage themselves, they will not miss the point of the metaphors and other figures of speech. The phrase used in the *Ratio studiorum* is itself metaphorical: *metaphoras devolvere*—metaphors are to be "unraveled."

By metaphor here is meant not only what the rhetorician refers to by that term, but also every sort of analogy or comparison or figure of speech, whatever might be its rhetorical term. Thus simile, metonymy, synecdoche, symbolism, allegory, etc., all may come under the generic term "metaphor".

How important metaphor is in literature may be gathered from the most cursory examination of any great literary work. Macbeth could have told the doctor, simply and without figure of speech: "Cure my wife of these hallucinations." But Macbeth does not say it this way. He says it in metaphors:

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?

The Ghost in *Hamlet* could have said, simply: "Many horrible things happen in Purgatory which, if I told you, would fill your soul with terror." But Shakespeare makes him say it in figures:

I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,

Make thy two eyes start, like stars, from their spheres,
 Thy knotted and combined locks to part
 And each separate hair to stand on end,
 Like quills upon the fretful porpentine.

Even Scrooge was not simply dead. He was dead *as a doornail*. And the peculiar aptness of that comparison is lost unless the reader knows what a doornail is.

It is well to remember, in this connection, that many an innocent-looking word can hide a metaphor.

Since brass nor stone nor earth nor boundless sea
 But sad mortality o'ersways their power,
 How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea
 Whose action is no stronger than a flower?

The metaphor is all in three words: rage, plea, action.

If the words are trite, the metaphors are not only hidden but dead and buried; there is no need to resurrect them. But trite words seldom occur in literary masterpieces. Indeed that is one of the Horatian tests of literature:

notum si callida verbum
 reddiderit iunctura novum. . .

—an old word becomes new if placed in some effective juxtaposition. In a piece of great literature, therefore, every word is “alive,” and the reader must be alive to their meanings.

Batter my heart, Three-Personed God!

begs Donne.

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
 Frightful, sheer, no-man fathomed

cries Father Gerard Manley Hopkins. Gloucester in *King Lear* says in bitter peevishness:

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
 They kill us for their sport.

Then, having lost his eyes and his way, he says with greater humility and greater truth, though also with greater irony:

I stumbled when I saw.

In every case, a metaphor (simile, analogy, etc.). So the "unraveling" of metaphors is an essential part of the teaching of literature.

THE THIRD COROLLARY: GRADING

Like all things else, the teaching of literature should be graded, or graduated; that is to say, adapted to the mentality of the students and the objectives of the class.

The mentality of students in first year high school will obviously differ from that of students in a graduate school; and between these two extremes there are many shades of difference, corresponding (roughly) to the various years of high school and college. As he advances from one scholastic grade to another, the normal student advances both mentally and emotionally. His outlook becomes more mature, his experience wider, his vocabulary larger, his information more varied, his power of thought and feeling better developed. Consequently, the more mature and better educated the student, the better will he be able to understand and appreciate literature. And the teaching must keep step accordingly.

And precisely because of this gradual mental growth, the objectives of the class must vary with every step of the academic ladder. The objectives of the English class in first year high school should not be identical with those of the English classes in college; and these in turn should differ from those in a graduate school, where students are engaged in literary research.

In the concrete, this should mean that the literature course should be graded in three respects. First, the

subject matter itself should be graded: the easier works for the lower years, the more difficult for the upper.

This is not to be understood in the sense that the classic works of literature are to be read only by adults, and that the so-called "teen-agers" are to read nothing but "teen-age literature." The notion of "teen-age literature" is a modern abomination, born out of an artificially-induced situation in which children under ten are taught little in school, with the consequence that the "teen-agers" of today can no longer read what the "teen-agers" of the past used to read quite easily. In point of fact, there is no such thing as "teen-age literature": literature is either juvenile or adult—unless it is some special miracle of creative genius (like *Alice in Wonderland*) which makes it at one and the same time both juvenile and adult.

But without subscribing to the "teen-age" heresy, it is still possible among adult works, to find some which are easier and others which are more difficult. Shakespeare's *King Lear* is definitely not for first year high school students, for whom Longfellow might be more appropriate.

Secondly, even where the subject matter is the same, the *approach* must vary with the varied mentality of the student and the varied objectives of the scholastic stage at which he is. *Macbeth* or *Julius Caesar* can be studied in high school, and again in college, and again in the graduate school—but differently in each case. The high school student might be interested in the plot, the speeches, or the primary emotions exhibited by the characters. The more psychological, or ethical, or political, or theological implications of the play, the niceties of dramatic structure, the richness of imagery and symbolism, the sources and influences that went into the shaping of the play—all these could be of interest only to maturer students beyond the high school stage.

Thirdly, not only the subject matter and the basic approach, but even little points of classroom *technique*

must be suited to the "grade" of the class. For instance, the manner of oral interpretation (*pronuntiatio*) and of textual exegesis (*metaphoras devolvere*) must vary with the mentality of the student and the objectives of the class. Discussions of fine shades of symbolism might be profitable among college men, but wasted on younger students. And on the other hand, while it might be perfectly proper to ask a group of first year students to explain "what is compared to what" in the following lines,

Silently, one by one, in the infinite meadows of heaven,
Blossomed the lovely stars, the forget-me-nots of the
angels;

it might be better to spare older students both the question and the lines!

Grading; a graded syllabus, with the objectives of each "grade" very sharply defined—this is one of the advantages of a planned system of education like that of the Jesuit *Ratio studiorum*. Where objectives are not clearly defined, they cannot be clearly graded; where they are not clearly graded, it is difficult to avoid haphazard teaching: for teachers cannot be expected to point their teaching toward a goal, if the goal is unknown.

FOURTH COROLLARY: THE PRIMACY OF IDEAS

There is a school of rhetoricians who look upon language as the "dress of thought." Obviously, since dress and wearer are not identical, and since the one may be considered quite apart from the other, so according to this view the "style" may be studied quite apart from the "thought," and the "thought" quite apart from the "style."

Newman has tried to laugh this opinion out of respectability in a famous lecture:

Thought and word are, in their conception, two

things, and thus there is a division of labour. The man of thought comes to the man of words; and the man of words, duly instructed in the thought, dips the pen of desire into the ink of devotedness, and proceeds to spread it over the page of desolation. Then the nightingale of affection is heard to warble to the rose of loveliness, while the breeze of anxiety plays around the brow of expectation. This is what the Easterns are said to consider fine writing; and it seems pretty much the idea of the school of critics to whom I have been referring.²

The prominence we have hitherto given to metaphor, rhythm, and other points of literary style should not be misconstrued as a suggestion that literature should be studied for the "style" quite independently from the "thought." Thought and style are separable only if by "thought" is meant the idea-in-embryo, the abstract concept, before it has been developed into the precise shade of meaning that we have in literature. Or put it this way: "thought" and "style" are philosophically separable, but they cannot be actually separated without destroying the composite, and it is the composite which is literature. The situation is somewhat like the union of soul and body in man: they are separable, but their separation is the man's death. Separated, the body becomes a corpse, and the soul a disembodied spirit—but it is the composite which makes the living, breathing man. Metaphor, for instance, is not merely an ornament of style; it is a way of thought; it modifies the thought. Style, as Newman says, is a thinking into language. To propose to study the "style" alone, while prescinding from the "thought" is like taking the curve of a finger without the finger. It is like attempting to duplicate Alice's experience in Wonderland, who saw the cat's smile without the cat.

This would seem superfluous to mention, were it not for the fact that sometimes an attempt is made (not often successful, one would suspect) to do just that: to teach literature for the "style," prescinding from the "thought." Attempts have even been made to teach Shakespeare for his "style." But how Shake-

spere's style could be taught is something that has not yet been explained to this writer.

This is perhaps the time to point out a distinction between the teaching of literature and the teaching of composition. The two are important, and they go hand-in-hand: but they are two distinct functions, and to confuse them is not good pedagogy.

Many a good writer has attained proficiency by imitating the style of some great master. Stevenson tells us that he used to do this, as Newman had done by imitating Cicero and as Cicero himself had imitated the Greek writers. To form one's style in this fashion is good common sense. It is implied in many precepts of the Jesuit *Ratio Studiorum*, and some excellent modern textbooks of composition (like those of Father Donnelly) have been constructed on the two principles of "analysis and imitation" of selected prose passages.³

But while all this is true, it does not therefore follow that all literature is to be taught merely as examples for imitation—as if there were any way of imitating Shakespeare's *King Lear*! This would be like making musical imitation the objective of all musical listening! The Jesuit *Ratio Studiorum* itself, which puts so much emphasis on the cultivation of a good literary style, makes a very clear distinction between the rules for explaining precepts of style and the rules for the "prelection" of authors.

The attempt to teach only the "style" is made more frequently in connection with the Latin and Greek classics, since it is the teachers with a classical background who are more likely to be preoccupied with questions of "thought" and "style"—questions which teachers with no classical background are sometimes unable to comprehend. This writer has seen instances in which the orations, say, of Cicero were gone over with a fine comb: every grammatical form explained, every figure of speech identified, every rhetorical device

labeled—yet many of the students seemed unaware of certain ideas which were prominent in the great Roman orator's thought, and which gave dynamic shape to his orations.

To take one instance. The *Pro Marcello* is an oratorical triumph for one reason among others: in it Cicero, the "vanquished," manages in the most adroit manner to impart (and in a public way) certain admonitions to one of the most autocratic of dictators that the world has known, Julius Caesar. Under cover (that is not the exact term because we wish to avoid any suggestion of insincerity or underhandedness on Cicero's part)—under cover of praise, which sometimes seems extravagant, the orator is in reality exhorting the dictator to better conduct, and giving him suggestions for better government. The adroitness with which this is done, and the soundness of the suggestions given, combine with all the resources of Ciceronian eloquence to make of this speech an oratorical triumph of the first magnitude. To study this speech merely for the sake of the sonorous periods, to give the reason why *nam* and not *enim* is used as a transitional particle, to name every figure of speech and to label every rhetorical "topic,"—to do all this while missing the psychological and ethical and political issues involved is to miss the forest for the trees.

The study of literature should first and foremost be a study of the thought—not, surely, in order to accept every thought uncritically as true, but in order to see it, weigh it, evaluate it, perchance reject it. Keats' desire for death as a means of union with a deathless ideal is an idea which must be dealt with in any study of the "Ode to a Nightingale." How is it possible to study that Ode merely for its "style" while prescinding from its "thought"?

This is particularly true of Shakespeare. There is a difference between *King Lear* and the latest farce. The difference is in profundity. *King Lear* is a profound vision of life—of human perversity and human

destiny, of authority and responsibility, of sin and retribution, of malice, cunning, weakness, selfishness, and of that nobility of soul that resists every attempt to kill it. Blindness and vision, towering pride and utter helplessness, misery in success and the wisdom that comes from suffering—all this is part of the vision in *King Lear*. It would be a pity if the student were to miss this vision and fail to explore its depths.

What an opportunity a teacher has! It is his not only to awaken the imagination and to train the powers of self-expression, but to form the minds and even the wills of the students. It is a significant fact that, though English literature is not predominantly Catholic, not a few have become Catholics through their study of English literature. This is not a plea for turning the literature classroom into a convert-making class. People object to what are called "proselytizing" and "indoctrination." But it is impossible to discuss literature intelligently without discussing ideas—and youth has a way of kindling to great ideas.

It is interesting to note that even in the most casual discussion of literary works, it is not "style" but ideas—frequently religious or ethical ideas, at that—that are discussed. "Where did Scobie go—heaven, hell, or purgatory?" "What about the 'whiskey-priest' in *The Power and the Glory*—did he go to hell?" "Was Sidney Carton's sacrifice an act of supernatural charity?" "Was Aeneas married to Dido, and if so what about his so-called *pietas*?" "What does Faulkner's Bear stand for?" "Or Melville's Whale?" Or perhaps, less profoundly but more often: "Which was it, the lady or the tiger?"

So, to return to our main point: in teaching literature, discuss ideas. Do not get so lost in stylistic or grammatical—or any other—detail as to miss the main ideas embodied in the work under study. Literature is a work of creative intelligence, and intelligence always deals with ideas.

All of which should be understood in connection

with what has been said above concerning "grading." Ideas should be discussed *pro captu*—in accordance with the mental maturity of the students and the objectives of the academic level at which they are.

A POINT OF METHOD

In bringing out all the above (unraveling metaphors, noting points of style, discussing ideas), the teacher has an effective instrument: questions.

Questions demand answers, and to give answers requires thought, or research, or careful rereading of the text—if the questions are such as to demand these.

This last point is important. It is often necessary to ask merely informative questions (many a student will not look up words in the dictionary, or identify places on a map, unless he knows he will be held accountable for these in class), but it would be fatal to the study of literature if the only questions asked were those that could be answered without much thought. "Who was Silas Marner?" "What did Rob Roy do?" Or that famous question: "Who dragged whom how many times around the walls of which?" Such questions require no thought. They require only a certain amount of information — information, incidentally, which can be obtained without reading the work in question. Even the so-called "comic books" can now supply the answer!

Questions should be asked which would help the student arrive at the meaning of a work, or penetrate more deeply into it. For example (and let this example be our last), let us take this simple-looking lyric which Palgrave has taken from an Elizabethan song-book. It will be found to be not as simple as it looks.

Weep you no more, sad fountains:—
What need you flow so fast?
Look how the snowy mountains
Heaven's sun doth gently waste!
But my Sun's heavenly eyes

View not your weeping,
That now lies sleeping
Softly, now softly lies,
Sleeping.

Sleep is a reconciling,
A rest that peace begets:—
Doth not the sun rise smiling,
When fair at even he sets?
Rest you, then, rest, sad eyes!
Melt not in weeping!
While She lies sleeping
Softly, now softly lies,
Sleeping!

Regarding this lyric, it would be possible to ask purely informative questions: probable authorship, probable date of composition, date of first publication, literary genre, etc. But why not ask questions that would demand a more attentive study of the lines? For instance:

What do the "sad fountains" in the first line refer to? If fountains flow "so fast," why are they called "sad?"

The word "sun" is used three different times in the poem, and each time with a shift of meaning. What are these meanings, and how do they affect the meaning of the poem as a whole?

Why is sleep a "reconciling" and why is it said to beget "peace"? Has there perhaps been a lovers' quarrel, and is there hope of its being patched up?

If so, what then is the full import of the line (with emphasis on the *need*): "What need you flow so fast?"

Is this poem, finally, a sentimental love-poem, or is it rather ironical, or satirical? Where is the irony? What is being satirized?

In effect, the student is being asked to give a detailed exegesis of the poem. He is being asked to "unravel metaphors," to decipher meanings, to read as it were between the lines. The questions make this exegesis easy. To answer them the student has to reread the poem with attention, and he will perhaps

discover (with somewhat of the joy of discovery) that what seemed a very simple poem contained far more than on first reading he had suspected⁴

Examination questions especially should receive a good deal of attention from the teacher. They should be so worded as to demand critical evaluation of ideas and thorough knowledge of the text. The standards of the course are often set by the type of questions asked in examinations. If such questions are merely informative in character, the attitude is engendered in the student of looking at literature merely as a source of information. But if questions are asked which demand critical analysis, an attitude is induced of looking at literature as something to be pondered, weighed, analyzed. And this is important, not only with regard to such little lyrics as we have examined, but more especially with regard to massive creations of literary genius like those of Shakespeare, Dante, Vergil, or Aeschylus.

CONCLUSION

To summarize: If literature is sometimes found difficult to teach, it is because an attempt is made to treat it contrary to its nature. The basic principle to be remembered is the nature itself of literature: memorable thought memorably expressed. Hence, it must be understood as thought, savored as expression, and evaluated as both.

From this basic principle, several corollaries follow, among them: First, literature cannot be appreciated fully without being interpreted orally. Therefore, *pronuntietur*: let the piece be rendered orally, with proper interpretation, the better to understand its thought and to appreciate its qualities of language.

Secondly, the literary expression of thought is very largely metaphorical. Therefore, *devolvantur metaphorae*: metaphors should be "unraveled"; otherwise, the thought is not fully understood.

Thirdly, since literature is not taught in a vacuum, but to a definite group of students, with definite limitations in intellectual, emotional, and imaginative background, both the subject matter and the approach to it should be "graded" so as to correspond to such limitations. There is a consequent need for an integrated system of education in which the objectives at each stage are clearly defined and "graded."

Fourthly, literature is the expression of thought, and should therefore be studied as thought. Consequently, attention should not be so focused on details of "style" (or any other details) as to lose sight of more important ideas. In literature, as in life, ideas must be given the primacy.

Fifthly, in all this, the teacher could borrow a leaf from Socrates: he should ask questions. And the questions asked, particularly in examinations, should be such as to demand thought and a more attentive reading of the text.

These ideas are elementary. Nothing new has been said. But it is hoped that what has been said will at least not be unhelpful.

¹ "I Visit a Public High School," *Teacher Education Quarterly* (published by the Connecticut State Department of Education, Hartford) IX (Winter, 1952), 68-74.

² "Literature" no. 4. *The Idea of a University*, ed. Charles F. Harrold, New York, etc.: Longmans, Green and Co. 1947, p. 242.

³ Francis P. Donnelly, S.J. *Model English*, Books I and II, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1919 etc.

⁴ The New Critics have done a service to pedagogy by refocusing attention on the text, and away from extraneous issues (like the biography of the author, or the history of ideas). Their method is not new: it is essentially that of the Jesuit *Ratio Studiorum* which in turn is based on systems much older. But if the method is old, it needed new emphasis—and such textbooks as those by Professors Brooks and Warren are helpful in giving the proper orientation to the literature course.