





context of our joint experience. If he reads or discusses a poem he will kill it for the class, and had better far have left it alone, unless he is, then and there, as discriminatively aware of it as he can be. Mere enthusiasm and knowledge will not be enough—they can lead to the most fulsome and impertinent thrusting of the poetry on the pupils. What is required is the exercise of a critical sincerity in ease and freedom, which is something that no one can provide to order.

There is, it is true, in the teaching of literature, a part which is comparable to the teaching of other subjects—literary history, namely, who wrote what, when, and why: who influenced whom; who reacted against whom. This, with annotation, anecdote, remarks on prosody and oddments of philology will supply material for a great number of lectures. And in the past this has, on the whole, been what teachers of English literature have felt that they should supply. We forget, however, how recent the teaching of English literature is, and in this recency is to be found the explanation of the queerly unoriented position of the whole subject.

The place of literature in Western culture has shifted and is still shifting. Some familiarity with a few great books used to be the almost native endowment of all. Wide and varied reading was the accomplishment of the gentleman's class only. In those days courses in English literature were not needed. A man's parents and friends could provide what, for his position in life, he needed. Today all this is changed.

The public, as a whole, is being cut off more and more from any family or juvenile contacts with literature and the wide and varied reading which is our universal accomplishment is more likely to impoverish and imperil our minds than to enrich or support them. All this is well known and it is doubtless an awareness of it which has caused the demand for literature courses in schools and at the universities. But the awareness has not been enough; we have not asked sharply enough what the demand is for and how that it seeks may be given. At the moment we are in general choking it off rather than supplying it.

The demand, under many disguises, is for contact with and initiation into the ways of thinking and feeling, choosing and judging, which have been counted the best in the past. Literary history will not meet this. It has its place in the necessary equipment of the scholar—but Heaven forbid that we should all be scholars. The only general demand that it can meet is a discreditable one which looks to literary courses to provide an imitation culture—the kind of "culture" by which a man may escape the imputation of being "uneducated" even when he is so. Quite a different kind of English teaching is needed to meet the need for a proper inheritance of our genuine culture and traditions. The recognition of this fact that what used to be given by natural contacts must now be given artificially by teaching is forcing a slow and painful reform in the English schools.

The focus of the problem is the position of research. If a man is to teach in a way at all adequate to the importance of his duty, he needs leisure, in which to read, meditate, and refresh himself. He needs protection from distraction and most research in English is the merest distraction without relevance to anything he is doing or (careerist considerations apart) the least urgency. Most researches are tasks that have been found, after painful research, in order to satisfy the system. In the present state of English studies the only researches that are worth doing are those that the worker feels so strongly about that he *must* work at them. Here again, as with teaching, a parallel with other subjects (scientific, for example) may be misleading. In physics there are plenty of pieces of work that any one of a hundred adequately trained persons can do equally well. In English subjects—art from the merest editing or compilation—there is needed a peculiar marriage man and the work. No other job can do it. No other man will suit him and no other man will suit him makes the organization of cruel and profitless and ex-

plains why so few academic theses have any significance for anyone.

What matters most to our civilization is that as many as possible of those who are capable of discrimination and reflection should be encouraged to discriminate and reflect. Wordy and impassioned attempts to simplify the problems that arise for all curious minds are no substitute for such encouragement. They do not feed the curiosity, they damp or disgust it. Nor is indiscriminate laudation of poetry our need at the moment. What is needed is better training in reading, in making out, that is, whether what we are reading has anything in it of value or not. It is not what we have read but how we have read it that counts. Explanations of the importance of poetry (even good explanations) and insistence upon its importance are of no avail unless the exercise and discipline of the mind in the act of reading is heightened.

The equipment both of writers and readers is being provided by universities. From them, and from the schools, the literary public must take its standards of sensitiveness, acumen, and alertness in reading. It used not to be so; we used to derive our standards from great books and from an idiom in the mouths of our fellows that itself derived largely from great books. But the natural channels, the family and the privileged class, for example, have been broken down; cheap printing and now the radio—those two overwhelming extensions of our physical means of communication—have completed the inundation; and henceforth we all have to swim for ourselves in a verbal medium of mixed quality that it would be idle to comment on here. As fishes are built up of what is in the water so the systems we, rather possessively and individualistically, call "our minds" are made up for us by a selection from the verbal medium we live in. Doubtless in addition we have our human nature, our family constellations, our distinctive ego-id proportions, our pre-verbal unconscious. . . . But, as the poet and critic are most concerned with us, we are structures built up on this basis by assimilation and accretion from our verbal medium. And the poet and critic, too, are being of the same order. Where they differ from us it is largely because they have followed more rigorous principles of selection.

This way of describing the familiar situation confuses it, for some people, with a relatively minor problem of vocabulary. But the peril that the breakdown of cultural channels has exposed us to is not only a matter of impoverishment, corruption, or blurring of vocabulary—serious though it is. It threatens our values still more deeply. Nearly all our possibilities of experience today are offered us first in imagination *through words*. Even when this is not so, the experience is illuminated for us and placed in some perspective for us through words. We judge it, we choose to pursue it or to avoid it because of words. All our intellectual and most of our emotional discriminations keep their order and clarity through words. The whole abstract world of moral values is held for us by a framework of words. Still more important, our skill in sorting and manipulating these values in imagination is chiefly a skill with words. Our forms of thinking are verbal. Our modes of purpose and feeling, if they are not verbal, can at least only be examined and

compared by means of words. A decline in our sensitiveness and discrimination with words must be followed soon by a decline in the quality of our living also.

These considerations together with the evidence (which is, I think, indisputable) of a rapid decline in verbal standards both as to speaking, writing, and reading—capacity among industrialized populations, puts a new and terrifying responsibility upon the literary critic. In the eighteenth century he was a gardener in a garden whose finest plants showed on the whole a strong tendency to overcome by themselves any weeds that might struggle to oust them. Today he is more in the position of a botanist called in to deal with an uncontrollable new growth of hybrids and migrants.

The real danger is seen most clearly if we consider the general capacity in reading, rather than speaking or writing. It is not hard to demonstrate that a majority even in a select company are not able to read sufficiently well for the study of any exacting literature to be of profit to them. A page of seventeenth century prose or verse and a request for an analytic paraphrase will disclose this fact. Phrases and constructions which were by no means too fine or too involved for the general reading public of Milton's time will badly strain the mental span of a modern class reading for Honors.

This would seem a paralyzing situation, if we did not know how unfamiliar any exacting reading is to modern readers or how little training in close attention to finely formed meanings they have had. Ordinary life gives no such training, and where shall we find today schoolmasters to do for us what Bowyer did for Coleridge and Lamb?

At the same time that we were studying the Greek tragic poets, he made us read Shakespeare and Milton as lessons; and they were lessons too, which required most time and trouble to bring up so as to escape his censure. I learnt from him that poetry, even that of the loftiest, and, seemingly, wildest odes, had a logic of its own as severe as that of science; and more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more, and more fugitive, causes.

The situation would be more paralyzing also, if we did not realize how intricate and deep an exercise the careful reading of any page of good prose or verse is. And how supreme an opportunity the exercise of close and critical reading gives us. Here, if we can use it, is our resource against confusion. Here is our means of strengthening that inner power of ordered choice which is our only protection.

As he ponders over the contemporary situation the critic or the reviewer must feel, I fancy, an increasing uncertainty as to the value of his undertakings. He feels himself struggling to affirm certain values against odds. The more candid he is the less he will be sure, himself, of those values. Meanwhile the more carefully and honestly he tries to write just what, after reflection, he thinks, the more he will discover that most of his readers—even the sympathetic—misunderstand him. For every additional exactitude in his writing he will have to pay a price in misunderstanding. The only road down which he can be sure of being followed is an old, easy, well-worn highroad of cloudy vagueness. Encountering these conditions and tracing them to their source, he may recall that there is one branch of the lit-

erary critic's profession where he is entitled to take steps to see that he is not misunderstood; one sphere where his judgments and distinctions can be assured of proper attention. It is not impossible that a part of the solution of our difficulties might be supplied by a migration from the journalist reviewer's attic to the classroom. The obstacles—overwork in term time and more limited choice of company—are not so serious that endowments could not overcome them, if those who can endow realized the urgency of the matter. The great need for better readers, and the little need for any but superlatively good writers, must make friends of literature wish that our available critical talent could be concentrated where its savage virtue would be most effective—in the classroom or the tutor's study.

J. A. Richards, Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge, has been one of the most stimulating and provocative influences in recent criticism. His "*The Meaning of Meaning*" (with C. K. Ogden), his "*Principles of Literary Criticism*," and particularly his "*Practical Criticism*" with its remarkable reports upon the teaching of poetry, have exercised wide influence. He was a visiting professor at Harvard in 1932. It has been unfortunately necessary to omit some of Mr. Richards' evidence for the conclusions in this essay, because of space limitations.

## A Dragon Wallows Up

(Continued from preceding page)

in the fiction of cruelty and disorder, distinctly hysterical.

A Matthew Arnold, a Tennyson, an Emerson, a Whitman are of little use in such a crisis. What could Whitman mean to a twenty-year-old Nazi, or Emerson to a convinced Communist? We have dropped from the spiritual level where such idealists can persuade the typical intellect; and it may be said with equal truth that their doctrine is too naive for a world economically and socially far more complex than theirs, and curdled with passions which the complacency of the nineteenth century kept under, in classes which had not yet sought their place in the sun.

What is needed today is a biting literature of social criticism, aware of the beast, the child, and the coward in every breast, yet unwilling to concede defeat or to accept error. We need a Voltaire. We need a "Candide," a book that Jew-baiters and war-mongers can understand. We need a lash for the failures of liberalism (as Voltaire lashed the failures of Christianity) by men who understand (as Voltaire understood) that the purposes of liberalism are indispensable. The stupidities of force and blind reaction can be fought only by intelligence, disillusioned but not discouraged. The lumbering naturalism of realistic fiction is quite inadequate, and so is the outmoded humanitarianism of the stage. A controlled and intelligent anger, destructive in order to construct, sharp as a knife and aware of its ends and its enemy, is the best weapon against this old dragon of intolerance, distrust, violence, and hate, wallowing up from the mud of history. You cannot kill dinosaurs with sermons or scientific analyses, or turn them back by oratory. Nor do whiffs of grape shot settle anything except for the moment, as Napoleon learned to his cost.

Sir W. Beach Thomas, writing in the *London Observer* in commemoration of the tercentenary of the death of the poet, George Herbert, says: "He was a friend of kings, but also a king of friends; and though James I. patronized him, and, if he had lived, might have turned him into a useless courtier, and Charles I. read him in prison, his life is chiefly famous for his friendships and his family friendships. No friendship under record has more ideal qualities than John Donne's with Herbert's mother. . . . George Herbert was a saint from his youth up, but at one period the temptation to be a worldling was almost too strong for him, and he suffered from wracking struggles in spirit, as in body, to the very moment of his death. . . . We may conclude, with apologies to the cynics, that saintliness was in the tissue of his being. So was music, so was verse. And in spite of the glories of 'The Temple' and 'Private Ejaculations,' his attributes may be set in that order of dominance, if not of merit."

## Fate Comes Unswerving

By MARK VAN DOREN

FATE comes unswerving like a frightened horse  
Sky-maddened on a white mid-afternoon.  
Fate comes unseeing, and the blinded hooves  
Drum a shrill thunder to a noteless tune  
That dies into the forest, where an owl  
Returns it to the midnight and the moon.  
  
Lean neither way, for nothing can escape.  
No walker in a field knows whence it comes.  
Only there is an instant when the dust  
Whirls upward and the round horizon hums.  
Then the feet loudest, and the final leap . . .  
With afterward no dream of any drums.