

## OBJECTIONS TO OBJECTIVES

MARK BARRON, O.P.



THE statement that there exists a very real parallel between religion and literature is neither profound nor particularly illuminating. Religion, broadly speaking, may be said to take a man out of himself and bring him into communion with his God. Literature likewise takes a man from out of himself, and acquaints him with "the best and happiest moments of the best and happiest minds."<sup>1</sup> But to go further and assert that there is a parallel between religion and the teaching of literature might seem to be a wholly unwarranted stretching of facts to suit some inane mental prepossession. Yet, there exists such a parallel and, paradoxically enough, it involves neither an under-estimation of religion nor an over-estimation of the teaching of literature. To put it quite simply and realistically, they are alike, because, in this topsyturvy world of ours, each has been allowed (or made, depending upon one's point of view) to take a back seat. The minister of religion<sup>2</sup> has submitted to demands from the pews while the teacher of literature has asked those at the desks before him what they would like to be taught.

Now this parallel between the two is owing to a loss of moorings. It manifests itself in the almost amusing (unless one chooses to regard it as tragic) uncertainty about ideals or standards, or, as the educationists would glibly proclaim, "objectives."<sup>3</sup> It all started, as Mr. Belloc and others have been telling us for some years now, four centuries ago when religion in the Western world became plural in number and Truth became the object of the emotions rather than of the intellect. It has con-

<sup>1</sup> cf. Shelley's definition of Poetry.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, "religion" refers to the amazing complexus of contradictory hypotheses posing under that name today. It does not by any means include the teachers and followers of the true Faith of Christ.

<sup>3</sup> Concession is here made to the vocabulary of modern educators. Like every other profession or vocation, Education has its catchwords. Unless one can use with a modicum of intelligence such words as "methods," "objectives," "functional," "vitalization," "revitalization," "coordination," "integration," "correlation," "project," "inhibition," he is manifestly unaware of the newer "trends" in Education.

tinued until now and will continue until such time as men are willing to undergo a radical change of heart and mind.

How may we know that there have been such changes and of so far-reaching an influence as even to affect the teaching of literature? Just as passengers in a smooth-running Pullman car can sometimes determine the fact that they are actually moving only by looking off at some fixed object, such as a farmhouse or a hay stack, so can we know that there have been changes only because there is yet something unchanged, permanent, to endure until the very stars fall from the heavens. It is *the* Religion and it can never become plural. Alone and unchanged in the market-place of the world, the Catholic Church can serve as a landmark by which one may determine, among other things, just how much of a parallel exists between modern religion and the teaching of literature. This will be done, not for the purpose of again focusing attention upon the vagaries of religion but rather to call attention to those of the teaching of literature.

Since the break-up of Christian unity, religion has to an alarming extent become anthropomorphic. Man has taken eternal, revealed truths and moulded them to suit what he considers his most pressing needs, even though those needs, in his opinion, may vary from time to time. Thus, today, religion must help to produce good citizens. It must serve as the stable expression of national unity and culture. Or, again, it must fit men for life in the modern world. But under no condition must it become too overbearing in its demands. In a word, God and the eternal interests of man have to a great extent been forgotten and religion has come to be regarded as something purely utilitarian.

In the teaching of literature there is manifest this same emphasis on and confusion about purposes or objectives. Men have, as it were, fallen asleep to the understanding of their own nature with its eager demands for Beauty and things intangible. They have awakened to discover the presence of literature, of obvious aesthetic and emotional appeal but with no apparent reason for being. And so they have set themselves to the discovery of a reason, to the invention of a purpose which, in their opinions, can be made to order a course in literature.

Of such purposes there are many, each with its own devoted coterie of vitalizers. They can be read about, if not for profit, at least for amusement, in educational journals. Thus literature must develop habits. It must emphasize noble ideals.

It must be world-wide in its scope and stress international-mindedness. It must be studied just for the fun which can be gotten out of it. Or, it can and must be made to serve the pupil as a guide in the solution of his life problems. There are many others of varying degrees of sense and nonsense. Of those which have been mentioned one need only consider two which are of especial interest because of the light they throw on the parallelism between religion and the teaching of literature. They are: international-mindedness through the teaching of world literature and literature as a solution to life problems.

In her presidential address to the National Council of the Teachers of English, at Memphis, Tennessee, on November 24, 1932, Miss Stella S. Center said:

If courses in literature might include more of the literature expressive of liberal internationalism, we might speed the day when negotiation and conference instead of war would become the chief instruments of foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

While one cannot but agree that here is a consummation devoutly to be hoped for, one also realizes that if and when such a spirit of "liberal internationalism" finally comes about, the literature expressive of it will have played but a small part. Six years have passed since the above-quoted words were spoken and one is forced to admit that "the parochial, the insular, the sectional, the narrowly nationalistic attitude" have not appreciably been lessened "in a world growing rapidly smaller by means of the airplane, the radio, the telephone, and television."<sup>5</sup> There is needed a change of ideology, a return to revealed, *divine* religion. It is precisely this truth which is implicit in so many of the objectives which are being brought to the attention of teachers of literature. In the face of so lamentable a breakdown of religious belief educators cast about for a substitute. They light upon literature and proceed to make it fulfil more than its normal functions in the education of the pupil. But a substitute cannot and will not be found—not even in literature, even though it be aimed at no more than the effecting of peace and concord between nations.

In the claims which are made for its ability to solve the life problems of high-school youngsters, literature is likewise made to usurp the function of religious belief and practice. Thus, in

---

<sup>4</sup> cf. Center, Stella S., "Responsibility of Teachers of English," *The English Journal*, February, 1933, vol. xxii, no. 2, p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

the *Manual of Courses of Study for the High Schools of North Carolina* of 1924, one reads that literature must serve "as an interpretation of problems of thinking and conduct that meet the individual in his daily life."<sup>6</sup> Although one may disagree quite heartily with much of what Howard Mumford Jones has to say in his article, "The Fetish of the Classics," one can assert with him that:

The doctrine that one draws from literature the possibilities for the solution of one's individual problems is a doctrine that in nine cases out of ten is simply not so. Think over the crises of your own lives and ask yourselves exactly what literature had to do with the solution of them. Consider the presidential election just concluded and inquire whether the political sagacity of Burke or Macaulay or Johnson or Webster seemed to have any practical bearing on its outcome.<sup>7</sup>

"Burke or Macaulay or Johnson or Webster" have not failed. Nor has the reader. The fault lies with those who see in literature mere handbooks of morals with answers to individual problems which can only be solved by religious instruction.

Confronted with so apparent a tendency in that direction, one may be expected to inquire: Should, then, the teacher of literature do away with all objectives? Now, it cannot be denied that, however misdirected they sometimes are, definite objectives in the teaching of certain subjects are of positive utility to both the teacher and the taught. To the teacher objectives serve as a *raison d'être* for teaching, give it spirit, a sense of direction, a positive purpose. The taught, for their part, are fitted for life and its exigencies. But the same cannot be said for literature. Just as the rose in a front garden "flowers without a reason but to flower," so neither can literature be said to serve a definite purpose extrinsic to itself.

Is there, then, no substitute for an objective in this matter? There is, and it has already been mentioned above, although one would hesitate to class it, as it has been classed, among definite objectives. It is that apparently most purposeless of purposes, the teaching of literature for fun. While agreeing with the complaint of Norma Dobie Solve: "The mistaken conception of art as play—because art has some of the qualities of play—has given rise to the cult of pleasure, of the easy, in the literature classroom,"<sup>8</sup> one cannot but regard as worthwhile the attitude

<sup>6</sup> cf. Jones, Howard Mumford, "The Fetish of the Classics," *The English Journal*, March 1929, vol. xviii, no. 3, p. 225.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 229-230.

<sup>8</sup> Solve, Norma Dobie, "In Praise of Difficulty," *The English Journal*, October 1933, vol. xxii, no. 8, p. 636.

of mind which recognizes that literature should not be made to serve an extraneous purpose. For, just as play cannot be thought of as purely utilitarian in the life of the child, so good literature and a taste for it will not serve to keep a man physically alive and well. Yet everyone recognizes the truth of the old saw: All work and no play makes Jack a *dull* boy. [Italics our own.]

Just as play is similar to art, so literature is an art. And, just as the totalitarian state thinks of art (and therefore, literature) in terms of propaganda,<sup>9</sup> so do educators think of it in terms of definite ends, apparently the more the better. In spite of their varying political and economic creeds, both the Communist (and Fascist) and the teacher would vehemently assert their knowledge of the nature and functions of art. But both are mistaken, for they cannot seem to understand that, if art is to remain true to itself as art, it must not be made to serve a definite utilitarian purpose. Described by Willa Cather as "an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself,"<sup>10</sup> art has no purpose save its own perfection, but it has a very definite meaning. It is an appeal to something which lies at the very roots of a man's being and is immortal. In the creative artist it is the setting down of something, however trivial and lacking in importance, which has been experienced and deeply felt. With "mute inglorious Miltons," it is the mirroring of such experiences. It is, in short, a spirit, free as the wind, evanescent, brooking no opposition, independent of all who would try to chain it down and direct it whithersoever they have a mind.

It must not be supposed that because no particular purpose is advocated in the teaching of literature that therefore no particular purpose can be achieved. As a matter of fact, although it was not meant to,—one cannot stress this point too much—literature can and may serve a multitude of purposes. Thus, it can and may contribute to international-mindedness, to the solution of student problems, to the development of habits of clear thinking, etc. (By the same token, a sincere adherence to what he believes to be the true Faith of Christ can help in a very definite way to make a man a good citizen.) It is all a question

---

<sup>9</sup> cf. Krutch, Joseph Wood, "Literature and Propaganda," *The English Journal*, December 1933, vol. xxii, no. 10, pp. 793-802.

<sup>10</sup> Cather, Willa, *The Song of the Lark* (Boston, 1915), p. 304. Quotation is made with permission of the publishers, Houghton, Mifflin Company.

of emphasis. In this matter the judicious teacher will suggest rather than insist. If there be a practical lesson to be learned from a particular character in a novel, play, or narrative poem, she will call it to the attention of the class. And one certainly cannot very well accuse such a teacher of being under the domination of any one definite objective.

Finally, and to conclude the parallel between religion and the teaching of literature, it must be asserted that only with the reform of the one will there come into being a common-sense attitude with regard to the other. Only after the people in the pews have learned to follow the revealed truths of those who speak as ones having more than mere human authority will the teacher of literature be able to state definitely (and definitively) what she intends to teach and set about doing it. Then will religion have asserted its true dignity and rôle in the lives of men and demand from literature the surrender of many of the functions which it (religion) should never have abdicated. Then will religion and literature go each its own way, rid of vagaries, serving no mere utilitarian purpose, but achieving something far more enduring—because eternal.