

METHODS OR MADNESS?

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IT IS ALL very well to repudiate even the very sense of objectives in the teaching of English literature and to speak in extravagant terms of the inner meaning of literature and its appeal to something essential in human personality. It is quite another matter to convince the average pupil in this too-appealing world of the twentieth century that Edmund Burke's "On Conciliation with America" is "fun." So it is that one is brought face to face with the question of "methods" in the teaching of English literature. Just how is one to go about the successful presentation of a certain play or short-story? In what way can Johnny possibly be made to appreciate "Il Penseroso" or Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"?

An examination of the "methods" which have actually been adopted in recent years by teachers of literature reveals a striking parallel with modern religion¹ in practise. Both the teacher of English literature and the minister of modern religion have concerned themselves overmuch with simplification and attention to the here and now. The result is a number of vagaries having their roots in the past but savoring very much of the modern confusion.

Thus there is everywhere evident what might be called, for want of a better expression, the flight from reason. It started four centuries ago with the break-up of Christian unity initiated by one Martin Luther. In his *Three Reformers*, Jacques Maritain speaks of the "profound anti-intellectualism" of Luther and "the absolute predominance of Feeling and Appetite."² A modern instance of the limits to which such a movement can be allowed to go is the following item concerning Mr. Bernarr MacFadden, the American publisher. When he began publica-

¹ 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.

² Maritain Jacques, *Three Reformers* (New York, 1929), p. 30.

tion of *True Story*, the most celebrated of his dozen magazines, MacFadden "picked common-man editors, not professionals. As soon as one of them showed signs of mental maturity he lost his job."³

Now it may seem to be a far cry from Luther to MacFadden and neither may seem to have much to do with literature (to which their contribution is, as a matter of fact, extremely questionable). It may further be objected that the type of mind that can lose itself in the pages of *True Story*, *True Experiences*, etc., is, like the poor, *always* with us. But it must be remembered that Luther started something which the teacher of literature faces every day and which MacFadden solves to his own satisfaction—and the satisfaction of the thousands who read his magazines, thousands who have been exposed to modern "methods" of teaching literature. High-school pupils read and revel in such magazines and, in comparison with the revelations they find therein, anything that the English literature period might offer seems colorless.

Confronted with so powerful an opponent to his noble efforts, what does the teacher do? He snatches the art of literature from its high pinnacle and sets to work to out-MacFadden MacFadden (as if such a thing were possible). Literature must at all costs be made palatable to the pupil. And one of the first costs is generally to make it as soothing as possible to an intellect which indulges in nothing more stimulating than a G-man adventure or the ruefully amorous experiences of an unsophisticated little telephone-girl.⁴

Then there is that indefinable something called "atmosphere." In modern religion it is to be found in the effort to make obligations to divine worship as palatable as possible to the jaded sensibilities of the modern man. Kneeling benches — if there are any — are cushioned. Sermons disguise themselves under titles nothing short of the bizarre. Membership in a congregation is quite definitely of a social nature. A movie screen has even been set up in an English church with a Robert

³ *News-Week*, vol. v, no. 26, June 29, 1935, p. 28. The present-day widespread popularity of the "picture magazines" among people of all classes is yet another evidence of a most lamentable unwillingness to think. As part of the "blurb" which hailed its coming some two and a half years ago, *Life* could speak of pictures as the new "responsibility."

⁴ Cf. Solve, Norma Dobie, "In Praise of Difficulty," *The English Journal*, October, 1933, vol. xxii, no. 8, pp. 636-643.

Taylor film as subject for the contemplation of the worshippers.⁵

In the teaching of literature this pursuit of atmosphere has become positively destructive in its manifestation. Thus the old dependable class-room desks with all of their amateur carvings, nicks and scratches have been thrown out in the back yard. Why? Because there is something decidedly inhibitive about anything stationary in the class-room. Children must not be chained down to a desk. They must be given the opportunity to move about, to express themselves. The class-room must become even more informal than the most informal of libraries. It must be made to differ from a lounge only in this, that its pictures and *objets d'art* are of literary celebrities and that there is a select number of well-illustrated and well-thumbed books. The teacher, for his part, must become a kind of moderator or consultant in much the same pattern as a major professor in the graduate school of a university.

At first it might seem that private interpretation, another innovation of the religious reformers, allowing the individual to proceed on no more valid intellectual basis than his own prepossessions and prejudices, could not possibly have a parallel in the teaching of literature. Yet, what is the "free-reading" movement but an application of the principle of private interpretation? Simply because he finds himself emotionally and intellectually out of tune with certain of the classics which his father and mother were made to study, the pupil of today is permitted to choose from a "free-reading" list what he shall read. The result has been a gradual break with some of the most worthwhile traditions of the past. It used to be that when a speaker or writer wished to put a point across in an original and picturesque manner he would refer to a character or an incident familiar, from their reading, to his listeners or readers. Today there are no such characters or incidents in general currency and who can deny that something of dignity and democracy has been allowed to slip both from our literature and life?

Religion and the teaching of literature are alike, too, in the unhealthy alacrity with which they seize upon certain means to achieve their several ends. Simply because popular feeling in favor of such un-Christian practises as divorce, birth-control and euthanasia has gathered momentum, some Anglican divines discuss, question and express doubt instead of assuming a united and definite stand. Also, definitely stated creeds of economics

⁵ Cf. *Time*, vol. xxxi, no. 13, March 28, 1938, p. 41.

and politics are given blanket ecclesiastical approval, no regard being had for the morrow and the change which it may bring. To put it quite simply, it is the sin of trying to be both *in* the world and *of* the world.

In the teaching of literature this tendency is evident in the too gullible acceptance of the radio and the movies as invaluable aids. It would be foolish to deny that these very popular forms of entertainment have been and are a source of help to the acquirement of a fuller appreciation of the beauties of literature. One needs only mention the excellent cinematic versions of several old classics which have come from both Hollywood and England during the past several years.⁶ In the field of radio, there was the series of programs of "streamlined Shakespeare" presented both by the National Broadcasting Company and the Columbia Broadcasting System during the Summer of 1937. The Sunday afternoon "Great Plays" of 1938-39 similarly revives the classic dramas.

But one cannot help wondering about the efficacy of such popular pastimes in the cause of good literature. To begin with, both the movies and the radio are a form of recreation. Modern man indulges in them because they are preeminently a mental sedative. Now, while one cannot very well deny that there are certain recreational qualities inherent in literature (which should, indeed, be read for fun), part of the pleasure occasioned by good reading must ever be the intellectual stimulation which accompanies it.

A second objection is based upon the fact that, with the exception of the drama, literature was written to be *read*. In spite of all its efforts to insure historical accuracy and exact recreation of atmosphere, the movies cannot fully achieve the authentic Dickens. No one who has seen "David Copperfield," "Tale of Two Cities," "Oliver Twist," "Great Expectations," or "Christmas Carol," can presume to say that he has read Dickens. If, having seen these films, he is moved to read the books of which they are a transcript, then have the movies served English literature. But to the average pupil a period of several weeks serious reading must seem very tame and tiresome after several hours of action and thrills in a movie theatre. Similarly, *Macbeth*

⁶ It might be well here to call attention to the fact that serious doubts have been voiced concerning the adaptability of Shakespeare, Dickens and Thackeray to the cinema as a form of art.

or *Hamlet*, cut down to a half-hour radio version with musical interludes, is *not* Shakespeare.

It has been said that confusion concerning objectives and methods in the teaching of literature is fundamentally owing to the break-up of Christian unity. More proximately it can be explained by the radical changes which have taken place during the last fifty years. As movies, radios and automobiles quickly passed from the category of luxuries into that of necessities such familiar pictures as that of Lincoln leisurely reading borrowed books by the light of a log fire came to seem very much a thing of the past. Quite evidently the presentation of the classics would have to undergo a revamping. Hence, reaction which is, before all else, expressive of a deep-seated impatience, set in. Mindful only of the necessity of new tactics, the reactionary saw very little, if any, good in what he planned to abolish.

To initiate a counter-reaction might very well be to leave oneself open to a similar accusation. Hence it is necessary to concede that very probably there is something worthwhile in modern "methods" of teaching literature, just as there are certain aspects of modern religion which cannot be condemned. Thus literature is not something solely for a group of initiates. It belongs to the man in the street just as well as to the so-called intelligentsia. If comfortable chairs are of some assistance toward the acquisition of an appreciation for *Silas Marner*, let there be comfortable chairs. But perish the thought that comfortable chairs had everything to do with appreciation if and when it finally came. Nor can one wholly condemn "free-reading lists." They are perfectly all right in their place and that place is to serve as an adjunct to the required list which most certainly must not be abandoned just because George cannot appreciate the whimsicality of certain of Dickens' characters.

It has been suggested that only with the reform of religion will there come into being a common-sense attitude with regard to the teaching of literature. There being no evidence of any immediate re-establishment of unity in religion, one can but propose the adoption of what might in some way approximate such a re-establishment (and would certainly follow it as a natural consequence). Teacher and pupil alike must learn the meaning of authority and, secondly, the teacher must be required to go harmlessly mad about literature.

Evidence has been brought forward to show that often that

neither the teacher himself nor the pupil whom he is to teach has any clear notion of the teaching authority. There must be an about-face. The pupil must be taught before everything else that what the teacher says *goes*, that the teacher can *exact*, and, if necessary, *demand*. The teacher must learn that, whereas hints and suggestions are the order of the day insofar as objectives are concerned, where there is more especially the question of class-room procedure, he must exact and demand, if necessary. He must be made to realize that authority is given him together with a definite time during each class day during which time he is to exercise that authority.

But authority is not enough. It can always and too easily become tyrannical, cruel, unreasonable even. And so, just as in the most powerful and lovable of religious leaders there has ever been sanctity of life manifesting itself in complete surrender to God and the things of God, so the teacher of literature must be possessed of a streak of madness about his subject. Madness rather than "methods" is to be required of the teacher of literature and it is to manifest itself in personal inspiration and the power to inspire others. If minutes are the daily measure of the teaching authority, they must be minutes that fly rather than plod along upon leaden feet. The period devoted to English literature should be one of enchantment during which the minds and emotions of the pupils are borne to other lands and other times; of realization of the beauty, majesty, force, infinite capacity of language; of the revelation of the meaning and inner significance of character and situation where before there had been next to nothing. To fail in this is to fail as a teacher of English literature. Methods minus such madness are but the refusal to recognize such a failure. They are but short cuts to little successes rather than enduring Success.

Authority, then, and a streak of madness may be calculated to save the day against an onslaught of methods. But what is this authority, this streak of madness if not the realization by the teacher of his own personality, his individuality? No one gives what he does not have—all the "methods" proposed by the educationists to the contrary notwithstanding.