

THE UNITY OF THE HUMANITIES¹

G. G. SEDGWICK

I AM confronted with two questions according to the programme before you. The first asks if the relations of the departments of English Literature with those of the Ancient Classics and History are close enough. The question is purely rhetorical: its answer is obviously "No". The second inquires what are the methods of effecting a closer relationship. To this my answer is "I do not know". And with that, really, my paper comes to an end. If your eyes are straining for the *lumen siccum* of truth, you may now close them, go to sleep or withdraw your attention to your own more worthy thoughts. For, in real effect "ye get namore of me."

Indeed, the subject is infected with the disease that infects most practical discussion of educational theory and practice. Much of what one can say for sure, as our classical friends are fond of telling us, has been platitude since Plato. Which, I dare say, is an argument for closer relationship between the Classics and Education. An irreverent student of mine once remarked about the study of psychology,—others have remarked the same thing—that it taught him only what he already knew. The obvious reply was that in such case it taught him nothing. If, after this paper is read, you feel as my student felt, perhaps you are in very truth subject to the same retort.

In any case the President of the Conference has done me the honour of asking for my platitudes on the questions at issue, and, if he had picked his man wisely, he would have been justified. For like all educational questions, these have to be examined again and again in the light of new conditions: and the platitudes have to be revamped into the idiom, or the slang, of each passing generation.

The object of this paper, then, is not to instruct but to remind. No doubt our President believes—and quite rightly—that this particular discussion, far from being worn out, has a curious capacity for lively and insistent growth: it is more acute to-day than ever. The last magazine I happen to have read—the *Atlantic Monthly* for May—continues two articles that bear directly upon it, in one form or another, and that illustrate with singular felicity how to

1. Read at the first conference of Professors of English in Canada, held at Toronto, May, 1928.

approach the subject and how not to. Professor Shorey is querulous in spite of his protestations to the contrary, and Professor Whitehead as usual breathes a serene upper air, though perhaps almost too rarefied, again as usual, for mortal lungs. The old combat as between breadth and specialisation has intensified and focussed: indeed it isn't so much a question, now, of rounding out English Literature with Greek and the Moderns and History as of keeping a well-rounded view of English Literature itself. Physicians complain of the increasing complexity of their profession. But the mere appalling sight of Professor Kennedy's bibliography—for one thing out of many—reminds students of English letters that medicine has nothing on us. At first glance, then, our questions *are* out of date: there is a more pressing duty laid upon us than they suggest—the difficult duty of keeping sufficiently wide horizons within the vast range of English studies themselves quite apart from extraneous fields.

Happily it is just in those extraneous fields that safety for English studies lies. Professor Manly, if I understand him, has been suggesting—and the suggestion comes with peculiar force from him—that the term of intensive and narrowly-confined studies in Chaucer is in sight: that fruitful investigation of Chaucer must hereafter be a process that calls the imagination into larger play. Probably he does not wish us to infer that imagination hasn't played too excessively large a rôle in Chaucerian studies up to the present. But, that aside, I gather from his remarks and his latest book that the help of historical and social investigations will have to be more largely invoked by students of medieval literature if their work is not to run waste in the regions of Carrenare and the drye sea. The most interesting problems that now confront a medievalist in literature—let me stick to him as an example—are problems that take him far afield into studies not once thought to be his province and that, like all roads, lead to Rome. My friend H. R. Patch's exhaustive work on the Goddess Fortuna—which as a subject doesn't interest me very much—is a case in point. The importance of that work, I take it, lies in a sort of philosophic or psychological significance—namely, the revelation of a medieval attitude of mind which is important in the study of Chaucer and his time: and that attitude was shaped by Boethius and a shadowy host of others, out of materials passed on by the Roman world. To take just one other instance, which I owe, likewise, to Professor Manly. There awaits an investigator the whole very interesting subject of the relations of medieval literature and painting in so far as these relations appear in the vast number of unexamined illuminations in the

MSS.—unexamined, that is, by the literary student. This, so far as I know, is a field almost unspoiled by the plough. And that study, when it is attempted, will call for a mastery of the history of medieval art as well as a mastery of letters proper. Here let me drop into the slang of the moment: a generation ago we were talking of sources: now the fashion is "backgrounds". Let us hope that the fashion may not fail of imagination.

After I had written the above paragraph I read Professor Whitehead's paper referred to above. Let me step aside to quote a paragraph or two as setting forth, in better fashion than I am capable of, the spirit which I believe should inform us in pursuing this present discussion:

"The justification for a university," he says, "is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest of life, by uniting the young and the old in the imaginative consideration of learning. The university imparts information, but it imparts it imaginatively. At least, this is the function which it should perform for society. A university which fails in this respect has no reason for existence. This atmosphere of excitement, arising from imaginative consideration, transforms knowledge. A fact is no longer a bare fact; it is invested with all its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energizing as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes.

Imagination is not to be divorced from the facts: it is a way of illuminating the facts. It works by eliciting the general principles which apply to the facts, as they exist, and then by an intellectual survey of alternative possibilities. It enables men to construct an intellectual vision of a new world, and it preserves the zest of life by the suggestion of satisfying purposes.

Youth is imaginative; and if the imagination be strengthened by discipline, this energy of imagination can in great measure be preserved through life. The tragedy of the world is that those who are imaginative have but slight experience, and those who are experienced have feeble imaginations. Fools act on imagination without knowledge; pedants act on knowledge with imagination. The task of a university is to weld together imagination and experience."

These paragraphs suggest the particular points which I believe our President wished me to labour. I have had no intention,—even if I were competent—to instruct this Conference in the present methods and status of research. I suspect that he wishes us to consider the relations of English with Classics and History as a problem of teaching. If, in this complex and highly divided modern day, those relations are increasingly difficult to the wise and prudent—namely us—they will not be any easier for the undergraduate to grasp. Yet we are plainly bound to try and help him to attain this grasp. Let us return to the questions on the programme.

The first question, I take it, we need not labour much—certainly as it applies to the Classics, by which of course we mean Latin and Greek. These languages are no longer a required staple of most curricula on this continent: they were optional in the High Schools, except for college matriculants, even in the Nova Scotia of my far-off youth: and the proportion of time given to them has since diminished. U. B. C. no longer requires Latin of a candidate for the B. A. degree. There is no use bewailing the situation even if there were grave matter for tears—and personally, I don't believe there is, ardently as I believe in the study, even the necessity, of Greek. In fact, it is just because I know its necessity that I am not disposed to be pessimistic about its future, but the ancient tongues will never again be a required staple of the public schools and of the most of higher public institutions based upon them. Consequently a steadily increasing number of young people gifted in the study of English will come up to college unprepared, as we say, in the Classics. We have to face that fact at once and always. And further we must face the fact that the notion of the classical languages as a special and divinely appointed instrument of "mental discipline" is an exploded myth to be held only by classical fundamentalists. One of these, bearing the name and authority of a great English public school, bore down upon us in B. C. not long ago with the old babble about the hard and salutary chewing required by Latin as compared with the "soft mush of the modern languages." But it was only too plain from his talk that he wasn't a well-equipped spiritual dentist: and he gave witness that Latin and Greek, in the wrong hands, may be made especially effective means not of imaginative liberation but of finally closing the mind. Perhaps one service that teachers of English can perform in establishing right relations between English and the Classics and in keeping the Classics in their necessarily important place is to assist at the final disposal of these corpses of superstition; Hamlet was coarse but had the right attitude of mind when he set about "to lug the guts into the neighbor room."

Another similar weight that doth easily beset us who study the Classics is the feeling of bored superiority over people who don't. Jebb, I think it was, got great fun over some old worthy who announced three reasons for studying Greek something as follows: (1) it was the language of New Testament; (2) it gave you a sense of superiority over your fellows; (3) it led to positions to emolument. The first reason does not appear to be potent now, the third has unluckily disappeared, but the second is still operative. Professor Shorey feels it strongly, even bitterly. Some one should fortify him with some lines of Landor:

Come, reascend with me the steeps of Greece:
 None stop the road and few will follow; we
 Shall breathe apart the pure fresh air and drink
 The untroubled spring.

This arrogant, or rather snobbish, exclusiveness, it is hardly necessary to point out, is curiously unclassical in temper: it is a case of the notorious Romantic escape from reality. And in any case it is an unfortunate attitude of mind for a teacher seeking to establish right relations between English and the Classics.

It is necessary, then, to pose these questions in the right temper. There remains, pressing upon all of us men who read or try to live intelligently, the immeasurable meaning to us of the Greek and Latin genius. The phrase is hackneyed, but the Thing has its unquenchable vitality which I think needs no more books, even charming as that of Livingstone, for proof. Such books, after all, are for those who are already aware. Undergraduates do not gain much by being preached to about it: our problem is to show them. And any preaching we do, perhaps, had best be in another form:

False dreams, all false,
 mad heart, were yours.
 The word, and nought else
 in time endures.
 Not you long after,
 perished and mute,
 will last, but the defter
 viol and lute,
 Sweetly they'll trouble
 the listeners
 with the cold dropped pebble
 of painless verse.
 Not Helen's wonder,
 nor Paris' stirs,
 But the bright untender
 Hexameters.
 Her beauty's a wraith
 And the boy Paris
 muffles in death
 his mouth's cold cherries.
 Yea, they are less,
 who were love's summer
 than one golden phrase
 of old blind Homer.
 And all their passion
 is nothing made
 but a star to flash in
 an Iliad.

This sense of at least one thing that endures surely is among the things that our questions point to. And the spirit in which to approach them is surely not unlike Mr. Humbert Wolfe's.

As we have already seen, they present merely one aspect of a broader problem—How to give breadth to a student's education? How to give him or get him to acquire a sense of relations? How to give him a sense of proportions? How to make him a man of culture in Arnold's sense? How, in an older word, that means the same thing, to make him humane? How, to use Whitehead's term (and he is surely repeating one William Wordsworth), to make out of a student a man of imagination. These are the problems of all teaching. Consequently, any pedagogical method that I shall suggest for allying Literature with Classics and History belongs likewise to any teacher of any subject who tries in any way to expand his student's horizon beyond his own specialization. In effect we are familiar with them all in the classrooms of leaders of our youth and, as a matter of actual name and practice, every method that I shall suggest is already a matter of at least advanced experiment on this continent. Pardon me, therefore, if the terms "Classics" and "History" tend for the last few minutes to drop out of sight.

One famous old piece of machinery for the humanizing of teaching is, alas, for Canadian Colleges like my own mainly a dream. It has an old name: the Tutorial System, with its suggestion of Oxford and Cambridge. For a good many years, the attention of American colleges has been veering around from Germany to England. And apparently the blasts of war hastened the turn of the weather-vane. At any rate, the rather half-way, and I think not altogether effective, Tutorial System introduced by Wilson at Princeton has given the hint to Harvard where the System has been engrafted in full blossom upon the Lecture method of instruction. So far as I have heard, opinions are hardly divided as to the general success of the scheme there. Its general nature needs no explanation. The virtues of hand-picked instruction are obvious and manifold. But the virtue pertinent to our discussion is its increased capacity of focussing many divergent lines of interest in the control of one instructor who can and, if he is competent, does relate Elizabethan drama, say, to Sophocles and Aristotle, and under whom the student studies those things as one thing not as two. Under such an instructor, the student may see Chaucer against his background of dying chivalry, economic and social unrest, scholastic philosophy and medieval science. And, moreover, of course, the student is enabled to make these suggested relations in a way suited to his own bents, rather than in the way of lecture groups wherein the teacher must seek a sort of lowest common denominator. Some English critics whom I have noted are following the Harvard and other similar experiments with satisfaction not to say amusement: Daniel, they think, has at last come to judgment.

Now I am fully aware, I think, that the Tutorial System is not a heal-all. Under a poor tutor, as Oxford men, particularly Rhodes Scholars, point out, the results are worse than farcical, they are simply nothing at all. Nor is it anything but silly to condemn the lecture room as an outworn institution, as Scott Nearing tells me is the prevalent view in Russia. Obviously, its continuance is at least inevitable. And under our conditions, I am sure it would be desirable to require it, in a modified way, in a scheme of teaching that we would mould according to our heart's desire. I believe that it has virtues of system and order and unity and social interest that will continue to make it the backbone of collegiate instruction, certainly on this continent. Even the Oxford superiority of lectures, may I venture to say it in a low tone, sometimes produces results that hardly justify the satisfaction of the product. Some sorry experience with overseas pronouncements on Chaucer lead one to suspect that perhaps tutorial instruction in language and history is sometimes just a thought sketchy as applied to literature. I believe if the order of the lecture room can be enlivened by more of the freedom that comes from individual conference, there will be some approach to the particular end we should like to attain. Certainly under such a combination of systems, student and teacher could be enabled to relate the literatures and history of the ancient and modern worlds more freely and amply.

The main bar to a thorough-going adoption of Tutorial systems in Canada is the little matter of its impossibility. Oxford and Cambridge are rather more expensive places than Saskatchewan. And Harvard, by last accounts available to me, is spending something like three hundred thousand a year on her tutors alone. Such a figure makes a Canadian sigh for a chance to dip a hand into the flesh pots of Egypt. Even Moses would find it difficult to extract a great deal more than we get now from dry and much flagellated legislative rocks. But at the least we shall get no harm from watching what happens among the wicked and the rich in Boston. Who knows if, some day after we are all safely dead—but so much for idle wishing.

We may get some illumination, too, from observing what, if anything, issues from the College within a College which Wisconsin is experimenting with. For Dr. Meiklejohn's hopes in establishing that College are in line with what we are discussing today. He is attempting to get a selected body of young people to study a selected civilization as a whole: its literature, its art in general, its history, its philosophy, its social and political values—the Many as manifestations of a One. The idea is daring and it has infinite possibilities of failure: at the outset, it certainly has had to

encounter doubt and opposition, or what is more depressing, faint enthusiasms. I have not heard what is being said about the actual working of the scheme, and indeed one year's experimentation will hardly establish sure grounds for inference. But if Dr. Meiklejohn's hopes are realized in any measure, he will be able to point the way, I think, to what could be done at least with deliberately selected portions of a student body, from the first year on, in some of our Canadian colleges—done by means of a somewhat difficult reorganization of machinery, but with not a very great additional permanent expense. Perhaps even the difficulty suggested is not inherently greater than that involved in a division as between pass and honours students. Certainly the Wisconsin idea is the sort of thing which would have attracted me as an undergraduate; and the attractions surely would be especially great for students whose bent is towards literature and history. But the best we can do at present is wait and see.

Of one other suggestion I can speak more confidently since we have been experimenting with it a little in B. C. It involves nothing new. Some of you, to my knowledge, were giving it practical effect before the University of B. C. was thought of. And I venture to call it a suggestion only because I think that my College is offering it more open official recognition. In brief, it consists in a considerable measure of release from lecture attendance and the like, extended to a small number of students who have proved their competence. The proffer of release appears in our calendar under the quiet name of "Private Reading for Senior Students", and it is being extended this next year to Honours Students in English of the third year. At present six of the fifteen units of fourth year work are obtained by candidates for English Honours without attendance at lectures. The conventional statement in the calendar under English 19—which is the official name of the Private Reading Course—requires these candidates to study the life, times, and complete works of some major English author, to pass examinations on their reading, and to write a graduation essay on some special phase of the author that interests them. Students who wish to modify this requirement and study some literary type or tendency or period are allowed to do so. In any case they are asked to study their author or their problem by themselves in all its relations—historical, social, literary—in so far as such a study can be done by undergraduates. They are free to get advice or help whenever they want it; or, at their peril, they may trust wholly to their own initiative and the library. The French Department gives a definite tutorial hour every week to each student in honours, which is, perhaps, the better thing to do. But up to the present, we have preferred to allow students to go

their own way. I should add that in the long run the instructor saves no time by doing so. More than a third of the time of Senior Honours students, therefore, is exempt from attendance on and preparation for lectures. Indeed we are permitted by regulation to release them from 9 instead of the 15 units, although this has not been done in the Department of English.

In my opinion such exemptions yield highly satisfactory results in the case of the students mentioned. They are compelled to be self-dependent, they learn the resources of the library, they get at least a bit of an inkling of what research means, and they get the satisfaction of sensing all this by themselves. But best of all, in my belief, they are given more time and privilege for grasping a subject in its broad relations, for grasping it *imaginatively*. For instance, one student this year who chose Chaucer and discussed him as a literary critic, was enabled by means of such ordinary and accessible books as our little library affords—Jusserand, Coulton, Taylor, Salzman—as well as by wide reading in M. E. literature itself, to get a sense of Chaucer in his temporal relations such as is denied to many good graduate students of my acquaintance. And I do not think she could have done this precise thing unless she had been exempt from ordinary requirements to follow out her own purposes.

Again let me say that I know there is nothing but the familiar and obvious in the general method or suggestion. It, too, is a lesson belatedly learned from the Old Country. The point I wish to make is that at least a few highly selected students may profit very greatly by a partial release from prescription, and that not the least of the profit comes from the fact that they have the time to relate, on their own behalf, what otherwise is liable to remain in their minds as courses of instruction more or less unrelated. Our Honours students look forward to this release and to the responsibilities which it involves, although they do often complain, after the manner of their kind, about the work involved. In nine years only two students out of some fifty have really abused their privileges and in consequence paid the penalty. As a result of our general experience, we are going to extend the experiment in a modified form to Honours Students of the third year.

It is true that any value which may exist in the methods here discussed accrues only to a very small proportion of the student body. We should like to reach as many as possible. But it is just this saving remnant that after all we feel it most important, yes, necessary, to reach. And that they can be reached by the method suggested is beyond doubt. A very considerable number of Colleges have been doing the same thing, for probably much larger numbers

of their students, in a wider, more orderly and philosophic fashion. Two of them of which I have some direct knowledge are Smith College and Amherst. At the latter, every student who attains a certain high standard is released, at least in his third year, from compulsory lecture attendance, class exercises, etc., and is allowed to shape his own course under the more or less informal guidance of his instructors.

As I have confessed, this paper fights shy of anything but general and remote suggestions, as far as the great mass of undergraduates is concerned. Very little that has been said touches directly the 600 Freshmen of U. B. C. We find it not easy to teach them anything at all, not to speak of such high-brow matters as the relations of English literature and Classics and History. Annually the English Department tries to reveal to them some of the mysteries of a Greek play in translation. And this does no particular harm. Further, our Faculty as a whole is looking into what the Americans love to call courses of Orientation. I think that there is a good deal of hope in these, both for the body of sciences on the one hand and for the humanities on the other. But just now we tend to brood over our first year with an all-covering but barren sympathy like a hen over a china egg. What to do with them in any way, not to speak of historico-literary relations in particular, I must confess baffles me. Our present discussion does not and cannot touch the root of their problem.

One more point—rather a general one also—and I have done. I believe that we teachers of literature and our Colleges have traditionally taken too narrow a view of what constitutes the Classics and History for purposes of teaching. We are still rather liable, I think, to regard the Classics as Greek and Roman literature merely. And we have been rather slow to realize, in a practical way, that other developments of Art and thought have influenced, hardly less potently, our modern life and its literature. Sculpture, vase-painting, architecture, philosophy, the history of music; the inter-relations of these things and their linkings with literature are incalculable. But as parts of history for purposes of instruction, we either neglect them or treat them as more or less minor incidentals. In the U. B. C. there is not one course for students of literature in particular or of things in general which is mainly devoted to any one of these subjects, with the sole exception of a course in Greek philosophy; and that, by good luck, happens to be traditional. And these subjects are precisely those in which students need the direction of a lecturer. I am aware that my University is singularly poverty-stricken and provincial in this respect. But a glance over calendars of Canadian institutions does not fill one with enthusiasm

for Canadian respect for the Arts. Of course Universities cannot be expected to produce artistic genius at call: at any rate, they don't. But it can hardly be doubted that ours have done none too much to foster, among the general body of undergraduates or even among the specially equipped, an interest in painting or sculpture or music, or even in these things as part of the history of civilization. While this is the case, we can scarcely complain of a certain lack of cultural breadth in our best students, let alone of the stunted perceptions of people at large or—with a few well-known exceptions—of the embryonic nature of Canadian Art. By and large our country is not a country where artists find a congenial atmosphere, and I have not heard that they find University towns are generally more congenial than other places. There are good friends of mine on our faculty at home who are still unaware that music and painting are even candidates for a place on the University curriculum. To them, even in 1928, these subjects have no value as "mental discipline"—whatever is meant by that mouldy phrase. One sometimes wonders if "mental discipline", as exemplified in them or in the rest of us, is justified of her children. A conception of the Classics and of History that involves instruction, definite and practical and thorough-going, in these subjects, will surely do much to keep Classics and History vitally related to the study of English literature.

Is it unfair to hint that Canadian Universities have not erred on the side of liberal breadth of view in education? It is true that we have not been and are not rich enough to have everything we want. And it is also true, as many old wives' tales have told us, that it is better to be safe than sorry in the matter of taking risks. We love to think of ourselves as rigorous and thorough and conservative and secure, and to sneer at educational experiment, particularly if it is American, as faddism and confession of weakness. I know that some of my friends and colleagues do so, even though we have been trained, for the most part, under a generous American hospitality, and furnished with such colour and breadth as we possess by that very experimentation which we affect to fear. Let me utter a parable and a modern instance, which is also, I must confess, a tale out of school. A friendly colleague was warning our faculty, as he often does, against running after strange gods, insisting that we stand fast by tried models of culture. Someone inquired what these were. The answer was immediate and confident and explicit: "What was done", he said, "at Queen's and Toronto". Our hosts will pardon me—a narrow and unrepentant Maritimer—for revealing the fact that he is a professor of palaeontology.