

WHAT IS THE USE OF LITERATURE?*

By AGUSTIN YANEZ

(English Condensation by E. Brinton)

REMINDING us that the real life of a nation, its national characteristics, and culture are the products of the innate spirit of the race, developing in its contact with the forces of nature, climate, and history, Yanez points out the importance in the development of the individual personality of a conscious awareness of one's nature and roots and the importance in the life of a nation, of individuals fully conscious of their nature and heritage.

Of what use is the study of literature to a generation whose eyes are fixed on the pursuit of pleasure and practical utility? There are three ways in which literary studies justify their inclusion in any educational system: they educate the sensibility of the individual; they develop a wider and deeper historical consciousness, and they cultivate an increased command of language as a means of expression.

In a full and accurate concept of humanism, the importance of the education of individual sensibility is obvious. Part of the disorder ruling in the world to-day is due to a confusion in men's minds between sensual enjoyment and aesthetic appreciation; the sensuality of crude nature must be changed and sublimated into a disciplined, aesthetic appreciation.

Literature is the cultural discipline most suitable for training the aesthetic capacity, because it makes use of the common heritage of man, the one unequivocal symbol of all possible intercommunication: the word. Individuals of different periods or different social groups may attribute varying symbolical values to a gesture, to a custom, a sound, a colour, a line; but the strict relationship between idea and word remains constant; thus a general system of grammatical rules is possible and human beings can achieve a certain measure of mutual understanding. By words, literature has an easy, or rather, a natural means of access to man's consciousness; it is the one sure tool which can,

*At a time when in the name of practical utility, scientific and technical studies are assuming an ever larger place in educational programmes, and we sometimes wonder whether the younger generation is not in danger of losing its cultural heritage, it is interesting to hear such intelligent and whole-hearted support of the study of literature as that presented by Agustin Yanez in the paper read at his Admission to membership in the Academia Mexicana de la Lengua.

The following pages are a condensation in English of this discourse. I have omitted the speaker's purely local references and the detailed application of his ideas to the teaching of literature in Mexican schools; on the other hand, where the theories and illustrations seemed to be of general value, I have not hesitated to translate them fully.

The paper was read by the author on September 5, 1953, in the Teatro Degollado, Guadalajara, in the presence of the members of the Mexican Academy and the delegates to the Sixth Congress of the International Institute of Hispano-American Literature, and published in the review *El Castor* Num. 15, Julio-Septiembre, 1953. Guadalajara, Mexico.—E. Brinton.

without violence, sharpen man's aesthetic appreciation; music, painting, sculpture, architecture, dancing, require special aptitudes, and they may meet deaf ears or blind eyes. Words, however, may be understood by everyone, their beauty appreciated; this is the great advantage which literary art derives from its very nature.

If they only served to sharpen our sensibility by close contact with the greatest minds of history, the importance of literary studies, indeed our need of them, would be quite evident in any educational system, however narrow its aims or specialized its programme. The biologist, penned up in his laboratory; the mathematician and the astronomer, absorbed in their research; the doctor and the lawyer, busied in the multiple activities of their daily existence; the engineer, exiled in barren regions; the accountant and the typist. . . if each and every one of them has trained his capacity for appreciation and is alert to catch those sparks which give life its importance and lighten the monotony of the daily grind, then their success is assured, not in their personal relations or in amusements outside their ordinary work but in the very jobs themselves, however narrow or circumscribed they may be; for it is through intuition that scientists, like artists, under the influence of some passage read or some literary memory, have often reached the threshold of some great discovery; and it is not over-rash to say that there has been no historical progress in periods of atrophied intuition; intelligence without sensibility is something not found in geniuses, for that would be barren erudition, lacking the creative impulse. Compare Galileo, Newton, Copernicus, Pasteur with learned laboratory workers, with teachers lacking in vision, and you will see the same difference that exists between the real and the painted figure, between the creative, dynamic, force of life and the static conservatism of museums: compare a merchant, an artisan, a typist, endowed with cultivated aesthetic judgment with others doing the same work but lacking this culture, and you will see with what justice we call cultured the man who has refined, rather than his intelligence, his "sensibility", his capacity for appreciation and intuitive understanding.

However, the study of literature is important not only as an educative process of an aesthetic nature, but also as an effective means of extending, purifying, and enriching historical consciousness. It is in the warp and woof of literature that the great moments and deeds of human endeavour remain firmly caught, living and eternal; whereas the dry document, the note

of the learned scholar, recorded without feeling, without creative inspiration, makes the facts of history arid, even suspect, deprived of all trace of the emotional climate which brought them into being. The literary work possesses the secret of preserving the historical background and projecting it, with all its warmth, light and animation into the future, into the consciousness and emotion of the generations to come.

The history of Greece in its legendary period may be reconstructed with wonderful vividness from the writings of Homer, of Hesiod, of Aeschylus, of Sophocles; Euripides and Aristophanes transmit to us, superbly, the passions of the race, but it is in reading Plato's Dialogues that we become most fully aware of the "ethos" of that great nation.

Even though all the historical documents of the Middle Ages were lost, if the *Divina Comedia* remained, the soul of Medieval man in his struggles between flesh and spirit, his mystical raptures and his abominable cruelty would still be revealed before our wondering gaze.

If a cataclysm were to destroy our civilization and just two or three representative works should be saved, perhaps the *Faust* of Goethe—knight of the real, the eternal Germany, which is the expression and not the repression of high human values—or *The Magic Mountain* of Thoman Mann, future generations would know the longings and anguish of our day; would be able to reconstruct, faithfully, the pulsing rhythm of our life; would be able to understand these aspirations which exalt us and give a meaning to our struggles.

The teaching of literature, then, should lead the consciousness into the past through the widest door, which gives the broadest view, pointing out along the way, the tiniest detail, often the most revealing; a gesture, a word, at first sight insignificant, may, nevertheless, reveal to us a hero, an event, a period of history, in a way inaccessible otherwise to our intelligence or intuition even when fully illumined by all the light thrown by the documentary evidence of statistics, geography, and history.

Have not the great histories of mankind been also works of literature, their authors artists? The artist captures the essence of the fleeting moment, perpetuating it in time. In his "*La historia como obra artistica*", Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo writes: "Not one of the greatest poems of humanity springs from the wilfulness or caprice of a poet, trying to create heroes acting in untrammelled, personal freedom; they have all, on the

contrary, epic as well as dramatic poems, received their savour and their vitality from history. Hence it may be seen that history, far from being prosaic by nature, is the most brilliant affirmation and expression of all poetry, actual and possible. Of course history is not merely an art in the sense that poetry, music or plastic creations are; but it contains and admits so many aesthetic elements that, in my opinion, it is even more of an art than oratory, since this is always chained to an immediate and useful purpose, alien to the aims of free art. In the realms of the mind, real and imaginary heroes exist together; Charlemagne and Don Quixote, Themistocles and Hamlet, have the same reality. And in the characters who have both historical and poetic existence, i.e. the Cid and all the heroes of the great Epics, their historic and legendary characters so mingle in our minds, forming a single concept, that it is impossible, without great intellectual labour, to imagine the Cid Campeador reduced to the size of the figure presented in the dry historical data of the Latin and Arab chronicles. . . removed from the pedestal where the Spanish Epic placed him."

Manzoni in his "Carta sobre las unidades dramaticas" has expressed a similar opinion concerning the close relationship between history and literary art: "The historical causes of an action are essentially the most dramatic and the most interesting: the closer the action conforms to material truth the greater will be its poetical truth."

The vivid example we possess in the "Cronica de la Conquista de México" by Bernal Diaz del Castillo will confirm the truth of the preceding theory. Amongst the great number of accounts of this event, Bernal's book stands out, alone, because of its aesthetic quality: it is at the same time, the fundamental epic of our literature and the most expressive account of the deeds which brought to birth a new nation. If Bernal Diaz succeeds in revealing to us the souls of conquerors and conquered, revealing to us with amazing realism the hazardous life of those days, placing before our eyes with cinematographic exactitude the background of these actions, so that we follow, step by step, passionate participants in those ups and downs, it is by reason of his poetic power, which is lacking in simple tellers of tales or mere copyists. So it is that the history of literature includes and studies the great historians as authors of works which come within its sphere and places Herodotus beside Pindar, Tacitus beside Horace.

But even historical knowledge would be incomplete and superficial, particularly when we are concerned with those

prehistoric, hidden moments which determine the nature of peoples and races, if we were to ignore the consideration of literary phenomena, quintessence of the historical process.

A short while ago, in the homage paid to the memory of Descartes by the University of Buenos Aires on the tercentenary of the "Discours de la Méthode", one of the speakers, Jacinto Cuccaro, in a comparative study of Descartes and Vico, affirmed that the great weakness of Cartesianism was its lack of historic sense: another of the speakers, Patricio Grau, in his essay "El problema de Descartes y la experiencia" asserts that the philosophy of the great Frenchman "lacks wide spiritual vision, a sense of the universe as a whole, cosmic fear and cosmic courage." In fact, every genuine culture, every fertile and complete intellect must possess a fine and deep historic sense. And we have now seen that this cannot be fully achieved if the sure path of literature is neglected.

It is urgent that we renew this study in our schools. It is not an empty activity: rather, without it, our culture will be maimed and paralysed; it will suffer from a lack of spiritual agility, indispensable to every high aspiration.

Literature, conceived in its two most important aspects as the highest development of language, the model of correct expression as well as the thoughtful consideration and practice of the artistic technique of the literary work, should be the culmination of philological studies. This brings us to the thorny question of rhetoric.

Rhetoric is a study of capital importance in the schools in spite of the web of prejudice in which it has become entangled. It is more: a plan of study including only grammatical rules will be incomplete and they themselves insufficient, unless they are amplified and based on rhetoric.

Opposition to the study of rhetoric and prejudice against it are understandable in so far as they are directed against methods of teaching which made of this subject an ineffective, dogmatic and spirit-killing routine; a routine which confused the teaching of literature with the teaching of dead rules, the creation of the work of art with second-rate reflections upon it, poetic genius with adequate technique; in this way the study of rhetoric usurped the place of other aspects of literature and prevented the fundamental activity: the direct, searching, unbiased contemplation of the work; the enjoyment of its aesthetic value; familiarity with the greatest poetical natures. Everything was reduced to its superficial aspect, to obedience to inflexible norms, which the history of Literature shows at each step to be

inapplicable. The reaction against the study of rhetoric is due in large measure to the Romantics whose attitude towards life still has the power to disturb us; but in their scorn of rhetoric, the Romantics were bringing into play their instinctive anarchy; and art is stern discipline, harmony, purification.

We are not speaking of rhetoric as understood by the Neo-classical masters, nor do we wish to defend it as a dead routine which prevents the reader from real contact with the work, with the feelings of the poets; neither, on the other hand, do we accept the anarchy of the Romantics and it is precisely against this that we are advocating the restoration of training, taking care not confuse the creative genius and its clearly defined liberty with the freely chosen method of creation. The study of this last is the object of rhetoric, and an indispensable preliminary to the study of literature.

The abuse of teaching dead rules in the literature class led to a reaction in the other direction. . . the literature class was converted into a class of literary history, often consisting of a superficial and inaccurate survey, interspersed with personal anecdotes. This was equally unproductive. Both methods are partial, incomplete and insufficient.

The need for developing literary study along a historical plan is, of course, obvious; but, on the one hand, this requires an introduction and on the other, it needs constant elucidations and technical analyses of the literary production and this without narrow judgments, without dogmas concerning the set characteristics of the various literary forms, metres, figures of speech, etc., but rather maintaining a width of vision to explain differences and modifications introduced in the course of history. Only in this way will it be possible to understand the nature of tragedy or why the Dialogues of Plato are outside the dramatic pattern; why the evolution of lyric poetry is, in a certain sense, the evolution of metaphor. In this way one will not be shocked, as the ancient rhetoricians were, at every literary innovation, every "modernist" tendency, but the flexible concept of the new teaching will create a capacity to accept, explain and enjoy beauty in new forms.

The exact profile of rhetoric restored, its field of operation clearly marked, we find that its teaching is the necessary complement and continuation of grammatical study; it will reveal the methods of composition of the great writers; its aim will be to foster in the individual, not only habits of pure and correct speech but also beauty and elegance of expression; by the

analysis of many styles, it will aid in the forming of individual style, supreme seal of personality.

This is why we began by saying that rhetoric, well understood and practiced, is an important subject in the schools and without it, grammatical studies will be incomplete and insufficient. Through a knowledge and practice of style, Literature achieves a utilitarian aim which combines with its other aims: aesthetic education, development of historical consciousness.

Finally, in answer to those who oppose the inclusion of a formal study of rhetoric in literary programmes, let us imagine what a course would be like in which the teacher tried to explain the formal nature of Gongorism without teaching the nature of metaphor; or to analyze the lyrical innovations introduced by Garcilaso and Boscán without first making sure that the students knew the constituent elements of verse, the meaning of a hendecasyllable and of a sonnet, the distinction between lyrical and epic poetry, between an elegy and a speech. The result is what we often see in certain literature classes: a confused review of dates of births and deaths, sometimes culminating in the reading of "selected" paragraphs, which leaves nothing with the student, except, perhaps, the beginnings of a secret dislike of literature.

Literature, properly studied, is one of the best disciplines of the mind. Since its purpose is to educate the sensibility, to develop and enrich the historical consciousness, to purify and beautify language, literary pedagogy will constantly bear in mind these three aspects: aesthetics, critical history and the technique of correct expression.

The literature course must include these three elements, but they should be so closely interwoven that the student only notices the transition from one to the other when he needs to see their relationship; for instance, in studying the works of Homer, the notion of the aesthetic concepts of the Greeks will arise naturally: this work, too, will raise questions concerning the social and cultural state of the people, their political life, etc., topics which will give background and depth to the literary phenomena; then it will be necessary to speak of the characteristics of the epic, and thus, the technical information will appear as a living and important idea. When the development of lyric poetry is being discussed, it will be relevant to consider its aesthetic possibilities, the creation of metaphors, images, the construction of the poetic line.

Thus, literature is a living, pleasant and fundamentally indispensable discipline for the integration of culture.