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The Role of Literature in a Liberal Education

Louise Cowan

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The Role of Literature in a Liberal Education

Liberal learning implies the move to a higher stage of understanding, into a new relation with the world; it is not that one acquires something but that one is changed in the act of learning. In the Divine Comedy, when Dante the pilgrim is at the apex of his journey, viewing the light that has been the goal of all his upward aspiration, that light which he has

seen reflected in Beatrice's eyes, he has something important to say, I think, about learning:

And as my sight, by seeing,
learned to see/The transformation
which in me took
place/Transformed the single
changeless form for me. . . .

The change is in the viewer and not the object. Ultimate reality is one and whole; but its images are many, and the creatures reflecting its splendor are multifarious.

“The sight by seeing learns to see.”

Dante has been led to this place and made to see, not simply told about it and asked to describe or analyze the details.

Let me just start out, then, by stating my thesis baldly: poetry is —if not the most important element in a liberal education, at least one of the two most important constituents, sharing the honors with its traditional running mate, philosophy.

which, I would say, however, is more sophisticated and less basic

Poetry (what we now call literature and underestimate by considering it primarily printed material in a book (with an emphasis on the high elitism of 19th century British writing) is the foundation, the base, the hallmark of liberal education. Its aim is not the corroboration of things we already know but the uncovering of what has been hidden. Its

mode of expression is not syllogism and analysis, but on one hand image and metaphor, analogy and symbol, on the other tonality, the hidden resonances of language.

Its effort is toward something as precise in its own way as the most careful intellectual analysis. It makes use of a kind of language that calls up the language of the soul, which needs, however, to be clarified and strengthened by education. It works by a faculty that has at various times been

designated as imagination, the intercessor between sense and intellect. Let me illustrate with an instance of this transformative seeing that occurs in a poem closer to us in time than Dante, one which for the modern world has the status almost of myth, or prophecy: Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner.

I want to focus on one incident in that poem: the mariner's blessing of the water serpents that

surround his becalmed ship.

Earlier, as you recall, he has apparently without reason shot an albatross, a white and otherworldly bird that came as friend to the ship and its crew, partaking of human food and participating in human prayers.

Consequences following upon this violation have been difficult for the mariner and his fellows to evaluate. At first the results of his deed seem to be evil, since a breeze that has been propelling

their ship dies away. But then, when it springs up again and the ship progresses along its journey, the fruits of the deed appear to the beholders in an auspicious light.

Thus his crew members applaud the mariner when the course of events works out profitably and repudiate him when it turns out badly. But there is no misconstruing, ultimately, such ill fortune as the voyage encounters: the ship is marooned, stopped short in burning heat just at the

equator:

All in a hot and copper sky

The bloody sun at noon

Right up above the mast did
stand,

No bigger than the moon . . .

Day after day, day after day,

We stuck, nor breath nor

motion:

As idle as a painted ship

Upon a painted ocean.

Water, water everywhere

And all the boards did shrink

Water water everywhere
Nor any drop to drink.

Into the midst of this deathlike
stillness comes movement, though
it comes to the mariner as only
the pullulating motion of decay:

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be
Yea, slimy things did crawl with
legs

Upon the slimy sea.

It is as though the mariner finds

himself in the very body of death; water serpents writhing about in the otherwise still sea take on aspects of worms crawling within a rotting corpse. His shipmates augment this sense of death by hanging the carcass of the albatross about the mariner's neck.

Later, after the men themselves have died and the mariner is alone on a wide wide sea, still becalmed, he bitterly contrasts his dead fellows' now remembered beauty with the ugliness of the thousand

thousand slimy things, which have, in his mind, no right to live. Their existence is a horror: he regards them with resentment and dread.

Suddenly something initiates a remarkable change in his perception of the snakes, a modification puzzling to explain. Whatever causes such a change, an abrupt transformation takes place in the mariner's actual sight of the snakes:

Beyond the shadow of the ship
I watched the water snakes

They moved in tracks of shining
white
And when they reared, the
elfish light
Fell off in hoary flakes.

The veritable metamorphosis
effected in this passage begins with
the mariner's peculiarly persistent
observation of the creatures:
instead of turning away in disgust,
he "watches" them and in the light
of the moon is given back an image
of luminous beauty:

Within the shadow of the ship
I watched their rich attire
blue, glossy green, and velvet black
They coiled and swam: and every
track
Was a flash of golden fire.

These repellent sea serpents have
undergone a startling alteration.
Earlier the mariner had spoken of
the "death fires" in the track of
the evil creatures, their garish
colors merging with the

putrescence of the water, which
“like a witch’s oils/ Burnt green,
and blue and white.” Now,
however, the snakes are “blue,
glossy, green, and velvet black,”
the affective words *glossy* and
velvet revealing a sense of pleasure
in the colors. If we examine with
some care this act of changed
perspection we ought to have a
clear indication of how the
imagination begins its work. The
mariner has not thought himself
into a modification of his initial

feelings about the snakes; even less has he pondered their meaning and overtly changed his mind about them. Rather, they present themselves to his sense in an image of lithe and lovely form almost miracu-lously, it seems:”they moved in tracks of shining white/ And when they reared, the elfish light/ Fell off in hoary flakes.”

These creatures from which he has recoiled as “slimy things” are now garbed in “rich attire,” so that he is moved to revel in their beauty:

O happy living things! No
tongue

Their beauty might declare
And a spring of love gushed
from my heart

And I blessed them unaware
Sure my kind saint took pity on
me,

And I blessed them unaware.

The self same moment I could
pray

And from my neck so free
the albatross fell off, and sank

Like lead into the sea.

The mariner has discovered within himself, in a spring of love that has “gushed” from his heart, the life-giving water for which he has yearned. The act is no more willed than it is intellectually conceived; he has not persuaded himself to look at things with a kindlier eye; no tinge of the moral imperative has entered into this most elemental act of a desperate and solitary soul. Something

outside him, grace, his kind saint, a burst of insight has altered his perception. Jacques Maritain in his *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* has spoken of this sort of inner change as “the humble revelation, virtually contained in a small lucid cloud of inescapable intuition—of some particular flash of reality in the God-made universe—a particular flash bursting forth in its unforgettable individuality but infinite in its meaning.”

The order in which Coleridge depicts these events bears some examination. This sequence of inner movements toward insight begins with an inner modification of awareness that radically alters the forms into which data from the senses are shaped. Perhaps we should speculate a moment about

why and how the water snakes change their appearance for the mariner. Before, he had viewed them in relation to himself, regarding their existence in terms of his own practical situation. In a sense he projected upon the snakes their loathe-someness and ugliness.

They were related to his guilt, to his offense against the nature, the human, and God. But something now has enabled him to relinquish his narrow judgment and allow the serpents their own being. It is not

that he has imposed on them a more agreeable image; on the contrary, he has opened himself to what they are in themselves and permitted their uncanny and grotesque beauty to manifest itself.

Through acceptance he has entered into an empathetic relationship: perhaps we could even say he has identified with them.

He no longer stands apart, viewing and judging, but moves into their being. Suddenly, then, he loves them. His heart is remade, his

aware-ness transformed; at that moment he is submissive to the spiritual powers of the universe that lie behind the watersnakes, and the curse of guilt and isolation falls from his neck into the sea.

He still has further suffering ahead of him, as we know from the rest of the poem, greater penance to undergo. But the issue on which I would focus is revealed in this moment of transformed awareness, since in its structure we can find a model for a basic affirmative

working of the imagination, which provides an example of the way in which several qualities that we might call specifically the product of poetic knowledge are generated in a work of literature. First, there is empathy (we identify with the mariner and actually feel the equivalent of his feelings); second, analogical thinking (we can read the experience point for point in several senses (Dante spoke of the meanings of his poem as poly-semous). We discern the

subtle shadings of symbol and metaphor: the albatross, for instance, is a powerful symbol. If we take sufficient care in reading the poem, we shall see, I believe, that this great white bird is the symbol of the divine aura of nature (It is not really, as some readers would have it, an allegorical symbol of Christ). Rather, the action of the poem indicates its connection with nature. Hence the love that the Polar Spirit has for it is the love that the Creator has for his

creation; and our sin against it is indicative of the sin Coleridge and other 19th c Romantics saw in the conquest of nature beginning then to take place all over the world.

Coleridge defined symbol as a figure that “partakes of the reality that it renders intelligible.”]

Continuing with our analysis of the tropes, we find the metaphor of the ship's voyage and are reminded of Ulysses' voyage, of Dante's “little boat,” of the ship metaphor throughout Western literature.

Various degrees of comparison are suggested by similes: "as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean"; here at last we are meant to picture something that we know is an illustration. We learn various skills of interpretation easily in a poem as simple as Coleridge's ballad. But the meanings are generated by the figurative language of poetry; and, more, something that we cannot simply call a feeling is brought into being. It is more like what Augustine

called the *ordo amoris*, the right order of our loves, the order of the heart.

Coleridge's poem is about that disease of consciousness that we became fully aware of only in the twentieth century.

J. Hillis Miller in an early work *The Disappearance of God* speaks of a sacramental apprehension of reality in Western culture wherein the sense of the divine was felt to be immediately present in nature, in society, and in each man's heart . .

. Modern thought has been dominated by the presupposition that each person is locked in the prison of his consciousness, and the assumption has been that man must start with the inner experience of the isolated individual.

The inner experience of the isolated individual is the dire and tragic destiny of the mariner before his communion with the watersnakes. Until this act of primary

imaginationk, he remains severed from being itself in the disease that has since been seen by writers following Coleridge to be epidemic in modernity. This fundamental isolation afflicts most nineteenth and twentieth century protagonists: Ahab, Emma Bovary, Raskolnikov, Lord Jim, Ivan Karamazov, Stepehn Dedalus, Quentin Compson, J. Alfred Prufrock. The keen analysis of this malaise, however, works toward its cure. For literature does not

simply diagnose; it works out a solution—in the form of story.

And the very nature of story is to turn out according to the laws of human nature and the structures of the universe. Hence the various genres, tragedy, epic, comedy, lyric, have their own “laws,” as we might put it; and for characters to live at all in fiction, they must live according to the laws of the land in which they find themselves. Hence it is a seemingly inexorable fate that Oedipus suffers, or Pentheus,

since they find themselves in a tragedy. And no matter how many difficulties the comic hero faces, some kind of happy occurrence will enable him to muddle through. We may make fun of plot; but it's what we love to see. For the intricate working out of the sequence of events marks the inexorable movements of the action within the human soul.

Marianne Moore, the 20th century American poet, has described poems as "imaginary gardens with real toads in them"; that is, constructed systems

containing genuine values; and so great poetry has been in the West: real moral issues can be argued out in great depth in the framework of an imaginary garden--a myth, a fiction. And the battles go on over the centuries, with these endless questions. . . engendering an action of imagination that leads not to formulaic answers but to a first-hand wisdom. One has not been told an answer, but has been made to see in a way that Jacques Maritain speaks of as a "connatural" knowledge--about the general moral and spiritual laws that govern the human lot.

But the case for poetry is not simply that

it refines sensibility or provides material for personal enrichment. Far more important, it teaches us as individuals and as members of a community how to gather up the discordant elements of the past, subject them to imagination, and make of an apparently ruined pattern a new life. This is the action that poetry enacts, over and over, in the minds and hearts of us all. It is this action of remaking that epic poems undertake and this action in which the contemporary novel is engaged. (Third-world countries in particular--in such writers as Gabriel Garca Marquez, Jose Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes, Isabel Allende, Chinua Achebe, and Ngugi wa Thiongo, as well as African-American and Native-American writers--are finding the novel to be the vehicle to contain their

societies' past wisdom, viewed in the light of the present disruptions of modernity and given new form for the future.)

Poetry makes our world: it gives form to a new order of being before it comes about in actuality. Homer's two mammoth poems The Iliad and the Odyssey could be said to have formed the Golden Age of Greek culture, as Virgil provided the pattern for the early Middle Ages. C. S. Lewis has shown us in his scholarly work The Allegory of Love that 12th-century medieval poets invented a new relationship between man and woman in their sweet new style of courtly love, so that the entire cultural pattern of Western culture was radically changed. And Dante made of that relationship one of the great poems of all

time. Then, at the moment of the Renaissance, when the entire cosmic pattern was undergoing radical alteration, Shakespeare's plays projected a world in which we have been living until very recently. Dostoevsky foresaw the end of modernity. Faulkner's novels have given form to what is coming about in post-modernism. This prophetic role--the vatic role of the poet--has been honored until the present day, when the kind of knowledge to be derived from poetry is given a distinctly lower place in the course of study.

In addition to poetry's ability to "create," in a sense, the coming culture in which people will live (Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet, speaks of this ability as

"the redress of poetry,") it also apprehends certain qualities in such a way that they may become actual experiences for the reader or hearer. Poetry provides an image of these qualities as they resonate in the actions of human beings. It provides an indirect but powerful knowledge--such as Christ provided in his parables. What do we most take to heart of His teachings? Not so much the Sermon on the Mount, where he states the requisites of the blessed, as the parables he told: of the unjust steward, the prodigal son, the lost coin, the buried talent. These stories convey to us in a memorable way the actions of the heart with its affinity for verities. For rather than ideas or facts, literature is concerned with verities, those intangibles that have to do with

the various orders of human existence: the relation with nature, with the family, with the city, the ancestral, the divine. The virtues that Socrates could not define in his dialogues of search are depicted indirectly through the mimesis--the imaging--of poetry.

Our convictions about love, honor, beauty, piety--though they are based on images innate in the human heart--have been shaped over centuries through a poetic tradition--through works that we have come to designate as classics.

We need to consider again, then, the power of poetry as an organizing principle in the curriculum. The fundamental flaw in most educational systems is the literalization of

curriculum, hence the literalization of mind. The conviction that students are prepared for living in the contemporary world by being taught information and skills underestimates the ability of the mind to work by analogy--to apply what it has learned theoretically to the practical world around it.

Poetry aids in the making of analogy; as well as in the formation of a cosmos; it provides a detached ability to see the whole at the same time that it affords a passionate involvement with the self. Werner Jaeger, in his classic *Paideia*, writes, *The theoria of Greek philosophy . . . embodied not only rational thought. . . but also . . .*

vision, which apprehend every object as a whole, which sees the idea in everything—namely the visible pattern —[as form.] “The ancients were persuaded that education and culture are not . . . an abstract theory, distinct from the objective historical structure of a nation's spiritual life. They held them to be embodied in literature, which is the real expression of all higher culture.”

Now I have been demurring about calling the discipline of poetry by the name of literature, for it speaks of the printed word rather than its distinguishing feature: the fiction. What

the Greeks called poetry (Aristotle said the endeavor was to be differentiated by an internal principle, mimesis (imitation – by the making of an image), rather than by meter or any external form): what the Greeks called poetry was anything fictional, made up – the beautiful lie, as Plato would have it, twice removed from reality, tending to weaken and debase its hearers. We have to grant him his argument if we apply it to some literature: but if we treat poetry as we treat the other disciplines in defining it by its best examples, then the answer to Plato's charge is a categorical negative.

What do I consider to define poetry? Let me name the authors instead of the works: The Bible, Homer, Aeschylus,

Sophocles, Dante, Shakespeare, Keats, Dostoevsky, Melville, Faulkner – eleven authors, if I may lump the Biblical writers all together. Without a knowledge of these indispensables that I have named, people (at least in the West – and we suspect all over the world) are severely handicapped; aspects of their own souls are likely to remain hidden from them. For these documents are not primarily for any one race of people. They are for and about humanity; and they are discoveries about humanity that must be passed down, since those discoveries are not to be found elsewhere.

There is a secondary group, less basic, more highly refined: I am much less certain of these (it seems to me there could be in this list a great deal of

variation): Aristophanes, Virgil, Chaucer, Cervantes, Donne, Milton, Goethe, Yeats, James, Joyce.

Of course there are many many other legitimate literary works. But in not one of them – if they are genuine representatives of the art of poetry – should there be anything banal, anything shallow, anything that pretends to be something it is not.

The work of these first ten authors that I have named depicts an entire cosmos: heaven, earth, and the abyss. They uncover a darkness in the human psyche—and a lightness---that would remain unknown to us without their revelations. Look at Aeschylus, for instance:

The Oresteia

2. These works reveal to us (even in translation) the language that Longinus says we are born with, what he called the language of the soul.

the effect of elevated language upon an audience is not persuasion but transport [ekstasis]. . . [There is a kind of writing that gives us skill in invention arranged in due order] But sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, Are we not to hold then that composition (**being a harmony of that language which is implanted by nature in man and which appeals not to the hearing but to the soul itself**), since it calls forth manifold shapes of words, thoughts, deeds, beauty , melody, all of

them born with our birth and growing with our growth and since by means of the blending and variation of its own tones it seeks to induce into the minds of those who are present the emotion which affects the speaker and since it always brings the audience to share in it and by the building of phrase upon phrase raises a sublime and harmonious structure: are we not, I say, to hold that harmony by these selfsame means allures us and invariably disposes us to stateliness and dignity and elevation and every emotion which it contains within itself,, gaining absolute mastery over our minds? “

tomorrow and tomorrow and
tomorrow . . .

Come, let's away to prison; there we
two will sing like bird i the cage . . .

Thou still unravished bride of
quietness . . .

Turning and turning in the widening
gyre . . .

I caught this morning morning's
minion, / Kingdome of daylight's
dauphin/

In addition to uncovering the language of the soul, genuine poetry, as we have said, teaches by analogy, engenders empathy, reveals what Ingarden has called "metaphysical qualities" that we could not experience in any other way; further, poetry engages our internal senses so that we are connected to our world. Poems accomplish all this by means of their form, what Thomas speaking of beauty, calls the splendor of form." –rather than by their structure of

ideas. And, as Aristotle points out in his study of tragedy, poems give us a sense of totality, a story with a beginning, middle, and an ending that is inevitable, that works itself out from the form.

And finally, poetic works commit us to an appropriation of what the poem has taught: they resolve the questions they raise: see the ending of the *Tempest* and of the *Brothers Karamazov*.

Prospero's farewell

Dostoevsky's Words from the Author

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