

CHAPTER 2

THE LITERARY EXPERIENCE

child must have attained the physical and intellectual capacity to perform this highly complex operation, the act of reading. He should be emotionally ready to meet this challenge. Essential, too, is sufficiently rich experience, so that words are signs for things and ideas. A set of marks on a page—CAT—becomes linked to a certain crisp sound in the ear. Eventually, the connection will become automatic, but it will be read as a word only when for the child that sign and that set of sounds are joined to the idea of a certain class of furry, four-footed animals.

Those who think of language as simply a self-contained set of signs linked to sounds ignore the essential third element, the human being who must make the linkage between them if there is indeed to be a meaningful word. Language is socially evolved, but it is always constituted by individuals, with their particular histories.

It is easy to observe how the beginning reader draws on past experience of life and language to elicit meaning from the printed words, and it is possible to see how through these words he reorganizes past experience to attain new understanding. Teachers who work with older students in school and college do not always recognize that those students are faced with a similar situation. Like the beginning reader, the adolescent needs to encounter literature for which he possesses the intellectual, emotional, and experiential equipment. He, too, must draw on his past experience with life and language as the raw materials out of which to shape the new experience symbolized on the page.

The teacher of literature, then, seeks to help specific human beings discover the satisfactions of literature. Teaching becomes a matter of improving the individual's capacity to

Terms such as *the reader, the student, the literary work* have appeared in the preceding pages. Actually, these terms are somewhat misleading, though convenient, fictions. There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are only the potential millions of individual readers of the potential millions of individual literary works. A novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. The literary work exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text: the reader infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the pattern of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel his thoughts and feelings. Out of this complex process emerges a more or less organized imaginative experience. When the reader refers to a poem, say, "Byzantium," he is designating such an experience in relation to a text.

Teachers at all levels should have the opportunity to observe the child's entrance into the world of the printed page. The

evolve meaning from the text by leading him to reflect self-critically on this process. The starting point for growth must be each individual's efforts to marshal his resources in relation to the printed page. The teacher's task is to foster fruitful inter-
actions—or, more precisely, transactions—between individual readers and individual literary texts.

Interaction has customarily been associated with the notion of separate, predefined entities acting on one another. The underlying metaphor for this is the machine. In response to developments in the philosophy of science, *transaction* is being used to designate a process in which the elements are aspects or phases of a total situation. The underlying metaphor is organic, as in the ecological view of human beings in a reciprocal relation with the natural environment.

In the past, reading has too often been thought of as an interaction, the printed page impressing its meaning on the reader's mind or the reader extracting the meaning embedded in the text. Actually, reading is a constructive, selective process over time in a particular context. The relation between reader and signs on the page proceeds in a to-and-fro spiral, in which each is continually being affected by what the other has contributed.

The reader approaches the text with a certain purpose, certain expectations or hypotheses that guide his choices from the residue of past experience. Meaning emerges as the reader carries on a give-and-take with the signs on the page. As the text unrolls before the reader's eyes, the meaning made of the early words influences what comes to mind and is selected for the succeeding signs. But if these do not fit in with the meaning developed thus far, the reader may revise it to assimilate the new words or may start all over again with different

expectations. For the experienced reader, much of this may go on subconsciously, but the two-way, reciprocal relation explains why meaning is not "in" the text or "in" the reader. Both reader and text are essential to the transactional process of making meaning.

The usual terminology—for example, "the reaction of the reader to the literary work," "the interaction between the reader and the work," or references to "the poem itself" as a determinate entity—tends to obscure the view of the literary experience presented here. Hence the need to differentiate between the text (the sequence of printed or voiced signs) and the meaning, the literary work. The poem or the novel or the play exists in the transaction that goes on between reader and text. (See below, p. 30; see also Dewey and Bentley; Rosenblatt, *Reader*.)

Literature lends little comfort to the teacher who seeks the security of a clearly defined body of information. He does have "knowledge," of course. There are even those reassuring things called facts—facts about the social, economic, and intellectual history of the age in which literary works were written; facts about the responses of contemporary readers; facts about the author and his life; facts about the literary traditions he inherited; facts, even, about the form, structure, and method of the work. Yet all such facts are expendable unless they demonstrably help to clarify or enrich individual experiences of specific novels, poems, or plays. The notion of "background information" often masks much that is irrelevant and distracting.

The uniqueness of the transaction between reader and text is not inconsistent with the fact that both elements in this relation have social origins and social effects. If each

author were completely different from every other human being and if each reader were unique in all respects, there could, of course, be no communication. There are many experiences that we all have in common—birth, growth, love, death. We can communicate because of a common core of experience, even though there may be infinite personal variations. Human beings participate in particular social systems and fall into groups by age, sex, occupation, nation. These, too, offer general patterns on which individual variations can be played. The forces of social conditioning are also pervasive in the formation of specific emotional drives and intellectual concepts.

Just as the personality and concerns of the reader are largely socially patterned, so the literary work, like language itself, is a social product. The genesis of literary techniques occurs in a social matrix. Both the creation and reception of literary works are influenced by literary tradition. Yet ultimately any literary work gains its significance from the way in which the minds and emotions of particular readers respond to the linguistic stimuli offered by the text.

In the past the danger has been that one aspect or the other of the literary experience has been emphasized. On the one hand, literature deals with and ministers to human life and human needs. On the other hand, this is accomplished by means of artistic form, through the exercise of literary craftsmanship creating works of high aesthetic appeal. To treat literature merely as a collection of moralistic pamphlets, a series of disquisitions on humankind and society, is to ignore that the artist is concerned not with indirect commentary on life

VS SOCIAL DO-GOODING

but with the addition of a new experience in life, namely, the work of art.

THE WORK OF ART

When concern with the human elements in literature has become confused with the purely practical approach to those elements in life itself, distortion and critical confusion have followed. Literary works have then been judged solely in terms of their conformity to conventional aims and standards. Such an approach made possible the elevation of the novels of the now unread Miss Yonge over those of George Eliot or Charlotte Brontë. This approach is possible only when the nature of literature as an art is forgotten.

When, usually in reaction against the practical point of view, only the formal and technical elements of the work have been considered important, an equally disastrous distortion has resulted. An excessive preoccupation with the externals of form and technical brilliance, such as Oscar Wilde exemplifies, has led to a breakdown of sound critical standards. The very remoteness of a work from the living core of human preoccupations comes to be considered a merit. The literary craftsman is elevated above the true artist.

In recent decades the influence of both the New Criticism and postmodern critical approaches has also tended to diminish the concern with the human meaningfulness of the literary work. The stress on close reading was unfortunately associated with the notion of the impersonality of the poet and the parallel impersonality of the critic. The work itself was said to be the critic's prime concern, as though it existed apart from any reader. (See Rosenblatt, "Poem" 123-28.) Analysis of the technique of the work, concern with tone, metaphor, symbol, and myth, has therefore tended to crowd out the ultimate

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LITERATURE AS EXPLORATION

questions concerning relevance or value to the reader in his ongoing life.

Since to lead the student to ignore either the aesthetic or the social elements of his experience is to cripple him for a fruitful understanding of what literature offers, the teacher of literature needs much insight into the complex nature of the literary experience.

What, then, happens in the reading of a literary work? The reader, drawing on past linguistic and life experience, links the signs on the page with certain words, certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes. The special meanings and, more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his interaction with the peculiar contribution of the text. For the ado-

¹ "The pernicious practice of converting every literary work into a moral homily is perhaps the abuse most frequently committed. But the Commission believes that no study, no reading of any work is complete without some consideration of possible extrinsic meaning, meaning that brings that work directly against the reader's own philosophical convictions and experience. It may be ironic that, after so many years of complaint about teachers who taught the moral instead of the work, warning should now be given against the incompleteness of any study of literature that avoids this consideration. But the Commission believes that 'close reading' may as readily sterilize the study of literature as moralizing once stultified it" (*Freedom* 72-73).

→ evoke literary work from the text
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lescent reader, the experience of the work is further specialized by the fact that he has probably not yet arrived at a consistent view of life or achieved a fully integrated personality. CULTURAL ISM

Another factor that adds to the variability of the teaching situation is the great diversity in the literary works themselves. There is a decided difference between the emotional satisfactions to be derived from a lyric by Sir Philip Sidney and a lyric by Robert Browning; an even greater diversity of appeal is made by works of different literary types and moods, such as *The Brothers Karamazov* and *As You Like It*. Obviously, very different kinds of sensitivity and knowledge are required for the fullest appreciation of each of these works. The infinite diversity of literature plus the complexity of human personality and background justify insistence on the special nature of the literary experience and on the need to prepare the student to engage in the highly personal process of evoking the literary work from the text.

Those who associate psychological or social interests with a narrow didacticism or instrumentalism tend to misinterpret the thesis of chapter 1—hence the need to reiterate that we are concerned with social and psychological insights as they flower from the actual aesthetic experience. Grammar and syntax are involved in any literary work, yet no one would mistake a novel for a treatise on grammar. One should be just as careful to avoid the confusion of seeming to discuss literary works as though they were treatises on sociology or psychology. The crux of the matter is that the text embodies verbal stimuli toward a special kind of intense and ordered experience—sensuous, intellectual, emotional—out of which social insights may arise. The following discussion seeks to dispel the confusion that so often results from a fixation either on something

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called pure art or on the social implications of literature cut off from their roots in personal aesthetic experience. Philosophers, to be sure, have defined the aesthetic experience in a great many ways. Often they have been concerned with fitting art into previously developed metaphysical systems, or they have emphasized one out of the many springs of aesthetic enjoyment. The play impulse, the instinct for imitation, the urge for self-expression, the desire to communicate, the religious or the mythic impulse are some of the many suggested sources of the human drive to create and enjoy art. This is merely further documentation that art satisfies a great many different human needs and impinges on the broad range of people's personal and social concerns.

In our everyday lives, preoccupied as we are with accomplishing some task or attaining some goal, we must often ignore the quality of the moment as it passes. Life presents a confused mass of details from which we select for attention. Only those related to our practical concerns. Even then our attention is focused not on the details themselves but on their practical bearing. We usually cannot stop to savor their quality. Yet it is being increasingly recognized that subconsciously we are often responding qualitatively to our surroundings. In our approach to a work of art, interest is centered precisely on the nature and quality of what is offered us.

This illuminates the difference between reading a literary work of art and reading for some practical purpose. Our attention is primarily focused on selecting out and analytically abstracting the information or ideas or directions for action that will remain when the reading is over. (I term such reading *effert*, from the Latin *efferre* 'to carry away'.) A paraphrase of a summary of a biology text or a rephrasing of the technical language of a law may be quite as useful as the original.

Someone else can read the newspaper or a scientific work for us and summarize it acceptably.

~~No one, however, can read a poem for us.~~ If there is indeed to be a poem and not simply a literal statement, the reader must have the experience, must "live through" what is being created during the reading. The transaction with any text stirs up both referential and affective aspects of consciousness, and the proportion of attention given to these will determine where the reading will fall on a continuum from predominantly effert to predominantly aesthetic. An aesthetic purpose will require the reader to direct more attention to the affective aspects. From this mixture of sensations, feelings, images, and ideas is structured the experience that constitutes the story or poem or play. This is the object of response during and after the reading event. (See pp. xvii, 292).

Definitions of the aesthetic experience often postulate that art provides a more complete fulfillment of human impulses and needs than does ordinary life with its frustrations and irrelevancies. Undoubtedly, such a sense of fulfillment and emotional equilibrium is largely due to the intense, structured, and coherent nature of what is apprehended under the guidance of the text. Yet those engaged in the task of developing sensitivity to a particular art form will not need to be reminded that any such complete experience depends not only on the work itself but also on the reader's capacities and readiness. Sound literary insight and aesthetic judgment will never be taught by imposing from above notions of what works should ideally mean. Awareness of some of the things that actually affect the student's reactions will allow the teacher to help the student in handling his responses and achieving increasingly balanced literary experiences.

→ imposing from above INCREASINGLY BALANCED LITERARY EXPERIENCES

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When in the course of our daily affairs we exclaim, "How funny!" or "How tragic!" we have engaged in an embryonic artistic process. We have seen a pattern in human life; we have juxtaposed certain events in our minds, have perceived their relationships, and have thus disengaged their humor or tragedy. The author does this in a more completely creative form, since he enables us to share his vision. No one would question that in the creation of the literary work the writer does more than passively reflect experiences as through a photographic lens. There has been a selective force at work. From the welter of impressions with which life bombards us, the writer chooses those particular elements that have significant relevance to his insight. He inscribes verbal signs that he hopes will enable readers to perceive selected images, personalities, and events in special relation to one another. Thus, out of the matrix of elements with common meaning for him and his readers, he builds up a new sequence, a new structure, that enables him to evoke in the reader's mind a special emotion, a new or deeper understanding—that enables him, in short, to communicate with his reader.

The reader, too, is creative. The text may produce that moment of balanced perception, a complete aesthetic experience. But it will not be the result of passivity on the reader's part; the literary experience has been phrased as a *transaction* between the reader and the author's text. Moreover, as in the creative activity of the artist, there will be selective factors molding the reader's response. He comes to the book from life. He turns for a moment from his direct concern with the various problems and satisfactions of his own life. He will resume his concern with them when the book is closed. Even

while he is reading, these things are present as probably the most important guiding factors in his experience.

The same text will have a very different meaning and value to us at different times or under different circumstances. Some state of mind, a worry, a temperamental bias, or a contemporary social crisis may make us either especially receptive or especially impervious to what the work offers. Without an understanding of the reader, one cannot predict what particular text may be significant to him or what may be the special quality of his experience. Hence it is important to consider some of the selective factors that may mold the reader's response to literature.

The reader seeks in literature a great variety of satisfactions. These sometimes quite conscious demands are in themselves important factors affecting the interrelation between book and reader. A freshman class at a New England women's college was unexpectedly asked, "Why do you read novels, anyway?" Here are some of the spontaneous answers:

I like to read a novel for relaxation after I have been studying hard all day.

I like to read anything that is well written, in which the author gives you interesting descriptions and exciting adventures.

I like to find out about the things that happen to people and how they solve their problems.

I had an interesting experience with a novel a few weeks ago. I discovered that one of the characters was in the same fix that I was in. I got a great deal from seeing how the character in the book managed.

I like to read about as many different kinds of situations as possible—just in case I myself might be in such a situation some day.

These students summarized, in simplified form perhaps, a number of the personal satisfactions that adolescent and adult alike seek from literature. Their remarks are akin to Guy de Maupassant's comment:

The public as a whole is composed of various groups, whose cry to us writers is:

"Comfort me."

"Amuse me."

"Touch me."

"Make me dream."

"Make me laugh."

"Make me shudder."

"Make me weep."

"Make me think."

And only a few chosen spirits say to the artist:

"Give me something fine in any form which may suit you best, according to your own temperament." (ix)

In its simplest terms, literature may offer us an emotional outlet. It may enable us to exercise our senses more intensely and more fully than we otherwise have time or opportunity to. Through literature we may enjoy the beauty or the grandeur of nature and the exotic splendor of scenes in far distant lands. Furthermore, it may provide experiences that would not otherwise be either possible or wise to introduce into our own lives. The love of action and adventure, the interest in kinds of people and ways of life alien to our own, the delight in

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scenes of strong emotion, in pictures of physical violence, even in images of hatred and evil, may be due to the release they provide for drives repressed by our culture. And literature affords an outlet for other than antisocial emotions. A great work of art may provide us the opportunity to feel more profoundly and more generously, to perceive more fully the implications of experience, than the constricted and fragmentary conditions of life permit.

The college students, bearing out the contention of the preceding chapter, placed greatest emphasis on literature as a means of broadening one's knowledge of people and society. This reflected their curiosity about life, a curiosity shared with younger adolescent and preadolescent students. For the average adult reader as well, literature contributes to the enlargement of experience. Through the medium of literature we participate in imaginary situations, we look on at characters living through crises, we explore ourselves and the world about us.

The capacity to sympathize or to identify with the experiences of others is a most precious human attribute. Scientific studies of reactions to works of art have revealed how pervasive is our tendency to identify with something outside ourselves. This has been found to be true even of nonhuman subjects. We tend to "feel ourselves into," to empathize with, the painting of the tree that is swaying in the wind, until the successful artist will have somehow made us that very tree itself. Even the delicate poise of an architectural column or the symmetry of a Greek vase will be felt in the pull and balance of our own muscles, though we may not be conscious of the source of our pleasure. How much more directly and completely is this tendency to project ourselves into the

object of our contemplation fulfilled when we are concerned with the personalities and joys and sorrows, with the failures and the achievements, of characters in literature!

This tendency toward identification will certainly be guided by our preoccupations at the time we read. Our own problems and needs may lead us to focus on those characters and situations through which we may achieve the satisfactions, the balanced vision, or perhaps merely the unequivocal motives unattained in our own lives.

The students valued literature as a means of enlarging their knowledge of the world, because through literature they acquire not so much additional *information* as additional *experience*. New understanding is conveyed to them dynamically and personally. Literature provides a *living through*, not simply *knowledge about*: not the fact that lovers have died young and fair, but a living through of *Romeo and Juliet*; not theories about Rome, but a living through of the conflicts in *Julius Caesar* or the paradoxes of *Caesar and Cleopatra*. In contrast to reading the historian's generalized and impersonal account of the hardships of the pioneer's life, they share these hardships with the heroine and her family in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*. The sociologist analyzes for them the problems of the African American in our society; in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, they themselves suffer these problems in their human dimensions. The anthropologist can teach them the ethnology of the Eskimo and the social patterns in the Philippines or India; in Peter Freuchen's novel *Eskimo*, in Carlos Bulosan's *The Laughter of My Father*, and in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, students themselves become part of these cultures. They may read encomiums on the devotion and disinterested-

ness of the scientist; in *Madame Curie* or *Arrowsmith* they share the scientist's single-minded zeal, frustrations, and intellectual and emotional rewards of success.

The college students were equally frank about the escape value of literature. They were especially ready to speak of release from the circumstances and pressures of their everyday lives. This term *escape* has perhaps been used too often in an indiscriminately derogatory sense; there are useful and harmful forms of escape. Anything that offers refreshment and a lessening of tension may have its value in helping us to resume our practical lives with renewed vigor. The unfavorable overtones of the term are due to the failure of much of the so-called literature of escape to accomplish this. (See pp. 200-04.) The greatest literary works may have for a particular reader the value of an escape. Our lives may be so monotonous, so limited in scope, so concentrated on practical survival that the experience of profound and varied emotions, the contact with warm, subtle personalities, the understanding of the wide range of human capacities and human problems may be denied us except through the medium of literature. Or a great work may give even to the person living a full and happy life a moment of change, of escape from practical demands. The capacity of a particular book to offer such values will be directly related to the emotional needs of the reader and his particular situation and preoccupations.

Another important potential satisfaction from literature, which the students only implied, is the possibility of compensating for lacks or failures through identification with a character who possesses qualities other than our own or who makes fuller use of capacities similar to our own. The young girl may in this way identify with Juliet or with Elizabeth

Bennet; the boy, chafing at his childish status, may identify with an epic hero. This compensatory mechanism may in part explain our vivid identification with characters very different from ourselves. Here again, the force of the reader's emotional reactions will be channeled in ways dictated by his sense of his own shortcomings. This process is usually considered in terms far too crude, since literature may provide subtle kinds of compensation. The human being has latent capacities for many modes of life and action that he would not elect but whose exercise through literature will nevertheless give him satisfaction.

The ability to understand and sympathize with others reflects the multiple nature of the human being, his potentialities for many more selves and kinds of experience than any one being could express. This may be one of the things that enables us to seek through literature an enlargement of our experience. Although we may see some characters as outside ourselves—that is, we may not identify with them as completely as we do with more congenial temperaments—we are nevertheless able to enter into their behavior and their emotions. Thus it is that the youth may identify with the aged, one sex with the other, a reader of a particular limited social background with members of a different class or a different period.

One student made rather surprisingly articulate another personal value of literature: its objective presentation of our own problems. It places them outside us, enables us to see them with a certain detachment and to understand our own situation and motivation more objectively. The young girl irked by the limitations of the small-town environment may derive such objectivity from Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. The boy unconsciously rejecting an overpossessive

mother may gain insight from Sidney Howard's *The Silver Cord* or D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. This process of objectification may also go on in a disguised form. Without conscious admission of the relevance of the literary experience to our own practical situation, our attitudes may be clarified either by a violent reaction against what we have read or by assimilation of it.

To have impact, a work need not treat circumstances overtly similar to the reader's situation. The power of the work may reside in its underlying emotional structure, its configuration of human drives. Thus, an adolescent boy may resent restraints imposed by accepted authority—family, school, or employer. At this moment of his life, he might find in *Murphy* or *the Bounty* satisfying expression of his rebellion; he might react with extraordinary intensity to *The Devil's Disciple* or *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. College freshmen have been known, very disconcertingly, to sympathize inordinately with Lear's unfilial daughters. Similarly, the youth who has just experienced disillusionment with friends might find the relationship between Othello and Iago the most significant part of the entire play. When *Hamlet* is a moving experience for the adolescent today, may it not be because the play gives form to a prevalent mood of uncertainty and disillusionment, of reluctance to undertake aggressive action in a world gone awry?

An intense response to a work will have its roots in capacities and experiences already present in the personality and mind of the reader. This principle is an important one to remember in the selection of literary materials to be presented to students. It is not enough merely to think of what the student *ought* to read. Choices must reflect a sense of the possible

links between these materials and the student's past experience and present level of emotional maturity.

There is an even broader need that literature fulfills, particularly for the adolescent reader. Much that in life itself might seem disorganized and meaningless takes on order and significance when it comes under the organizing and vitalizing influence of the artist. The youth senses in himself new and unsuspected emotional impulses. He sees the adults about him acting in inexplicable ways. In literature he meets emotions, situations, people, presented in significant patterns. He is shown a causal relationship between actions, he finds approval given to certain kinds of personalities and behavior rather than to others, he finds molds into which to pour his own nebulous emotions. In short, he often finds meaning attached to what otherwise would be for him merely brute facts.

Substantiating Maupassant's complaint, none of the students made articulate a sense of that emotional equilibrium which is a mark of a complete aesthetic experience. This omission is undoubtedly explained in part by the difficulty of describing such moments of mental and emotional poise or illumination. It is probably even more largely explained by the fact that the adolescent's attention is to an extraordinary degree focused on the personal import of what he reads. We have glanced at several of the factors that produce this preoccupation with the human contribution of literature.

Yet for the adolescent, too, these human concerns are embodied in the aesthetic experience. The student who has lived through the experience of *Othello* will have been carried along on the wave of feeling and insight to the moment of ultimate resolution. His sense of the gamut of human experi-

ence and emotion will have been broadened. He will have entered, for the time, into a world of strange moral values and responsibilities. But this participation in human affairs will have been possible only because *Othello* is above all a work of art. The resonant blank verse, the opulent imagery, the swifly paced structure of the play are an integral part of this reliving of Othello's and Desdemona's tragedy. The entire experience has a structure and an inner logic, a completeness that only the great work of art can offer. The student would tend not to speak of this phase of the matter, precisely because these formal and stylistic elements of the drama were an aspect of his apprehension of its human import.

It is possible to do justice to this problem of form and style without being false to the psychological process involved in the relationship between book and reader. Note that we have been discussing those social insights and the human understandings that may arise specifically from the experience of literature. *The enhancement of these human values will therefore depend on the intensification and enrichment of the individual's aesthetic experience.*

Any theory about art that tends to break up the response to literature into distinct segments, whether under the headings "social" versus "aesthetic" or "form" versus "content," is misleading. Of course, teachers must themselves have a zestful appreciation of the sensuous and formal aspects of literature if they are to be of any help to their students. Yet if they do not in addition see these aspects of literature in their organic relation to those broader human aspects that we have been discussing, they will merely tend to impoverish their students' sense of both literature and life.

More than merely the intellectual content of literature was involved in the discussion in chapter 1 and in the preceding consideration of factors molding the reader's response. Those factors influence the reader's sensitivities to all aspects of the work of art as an integral whole. Indeed, although one may talk about qualities of form and style or about content, this theoretic division has little to do with the actual psychological situation when we are responding to a given literary work. Each of these aspects of the work exists by virtue of the other aspects.

We may, for example, talk about something called the sonnet form, but such a form can be apprehended only as it is embodied in a particular sonnet made up of particular words. We cannot dissociate from the total effect of the poem the meaning of the words—the images, concepts, and emotions that they denote, the nuances of feeling and the associations that cluster about them. It is equally impossible to distill from the total effect the sound of the words or the beat of the verse. We can tap out the rhythmic pattern of a poem, but will anyone contend that our sense of that tapping is the same as our experience of the rhythmic pattern when it is embodied in a sequence of sonorous and meaningful words? Obviously, the effect of a sonnet on a person who does not know the language can offer few clues to the impression that would be produced by the sound and rhythm on a person who understood the meaning of the words as well. The complete effect of a particular sonnet results from the fact that different elements act on us simultaneously, reinforce and, one might almost say, create one another. Similarly, in music we may define a particular form such as the fugue, but we can never

experience the form abstracted from the complex texture of some specific musical work.

It is equally impossible to experience content apart from some kind of form. It is a cliché to say that a paraphrase of a poem does not represent the actual content of the poem. Certain of its concepts and implications have merely been abstracted and rephrased. One might, for example, state the various ideas and name the various emotions encountered in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, but this would, in a sense, be offering not only a different form but also a different content. The various concepts and images take on significance and emotional and intellectual overtones from precisely the form in which they are experienced in the poem. Even a transposition of the different stanzas would have given them a different significance. To encounter an idea after our emotions have been aroused through various images and rhythms gives that idea a very different significance from what it would have if presented in another rhythmic pattern or in another sequence. Hence the term *content of the literary work* is confusing when used to indicate abstract intellectual import.

If we think about the total experience of the reader, we shall not be thus misled. We shall see that the formal relations in the literary work—the verse form, rhyme scheme, sentence structure, plot structure—or the other sensuous elements, such as the imagery, do not have a separable or even a clearly distinguishable effect. How can we legitimately dissociate anything called the content of a poem from the interplay of sensations and concepts and emotional overtones produced by the particular words in the particular relations to one another in which they are found in the text itself? Only as we become sensitive to the influence of subtle variations in rhythm and in

the sound and emotional overtones of words, only as we become more refined instruments on which the poet can play, will we be able to experience the full import of the poem.

Similarly, it is essential to hold firmly to the totality of the reader's experience of the literary work whenever we are tempted to speak as though the structure of a play or novel were distinct from the specific sensations, emotions, personalities, and events presented in the work. The sense of the form or structure of the play or novel results from the fact that these particular elements and no others are *experienced* in particular relations to one another. Just as in a melody a particular note takes on color and character from its context, so in a play or novel the significance of any particular scene or personality is the result of the context in which it is encountered.

To return to *Othello*: recall the scene in which Desdemona sings the "Willow Song." This has great poignancy; we have lived through the mounting tension of the intrigue, and now the innocent Desdemona sings as Emilia prepares her for the night. This episode would have little pathos or even interest for anyone who knew only that scene of the play or if that scene were placed at some different point in the play. It would be hard to say whether the transposition would be a change in form or in content. The actual result would be to make the reader or the audience see and feel fewer human implications in the scene. Similarly, although we may speak of the structure of the play and even make diagrams that purport to represent the rising tension and the climax, we must remember that the rising tension results from the reader's identification with certain personalities presented to him and from his vicarious experience of emotions and ideas.

Thus we find ourselves involved in a circular argument. If we start with form or structure, we find that we are merely talking about the particular relationships of certain human sensations, concepts, and emotions. If we talk about so-called content, we find that we are merely dealing with the significance that arises from a particular series of relations among certain sensations, concepts, and emotions. Teaching practices and assignments should be scrutinized to make sure that students are not given the idea that the formal relations in a literary work exist apart from, and are merely superimposed on, something called the *content*. Much truer to the reality of both literary creation and literary experience is the sense of how organically interfused are these two phases of the work of art.

Of course, students need to understand the nature of the diverse literary forms—the lyric, the epic, the novel, the essay, the drama—forms that our literary ancestors and contemporaries have developed through the cyclic process of "convention and revolt." We want to share with our students the pleasure to be derived from a discriminating response to the means that the author has employed and the variations or reversals he has based on the traditional pattern. Knowledge of the problems of artistry, a recognition of the author's aims and of the technical difficulties involved in achieving these aims often tend to increase enjoyment. Pleasure arises from discovering the kind of structure that the artist is creating, from seeing things fall into a pattern. Awareness of the function of various characters or episodes or images illuminates what the work as a whole "means." However, that perception of order or pattern is important to the average reader only in relation to the impact of the work as a whole. And these sensitivities

to the author's technique are not necessarily best fostered or manifested through a labeling of devices or an analysis of forms.

One of the best ways of helping students gain this appreciation of literary form and artistry is to encourage them to engage in such imaginative writing. In this way they will themselves be involved in wrestling with the materials offered them by life or by their reaction to it; they will discover that problems of form and artistry are not separable from the problems of clarifying the particular sense of life or the particular human mood that the work of art is destined to embody.

The reader's role, we recall, is an active, not a passive, one. The artist using the medium of words must, like other artists, make his appeal primarily to the senses if his desire is "to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions." Unable to tangibly represent objects, the writer must select significant images that will stimulate his reader to undertake the process of sensuous and intellectual re-creation. The greater the reader's ability to respond to the stimulus of the word and the greater his capacity to savor all that words can signify of rhythm, sound, and image, the more fully will he be emotionally and intellectually able to participate in the literary work as a whole. In return, literature will help the reader sharpen further his alertness to the sensuous quality of experience. Such training is extremely necessary in our society, geared as it is toward a neglect of the quality of the means in an obsession with practical ends.

Here again, even a discussion of the writer's artistic medium necessarily leads to emphasis on the kinds of human experience toward which words point. Words themselves, it is true, not only refer to something else but also possess a sensuous quality of their own. The child, long before he understands

the meaning of the words, will derive pleasure from the sound, the rhythmic movement, and subtle inflection of a lyric by Blake. But this represents only the thinnest and most fragmentary response to words. Those pleasant sounds can evoke for him extraordinarily rich experiences as his mental and emotional capacities are enlarged and he comes to know what the words symbolize. We must foster the child's delight in the music of words, but we must also help him link up definite experiences and concepts with those sounds as they occur in different contexts; he must come to understand more and more what a word implies in the external world. These aims apply, of course, throughout the whole process of the individual's acquisition of language. Perhaps adolescent students are often impervious to the appeal of literature because for them words do not represent keen sensuous, emotional, and intellectual perceptions. This indicates that throughout the entire course of their education, the element of personal insight and experience has been neglected for verbal abstractions.

Teachers who themselves possess a lively awareness of the world about them will seek to develop the student's sensuous endowment so that he may gain from life and literature the greatest measure of enjoyment of sound, color, and rhythm. As the student looks more closely at the world of sight and sound, he will also come to distinguish their effect on his own moods. He will come to notice dominant impressions, to see certain patterns in events, to sense the clues to the states of mind of other people. Sensuous details will acquire significance as they lead him to glimpse the emotional undercurrents that flow so swiftly beneath the surface of everyday life. In the same way, greater receptivity to the sensuous stimuli

offered by literature must be paralleled by enriched emotional associations with them.

On the one hand, emphasis on abstract verbalization, on intellectual concepts cut off from their roots in concrete sensuous experience, is destructive of responsiveness to literature. On the other hand, image, form, structure, the whole sensuous appeal of literature can be fully apprehended only within the framework of a complex sense of life. Sensitivity to literary technique should be linked up with sensitivity to the array of human joys and sorrows, aspirations and defeats, fraternizings and conflicts.

The teacher realistically concerned with helping his students develop a vital sense of literature cannot, then, keep his eyes focused only on the literary materials he is seeking to make available. He must also understand the personalities who are to experience this literature. He must be ready to face the fact that the students' reactions will inevitably be in terms of their own temperaments and backgrounds. Undoubtedly these may often lead the student to do injustice to the text. Nevertheless, the student's primary experience of the work will have had meaning for him in these personal terms and no others. No matter how imperfect or mistaken, this will constitute the present meaning of the work for him, rather than anything he docilely repeats about it. Only on the basis of such direct emotional elements, immature though they may sometimes be, can he be helped to build any sounder understanding of the work. The nature of the student's rudimentary response is, perforce, part of our teaching materials.

The individual reader brings the pressure of his personality and needs to bear on the inextricably interwoven "human"

and "formal" elements of the work. If his own experience of life has been limited, if his moral code is rigid and narrow or slack and indiscriminating, the quality of his response to literature will necessarily suffer. Conversely, any sensitivity to literature, any warm and enjoyable participation in the literary work will necessarily involve the sensuous and emotional responsiveness, the human sympathies, of the reader. We shall not further the growth of literary discrimination by a training that concentrates on the so-called purely literary aspect. We go through empty motions if our primary concern is to enable the student to recognize various literary forms, to identify various verse patterns, to note the earmarks of the style of a particular author, to detect recurrent symbols, or to discriminate the kinds of irony or satire. Acquaintance with the formal aspects of literature will not in itself ensure aesthetic sensitivity. One can demonstrate familiarity with a wide range of literary works, be a judge of craftsmanship, and still remain, from the point of view of a rounded understanding of art, aesthetically immature. The history of criticism is peopled with writers who possess refined taste but who remain minor critics precisely because they are minor personalities, limited in their understanding of life. Knowledge of literary forms is empty without an accompanying humanity.

When literary training is viewed as primarily the refinement of the student's power to enter into literary experiences and to interpret them, there will be little danger of excessive emphasis on one or another approach. We shall be aware of the need to sharpen the student's responses to the sensuous, technical, and formal aspects of the literary work. But we shall see these as merged with—reinforced by and reinforcing—responses to those elements in the work that meet the

reader's need for psychological satisfactions and social insights. Particularly for the adolescent reader, the desire for self-understanding and for knowledge about people provides an important avenue into literature. The young reader's personal involvement in a work will generate greater sensitivity to its imagery, style, and structure; this in turn will enhance his understanding of its human implications. A reciprocal process emerges, in which growth in human understanding and literary sophistication sustain and nourish each other. Both kinds of growth are essential if the student is to develop the insight and the skill needed for participation in increasingly complex and significant literary works.

This view of the literary experience raises a number of questions. What does it signify for actual teaching aims and methods? How can students develop sensitivity to all the organically related facets of the literary work? What adolescent needs and interests should the teacher be aware of? How can the study of literature enable students to understand themselves better and to see human beings and society in a broader context of emotions and ideas? In short, how can students be helped to achieve literary experiences of higher and higher quality? Parts 2 and 3 will consider such questions.

PART TWO

THE HUMAN BASIS OF LITERARY SENSITIVITY

CHAPTER 3

THE SETTING FOR SPONTANEITY

During a reorganization of education on the Indian reservations some years ago, it was discovered that in some classes the Indian boys and girls were being required to read Restoration comedies. It seems ridiculous that these children, whose past experience had been only the conditions of the reservation village and the vestiges of their native culture, should be plunged into reading the sophisticated products of a highly complex foreign country remote in space and time. Can it be doubted that the children could make nothing of it? Any show of "understanding" a Restoration play would undoubtedly be only a parroting of empty words and phrases to satisfy a teacher's demand.

The plight of these Indian children probably differs only in degree from the average American child's relation to much of the literature he reads in his classroom. The relevance of literary materials has too often been measured in terms of purely verbal operations. To demonstrate "understanding" of a work has

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been primarily a matter of paraphrasing, defining, applying the proper rubrics. This can be accomplished even when the work presents nothing that awakens an intimate personal response. Too often, the average student might utter Coleridge's lament in "Dejection" when the poet gazed at the sky and the stars and could only "see, not feel, how beautiful they are!" The teacher is concerned with making the student "see" what in the work of literature has made *others* deem it significant. Whether the student himself "feels" this is an entirely different question and one that is rarely considered.

Undoubtedly in many English classes today the student functions on two separate and distinct planes. On one plane, he learns the ideas about literature that his teacher or the literary critic presents to him as traditional and accepted by educated people. On the other plane, he reads the literature and reacts to it personally, perhaps never expressing that reaction or even paying much attention to it. Only occasionally will there be a correlation of these two planes of activity. Teachers frequently approach a book or a poem as though it were a neatly labeled bundle of literary values to be pointed out to the student. If the consensus of critical opinion recognizes certain virtues in a given work, the critics' direct experience of it has led them to perceive those values. The student's repetition of that critical opinion would have validity only when he himself had lived through an experience similar to the critics'. When the images and ideas presented by the work have no relevance to the past experiences or emotional needs of the reader, only a vague, feeble, or negative response will occur.

It is not at all surprising that so few of even our college graduates have formed the habit of turning to literature for pleasure and insight. The novel or play or poem has been

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made for them too much something to know about, something to summarize or analyze or define, something to identify as one might identify the different constellations on a star map or define the qualities of a particular chemical element. For is there a great difference, after all, between the process of memorizing the properties of hydrogen or its peculiar reactions to changes in temperature and the process of memorizing that the Romantic movement was a reaction against eighteenth-century classicism, was concerned with the individual, and produced a great deal of "nature poetry"? How many students have reeled this off for an examination and yet never have felt the full impact of a Romantic poem! Literary history has many values as have the various approaches developed by literary critics and scholars. But all the student's knowledge about literary history, about authors and periods and literary types, will be so much useless baggage if he has not been led primarily to seek in literature a vital personal experience.

Far from helping the student in this direction, much literature teaching has the effect of turning him away from it. He is to a certain degree insulated from the direct impact of the work. He comes to it with the idea that he should see in it first of all those generalized values or kinds of information that the literature class stresses—summaries of plot and theme, identification of certain characteristics that mark its period or genre, certain traits of style and structure. Much of even the best literature teaching is analogous to typical American spectator sports. The students sit on the sidelines watching the instructor or professor react to works of art. Though the student may develop a certain discrimination in the appreciation

→ American spectator sports - 1/23/52

to vital personal experience

of professorial taste, this often tends to obscure the need for the student himself to develop a personal sense of literature.

The great value of the various scholarly and critical approaches to literature *in their proper place* will be considered in chapters 5, 7, and 8. But they can be very easily transformed from useful aids into preoccupations that claim the center of attention and crowd the student's personal experience with literature into the dim outer fringe of vision. One could, for instance, become quite proficient in the history of Italian literature without knowing the language and without having read any Italian work even in translation. One would be able to sketch the sweeping lines of literary change, to discourse glibly on the special characteristics of the different periods, to name the contributions of its great writers, and to recount their biographies. It would be possible to learn summaries of the so-called content of their works, as for example the story and the philosophy of *The Divine Comedy*. One might even hold forth on its relations to the dying medieval culture and the dawning Renaissance. Without acquaintance with the works themselves, all this information would lack essential substance. Much of the activity concerning literature with which the average student busies himself in school and college has something of this character. The frame is elaborately worked out, but there is a blank where the picture should be. Missing are the personal experience and understanding of the literary works that historical and biographical information should enhance.

The problem that the teacher faces first of all, then, is the creation of a situation favorable to a vital experience of literature. Unfortunately, many of the practices and much of the tone of literature teaching have precisely the opposite effect.

→ creation of a situation favorable to a vital experience

They place a screen between the student and the book. The solution of this primary problem is therefore complicated by habitual attitudes and academic practices. The majority of English teachers still need to concentrate on this problem, for in many English classes today the instructor never even glimpses the student's personal sense of the work discussed. The teacher may be interested in, let us say, *Pride and Prejudice* from the point of view of the history of the novel form in England, or he may be eager to discuss the relation of style and theme. The student, however, may be impressed by the revelation that then, even as now, the business of finding a mate was no simple matter and that then, even as now, personality clashes and the gap between generations were important. In many cases there is an unbridged gulf between anything the student might actually feel about the book and what the teacher, from the point of view of accepted critical attitudes and his adult sense of life, thinks the pupil should notice.

This often leads the student to consider literature something academic, remote from his own present concerns and needs. He recognizes a traditional aura about literature but discards it when his school days are past. (We all know the student who says, "But I have had Shakespeare," as though it were something to suffer through and forget, like the measles.) Thus he does not learn to turn spontaneously to the literature of the past or to the comparably good literature of the present; such works, he feels, must be approached only in full dress and with all the decorum of critical method handed down by the teacher. He is cut off from the personal value they might have for him. Instead he turns to the pulp magazines, comic books, or lurid drugstore paperbacks.

! For many students, the only thing approaching a personal literary experience is provided by such trashy writings. This is certainly not because there is no good literature that could arouse their interest and fulfill their needs. Obviously, one reason for this situation must be the frequently defensive attitude toward "good" books built up in the mind of the student in school and in college. He has been given to understand that there are proper ways to react, there are certain things to look for—that he must be ready to discuss the characterization or to analyze plot and subplot or to talk about the author's choice of words. To some extent this is a reflection of that blight on our educational system, its emphasis on the attainment of good marks rather than on the value of the work or the knowledge for its own sake. Instead of plunging into the work and permitting its full impact, he is aware that he must prepare for certain questions, that his remarks on the work must satisfy the teacher's already crystallized ideas about it.

The teacher of college freshman literature courses is often perturbed to find this attitude affecting the work of even the most verbally proficient students. They read literary histories and biographies, criticism, introductions to editions, so-called study guides, and then, if there is time, they read the works. Their interest in the author's life is often on a par with that of the Hollywood gossip column; or they have learned at best to view the work as a document in the author's biography. Their quest is for the sophisticated interpretation and the accepted judgment. If they have learned techniques of close analysis, they tend to look on the work as a means of displaying their analytic virtuosity. They seem shut off from the personal nourishment that literature can give. Hence they are often insecure

and confused when given the opportunity and responsibility to express their own honest responses to the work.

I. A. Richards published the classic documentation of this point in 1929. Giving no clues to title, authorship, period, school, or literary value, he asked his class at Cambridge University to write comments on unidentified poems. As he reports in *Practical Criticism*, the students found it extremely difficult to make up their minds about the poems or even to work out possible opinions from which to choose. They set forth an extraordinary variety of views, and the "reckless, desperate" tone of many of their comments revealed their bewilderment. Instead of being able to apply to the poems neatly ticketed interpretations and judgments appropriate to their authorship and their literary period, the students were forced to base their comments on their own intimate reactions. In most cases, their training in literary history and their fund of critical dicta on good poetry were of very little use in helping them handle their unvarnished primary personal responses. They were thus at the mercy of personal obsessions, chance associations, and irrelevant conventional opinions about poetry. Hence they often failed to understand the poems or to discriminate differences in literary quality.

Evidently, in most cases an unprecedented demand was being made on these students. Yet during the whole course of their literary training they should have again and again been given the opportunity to handle their primary responses to the text. A secure approach to poetry would have utilized the "background" they possessed; but it would have been a tool, not a crutch.

Surely the majority of American students, subjected to similar experiments, would not yield a different picture even

today, after several decades in which close reading has been increasingly stressed in colleges and secondary schools. The average American student probably would not reveal as much literary background, let alone the ability to utilize it. We insist that students should not consult histories of literature or works of criticism to find out what to think about an author, but we have usually not sought to discover why they are so lacking in self-reliance.

Few teachers of English today would deny that the individual's ability to read and enjoy literature is the primary aim of literary study. In practice, however, this tends to be overshadowed by preoccupation with whatever can be systematically taught and tested. Or the English program becomes what can be easily justified to parents and administrators, whose own past English training has produced skepticism about the value of the study of literature. The professional preparation of the English teacher, moreover, often has little relation to actual conditions in the classroom.

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How then can students be enabled to have such vital experiences with literature that they will indeed come intimately and lastingly into their literary heritage? This has always been the concern of the teacher who is also a lover of literature. He has known that without this all his conscientious lecturing and questionings, all his techniques are valueless. To attempt a comprehensive solution to this problem would, of course, be fatuous. The following discussion will naturally tend to emphasize those aspects that seem to have been most generally neglected. The purpose is not to set a pattern or formula for any one teacher or class to follow but to underline general considerations that should influence practice.

Unless the teacher himself values literary experience, revision of his aims or his methods will be futile. By implication, any definition of the ideal relation between the student and the literary work applies also to the teacher. As long as an artificial and pedantic notion of literary culture persists, students will continue in their indifference to the great works of the past and present.

The teacher's personal love of literature, however, has not always been proof against the influence of routine, pedantic notions concerning teaching methods. He is dismayed at the results indicated by the low level of taste about him; he undergoes constant frustration, or he consoles himself by focusing on the rare student who seems to possess the divine spark. To develop many such students, the teacher must liberate himself as well as his pupils from self-defeating practices. He should not relinquish his own zestful sense of literature as a living art.

The persistence of many of the routine procedures in literature teaching makes it necessary to phrase some primary duties in negative terms. First is the necessity not to impose a set of preconceived notions about the proper way to react to any work. The student must be free to grapple with his own reaction. This primary negative condition does not mean that the teacher abdicates his duty to attempt to instill sound habits of reading or sound critical attitudes. Nor does this imply that historical and biographical background material will be neglected. The difference is that instead of trying to superimpose routine patterns, the teacher will help students develop these understandings in the context of their own emotions and their own curiosity about life and literature.

The youth needs to be given the opportunity and the courage to approach literature personally, to let it mean

something to him directly. The classroom situation and the relationship with the teacher should create a feeling of security. He should be made to feel that his own response to books, even though it may not resemble the standard critical comments, is worth expressing. Such a liberating atmosphere will make it possible for him to have an unself-conscious, spontaneous, and honest reaction.

When the student feels the validity of his own experience, he will cease to think of literature as something that only a few gifted spirits can enjoy and understand in an original way. How often, when urged to speak out for himself, a student will respond, "But I'm not literary, the way Jane or John is!" Nothing is more conducive to this than the attitude of the instructor that he is one initiated into the esoteric mysteries of art, suffering with amused tolerance the Philistine reactions of the class. The instructor's function is, rather, to help students realize that the most important thing is what literature means to them and does for them.

Another negative means of furthering a spontaneous response is to avoid placing undue importance on the particular form in which the expression of the student's reaction should be couched. He should be able to express himself freely. Nor should there be constant insistence on summaries or rehashes of the work. That may become as artificial and inhibiting as any of the other routine methods. The young reader should feel free to let his comment take the form dictated by what he has lived through in reading the book. To set up some stereotyped form will probably focus the student's attention on what is to be required of him after he has read the book rather than on the work itself as he evokes it from the text.

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The effect of such assignments is illustrated by a father's report of his twelve-year-old daughter's experience with *Great Expectations*, which she had selected for individual reading. Her reaction was intense. She said to him, "This is a very, very deep book. You're thinking about the story, the strange things that happen to Pip—and all of a sudden you see another meaning back of it." She groped toward a phrasing of those "deeper" symbolic meanings and offered an unusually mature interpretation of the book. Later, her father found her at her desk, in despair before a blank sheet of paper with only the title of the book written on it. To his remark that surely she had much to say, she replied that none of those ideas would serve; she had to write a book report—summarize the plot, sketch the setting, describe any two characters, write a brief opinion or blurb. The little formula provided by the teacher as a guide had instead divorced the youngster from her actual experience of the novel. The book report she finally ground out revealed none of this response. Fortunately, her involvement in this powerful work had made her temporarily forget the assignment. The next time, she would be on her guard, less likely to pay attention to much beyond what would be useful for the book report. Conscientious teachers often thus unwittingly defeat their long-term aims by classroom methods, day-to-day assignments, and devices for evaluation.

An experience reported by a teacher documents this point: "As I was leafing through a tenth-grade poetry text, I found myself drawn into rereading the old Scottish ballad 'Edward, Edward' with its step-by-step revelations of a crime and its fearful aftermath. In the dialogue with his mother, you recall, he reveals that the blood on his sword is that of his 'fadir deir.' He utters his desperate decision to do penance wandering

over the seas, leaving his halls to fall into ruin, his wife and children to wander the world as beggars. And then there is that final stanza:

'And what wul ye leive to your ain mither deir,

Edward, Edward?

And what wul ye leive to your ain mither deir?

My deir son, now tell me O'

'The curse of hell frae me sall ye beir,

Mither, mither,

The curse of hell frae me sall ye beir,

Sic counseils ye gave to me O'

"As I finished the poem, it was as though I had been participating in a Greek tragedy in capsule. Associations with Oedipus and Orestes were a measure of my involvement. And then I turned the page—"What is the name of this kind of poem? What characteristics does it share with other poems of this type? What is the effect of the refrain?"

"The shock of these questions drew me away from all that I had undergone in reading the text—the structure of feeling called forth by the pattern of events, my darkening mood as I saw the destruction of the family by the son's desperate crime and desperate penance, the horror of the final interchange. For the moment, I was the student, rudely torn from all this by the textbook editor's questions."

Is this not typical of what often happens in the classroom? Out of misguided zeal, the student is hurried into thinking or writing that removes him abruptly and often definitively from what he himself has lived through in reading the work. It therefore becomes essential to scrutinize all practices to make

sure that they provide the opportunity for an initial crystallization of a personal sense of the work.

Although all students should not be required to give the same sort of expression to their reaction, in most cases a personal experience will elicit a definite response; it will lead to some kind of reflection. It may also lead to the desire to communicate this to others whom the boy or girl trusts. An atmosphere of informal, friendly exchange should be created. The student should feel free to reveal emotions and to make judgments. The primary criterion should be not whether his reactions or his judgments measure up to critical traditions but, rather, whether the ideas and reactions he expresses are genuine. The variety and unpredictability of life need not be alien to the classroom. Teachers and pupils should be relaxed enough to face what indeed happened as they interpreted the printed page. Frank expression of boredom or even vigorous rejection is a more valid starting point for learning than are docile attempts to feel "what the teacher wants." When the young reader considers why he has responded in a certain way, he is learning both to read more adequately and to seek personal meaning in literature.

There is no formula for giving students the assurance to speak out. One experienced teacher has found that his students are encouraged by mention of comments made by other students in past discussions. Another finds that classes that are accustomed to the traditional recitation pattern may be reluctant to engage in spontaneous discussion but will welcome the chance to write brief anonymous comments on a work at the beginning of a meeting. Some of these comments selected at random will serve to elicit further frank reactions and interchange. This teacher sometimes analyzes the written

comments and later reports on trends and contrasts as a way of focusing on problems of importance to the group. Sometimes a general "unstructured" question, to borrow a term from the psychologist, will be enough to open the discussion. The teacher needs to maintain the conviction that it is important to place the discussion of the text in this matrix of personal response. He also needs to develop the security to permit a rather free-flowing discussion to begin with, before the group can be helped to focus on problems and skills of interpretation relevant to them.

A situation conducive to free exchange of ideas by no means represents a passive or negative attitude on the part of the teacher. To create an atmosphere of self-confident interchange he must be ready to draw out the more timid students and to keep the more aggressive from monopolizing the conversation. He must be on the alert to show pleased interest in comments that have possibilities and to help the students clarify or elaborate their ideas. He must keep the discussion moving along consistent lines by eliciting the points of contact between different students' opinions. His own flexible command of the text and understanding of the reading skills it requires will be called into play throughout.

One of the most valuable things the students will acquire from this is the ability to listen with understanding to what others have to say and to respond in relevant terms. If they have thus far been subjected to the typical school routine, the tendency is at first for them to address themselves only to the teacher; the conversational ball is constantly thrown to the teacher, who then throws it to another student, who again returns it to the teacher, and so on. In a more wholesome situation, the ball is passed from student to student, with the

teacher participating as one of the group. This interchange among students must be actively promoted.

But should not the teacher or instructor enter more positively into the picture? Should his function be only to select a sufficiently wide range of good books, place them on the shelves of a library, turn the students loose to seek their own mental and emotional nourishment, and then listen to their spontaneous comments? Even the decision about what should be placed on the shelves of this library would make the teacher's task an influential one. Ideally, general considerations such as have been suggested thus far would guide his choices: an understanding of adolescent needs and conflicts and a recognition of any circumstances in their personal and social backgrounds that would make certain books of the past or present particularly interesting and illuminating.

This need to select from the body of literature those works to which particular students will be most receptive implies a knowledge not only of literature but also of the students. If the language, the setting, the theme, the central situation are all too alien, even a great work will fail. All doors to it are shut. Books must be provided that hold out some link with the young reader's past and present preoccupations, anxieties, ambitions. Hence, a standard literary diet prescribed for all has negated the reality of the school situation. In our heterogeneous society, variations from group to group and from individual to individual require a wide range of literary materials that will serve as the bridge from the individual's experience to the broad realms of literature. Such factors as the students' general background, level of maturity, linguistic history, and

major difficulties and aspirations would guide the teacher's selection of works to bring to their attention.¹

Carole *Newman* There is much to be said for Newman's vision of a university as a place where young people have access to books. Until quite recently, after all, English literature was not a subject for organized study and teaching. Yet it was a vital and absorbing interest to many, perhaps because there was no superstructure of traditional teaching practice connected with it. If the student turned to English literature, it was because he felt its personal value. He read with a free spirit, not because the academic powers decreed a knowledge of it necessary, but perhaps precisely because it was outside the stultifying routines of the curriculum. Unfortunately, it sometimes seems that it would be much better if students were turned loose in a library to work out a personal approach to literature for themselves.

Nevertheless, the teacher of literature may have a powerful and beneficial influence. The basic postulate is that such influence will be the elaboration of the vital influence inherent in literature itself. Important as it is, the selection of a humanly significant book list is only the first of the teacher's important functions. To reject the routine treatment of literature as a body of knowledge and to conceive of it rather as a series of

¹ Much in the following chapters will relate to this matter of selection. Ultimately, of course, students should learn to select their own books. An account of how high school students developed increasing maturity and breadth of choice when permitted to choose the books to be added to the school library is to be found in Lou L. La Brant's *An Evaluation of the Free Reading in Grades Ten, Eleven, and Twelve*. See also *Were We Guinea Pigs?* (Ohio State Univ.) and the report on these students as adults, *The Guinea Pigs after Twenty Years*, by Margaret Willis. Under the restricted conditions of most public school systems, however, the pressing need is that teachers should be aware of what books students require and should exert pressure for their introduction into the school library.

A series of possible experiences vs a body of knowledge

possible experiences only clears the ground. Once the unobstructed impact between reader and text has been made possible, extraordinary opportunities for a real educational process are open to the teacher.

A situation in which students did nothing but give free rein to their reactions, their likes and dislikes, would undoubtedly have psychiatric value. The psychologists warn us about the neurotic effects of the stressful nature of our whole culture. In the compulsive atmosphere of the average school and college today, there is a tremendous pressure on students to fulfill requirements and to meet standards. A literature class where the student could feel that everything that he thought or said was equally valuable might possibly have a therapeutic effect. But the development of literary understanding is a more positive goal. The study of literature should give the student the form of emotional release that all art offers and, at the same time, without strain or pressure, should help him gain ever more complex satisfactions from literature. A spontaneous response should be the first step toward increasingly mature primary reactions.

certainty *lively* *untrammeled discussion bespeaks art*

Certainly, lively, untrammeled discussion bespeaks an admirable educational setting. The fact that the student is articulate and eager to express himself is a wholesome sign. The teacher has given the student a feeling of adequacy, of having experiences and ideas worthy of consideration. Yet all of this, as great an achievement as it represents, only means that the obstacles to real education have been eliminated. The student still needs to acquire mental habits that will lead to literary insight, critical judgment, and ethical and social understanding. There still remains the necessity for positive aids to

intellectual development. Though a free, uninhibited emotional reaction to a work of art or literature is an absolutely necessary condition of sound literary judgment, it is not, to use the logician's term, a sufficient condition. Without a real impact between the book and the mind of the reader, there can be no process of judgment at all, but honest recognition of one's own reaction is not in itself sufficient to ensure sound critical opinion. Given this free response, all things shall be added unto us. The implication is that there are other things to be added. Teachers who have been pioneers in freeing themselves from the old routines will be especially aware of the importance of envisaging this constructive phase of the problem.

One occasionally meets a student who has been given unlimited scope and is refreshingly honest in expressing his reactions to literature. Often, nevertheless, although his attitude toward books may be unspoiled by false reverence for what is "correct," his is not an emotionally organized or reasoned approach to literature. He is still at the mercy of his raw reactions, still uncritically ready to proffer every judgment dictated by the chance circumstances of his own personal life. Undoubtedly he is much better off than students who have been deadened to any direct sense of literature, but he is still functioning at the lowest critical level. He needs to retain his spontaneity and yet to develop further, to make each literary experience the source of enhanced capacities for his next experience. For he can begin to achieve a sound approach to literature only when he reflects on his response to it, when he attempts to understand what in the work and in himself produced that reaction, and when he thoughtfully goes on to modify, reject, or accept it.

This chapter has underlined the importance of a relationship between teacher and students that will permit the student to respond intimately and spontaneously to literature. This aim, it was seen, has sweeping implications for classroom procedure and for the choice of works to be read and discussed. Yet enabling the student to approach the text without artificial restrictions and to respond in his own terms is only one aspect of the teacher's role. This has simply established the conditions for carrying out another equally important aspect: to initiate a process through which the student can clarify and enlarge his response to the work. This entails complementary objectives: on the one hand, a critical awareness of his own reactions and, on the other hand, a keener and more adequate perception of the potentialities of the text. Both kinds of advance will go on simultaneously, each making the other possible. The complementary character of these two phases of the development of critical powers has hitherto been insufficiently recognized. They will be the concern of the next two chapters.