SARAH TRYPHENA PHILLIPS LECTURE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND HISTORY

LITERATURE AND EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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Read 10 November 1965

I HOPE that no one has inferred from my somewhat ambiguous title that I have proposed to myself to discuss with you this evening the two vast and complicated topics of literature in the United States and education in the United States. My objective is more modest and more realistic: I should like to look at the part played by literature in American education today and at some of the ways in which the part that literature *should* play in American education has been defined by Americans themselves. The place of literature in education is one much discussed in America: it is one aspect of the larger topic of the place of the humanities in education that is a frequent theme of addresses by college deans, presidents of learned societies, and similar spokesmen for what might unkindly be called academic vested interests. The frequent ventilation of this theme has borne fruit in recent legislation by Congress setting up a National Arts and Humanities Foundation parallel to, though with only a small proportion of the financial resources of, the National Science Foundation. Indeed, the idea of a government endowed humanities foundation—support for which in principle President Johnson first announced at an academic convocation at Brown University in September of last year, at which I happened to be present—suggests a deliberate pitting of the humanities against science, or at least a claim made for the national importance of the humanities in the face of the increasing prestige and influence of science.

This claim has often been voiced. When one considers the number of committees set up in colleges and universities throughout the United States to discuss the question of basic humanities courses and related matters, and when one looks at the vast amount of literature on the subject from the 1944 Harvard Report on *General Education in a Free Society* (to go no further back) to the latest article in *Teachers College Record* or *The*

English Journal on the teaching of poetry or the encouragement of 'creativity', one realizes how concerned American 'educators' (as they so often call themselves) are about this whole question. At its simplest, one could say that the concern arises from a fear that the technological and materialist bias of modern American society threatens to impoverish, and often has already impoverished, the lives of its citizens, and education must be designed to compensate for this impoverishment. It is true that ever since the Russians launched their first sputnik Americans have been seeking ways to make more effective use of the talents of their people by improving educational procedures and techniques, but this is rather a different matter: the space race has had no direct influence on humanities teaching, though it has increased the concern of humanists to press their claims against the ever growing demands of scientists in the space age. We are reminded of the answer given by the nineteenth-century sage when told that a cable had been laid under the Atlantic so that a message from London could be immediately transmitted to New York and vice versa. 'Yes, but have they anything to say?' If we have space satellites to enable us to transmit television programmes across the world, what kind of programmes shall we transmit? If we go to the moon, what shall we do there? If we increase leisure and the expectation of life, how shall we spend the extra time? The more the scientists and technologists work, the more questions are thrown up for the humanist to answer. (Perhaps it is hardly necessary to explain that I am using the terms 'humanities' and 'humanist' in the modern American sense: the equivalent in British academic terminology would be 'arts' and 'arts man'.)

Can the proper teaching of literature, at the secondary level or the college level or both, help to solve the problem of adequate living in an industrial democratic society? This is the question that we meet again and again in present-day American discussion. In the issue of *Teachers College Record* for November 1963 there is an article urging that the schools have a responsibility 'for helping to nurture sensitivity to the sweep of a line, the intricacies of rhythm, and the subtleties of melody'. The author quotes from the American psychologist David McClelland criticizing the accepted American definition of excellence. 'There are other types of human excellence, without which life would hardly be worth living . . . I mean such characteristics as sensitivity to other human beings, compassion, richness and variety of imaginative life, or a life-long concern

for a particular scientific problem, whether one is paid to work on it or not.' These other types of excellence are set against the view satirized by the British writer M. D. Young in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, that human worth can be calculated by the formula M = IQ+E, Merit equals Intelligence plus Energy. This article, which is not specifically concerned with literature, pleads generally for direct experience of all the arts as a means of educating the heart as well as the head. Such an antithesis sounds crude, especially in summary, and rather reminiscent of some late-eighteenth-century educational theory. But the author is only one of a large company of educational experts in the United States who are exploring new ways of developing the imagination in association with the intellect in secondary education.

In the January 1964 issue of the same periodical—which is the journal of Teachers College, Columbia—pride of place is given to four articles on the part to be played by the humanities in education, one of which, significantly entitled *The Heart Needs a Language* (a quotation from Coleridge), is specifically concerned with the teaching of literature and with justifying it against the claims of science and technology.

> The prestige of scientific and technological studies [the author writes] is so great as to obscure, especially for the popular mind, the value of literary study, which seems by any obvious comparison to be entirely useless. It puts no men in orbit, it cures no frightening diseases, it makes clear no contribution to increase of the Gross National Product. . . . This climate does not make the student of literature any worse off than he was before—not absolutely, anyway; but relatively it does, and it certainly gives a new urgency to the perennial need to justify continued attention to his subject.

The author goes on to demonstrate how certain poems might be presented to a class so that they provide an experience that 'leads into knowledge of life, [and] enhances the awareness of human possibilities', doing so 'by exhibiting the human value of actualities'.

I first thought of citing one or two articles from *Teachers College Record* to illustrate the modern American concern with the part to be played by literature in education, and intended after that to range more widely for other evidence. But going through issue after issue of this periodical I found so much of the evidence accumulated right there in the form of articles written by American professors from all over the United States—only a

small minority of them, incidentally, from schools of education —that I have been tempted to quote more widely from it. For example, the 400th birthday of Shakespeare was celebrated in the April 1964 issue by four articles under the general title *Shakespeare as Educator*. One of the articles is concerned to show how Shakespeare, properly taught, can redeem modern experience from a sense of emptiness and automation. The title is *Shakespeare and Our Time's Malaise*, and the author, Paul Siegel, is a Renaissance specialist at Long Island University. Shakespeare, he argues, can provide a counterbalance to the forces in modern society that make for conformity and the 'lonely crowd'. 'Shakespearean tragedy heightens our feeling of the value of life through a presentation of greatness in a defeat—which is in a sense a triumph. Shakespearean comedy heightens our feeling of the value of life through its presentation of human vitality winning out over the mechanical codes which would imprison it and the automatized persons who would destroy it.' So the author summarizes a fairly complex argument—not without having first quoted the great American oracle of the liberal imagination, Lionel Trilling. 'It is simply not possible', Trilling wrote and Professor Siegel quoted, 'for a work of literature that comes within the borders of greatness not to ask for more energy and fineness of life, and, by its own communication of awareness, bring those qualities into being.'

This kind of claim for literature reminds us a little of Dr. F. R. Leavis's passionate belief in the educative power of truly great literature properly and critically read. Leavis's view of the *centrality* of literary experience, its ability to train the sensibility and enrich and refine the whole personality, is, however, in virtue of its insistence on rigid selection, precise discrimination, and a constant and steady application of the most highly trained critical faculties before any desirable result can be achieved (and the clear implication that more harm than good is done by people reading literature in any other way), a much more aristocratic view of literature in education than that prevalent among American 'educators'. Only a tiny minority would ever be able to achieve that salvation through the proper critical reading of literature in which Leavis believes: the American argument is more democratic, and it is concerned with the teaching of literature at all levels. David Holbrook, with his insistence on the educative value of good if simple poetry for children of little or no conventional academic ability, is more like one kind of American spokesman on this subject,

but then again the American argument concerns college humanities courses as well as teaching in high school and below.

If Professor Siegel believes that Shakespeare's plays, properly presented to the pupil or student, can compensate for the forces in modern civilization making for the mechanization of personality, Professor N. A. Ford, Head of the Department of English at Morgan State College, Baltimore, has argued that the proper teaching of literature can help the student to achieve what he calls 'cultural integration'. In an article entitled *Cultural Integration through Literature* which appeared in the January 1965 issue of *Teachers College Record*, Professor Ford gives some specific examples of how particular works can be used in the classroom to solve some of the social problems posed by modern American civilization. He defines cultural integration as 'that stage of development of an individual which makes and keeps him forever aware of the major powers that constitute his human nature and of the need to relate those powers and their expression to one another and to the world in which he lives'. Racial integration is one aspect of cultural integration, but only one. And he sees cultural integration as important in modern America for four reasons—'the overwhelming dominance of science', the 'fantastic growth' of slums and ghettos in large urban centres which produce a 'culturally impoverished' population, 'the shrinking dimensions of the modern world' which make it imperative for Americans to learn to understand and to live with other peoples, and the problems posed by the increasing leisure produced by automation. Professor Ford tries to show how *The Merchant of Venice* and *Huckleberry Finn*, properly taught, can help students to achieve 'a balanced view of minorities within the nation'. While he is quite right in deploring the misguided zeal of those negro parents in New York City who successfully demanded the removal of *Huckleberry Finn* from the reading list of the public schools because its repeated use of the word 'nigger' was offensive to negro children, he seems to me to be quite wrong in the way in which he recommends that this great and humane novel should be used. 'Since one of the marks of the culturally integrated individual is his sensitivity to and concern for the feelings of others, the teacher of *Huckleberry Finn* has an excellent opportunity to emphasize the shame and humiliation such derogatory epithets cause those who are thus insulted.' And, to make doubly sure that Mark Twain's novel doesn't do harm,

Professor Ford recommends that other books covering the same period and similar characters in a more simply admiring way should be included. But of course the greatness of *Huckleberry Finn* consists among other things in its sustained implicit criticism of the ideals and action of a society in which negroes were called 'niggers' and treated as sub-human, and a proper demonstration of what the book is *about* (as opposed to using the book as a jumping off place for giving moral talks on the undesirability of insulting people of other races) would surely dispose of all objections that could be made to it on moral grounds. The use of books as texts for preaching good moral lessons is not a *literary* use of them at all, and is liable to obscure the distinctive nature and value of the literary imagination. Similarly, while Professor Ford is right in deploring the demand made by some American Jews that *The Merchant of Venice* be banned from public schools and cinemas, his contention that if the play is 'accompanied by a fair knowledge of Jewish history and culture' then Shylock will be seen as more sinned against than sinning and his place in the play will be seen as an argument for the basic unity of mankind, really won't do at all. This, too, is an anti-literary argument, for the true life and meaning of the play can only be explained by a proper reading of it in its own terms, not by bringing to it a mass of factual knowledge of which Shakespeare himself was unaware.

Nevertheless, there is a problem here, not only the problem of prejudice and how or whether to use literature to remove it, but also the problem presented by groups that are apparently immune to the English literary tradition. For literature in American schools reflects a world of literary culture sometimes worlds away from the actual lives and backgrounds of schoolchildren. Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Mexican-Americans, reservation Indians—four groups which, together with 'Hill Whites' from the Appalachian uplands, are listed in a recent Educational Policies Commission report on *Education and the Disadvantaged American* as the most culturally impoverished streams in American schools—cannot be expected to take easily to the world of Shakespeare and Wordsworth or even of Whitman and Mark Twain. The classic literary culture of the English-speaking world is very far away from them. The situation is different, though there are points of similarity, with children of European immigrants, for those immigrants are likely to have their own approach to, their own version of, Western literary culture. The delighted discovery and adoption as their own of

English literature by the children of East European Jewish immigrants a generation and more ago is reflected not only in such works as Alfred Kazin's autobiographical *A Walker in the City*, but, most impressively, in the achievements of a remarkable galaxy of writers and critics, sons of immigrants to a man, who can almost be said to dominate the American literary scene today. For them, education had been the key: it had made them free of the world of English and American literature. But the bright, imaginative child of cultured (even if differently cultured) immigrants has never presented a real problem to the American educational system. It is for the groups and with respect to the groups officially designated as 'disadvantaged' that the problems discussed by Professor Ford exist most desperately. Can literature really help here? Literature of the English language can provide a common literary culture for all Americans whatever their parents' origin. But some groups may be so removed by their habits of living and feeling from any contact with literature in the English language that it might be argued that any sophisticated presentation of English literary classics is liable to be less educationally effective than the lively and imaginative presentation of folk literature and material drawn from the pupils' own daily environment.

I have been led into a digression. The fascinating problem of the melting pot, and the place of literature in American education as a melting agent, loomed up for a moment, and I could not resist nodding in its direction. But that is not my real theme. Nor is my real theme the educational problems presented by the 'disadvantaged'. It is not in any case their problems but the problems of prejudice against them on the part of more fortunate citizens that Professor Ford's article was really concerned with. Can literature make us more tolerant of other communities, other races? I think myself that any attempt to make literature do this directly is misguided: the educative effects of continued exposure to good literature are deep and complex and cannot be easily related to any single ethical ideal. On the other hand, it is perfectly true that an historical novel or modern autobiography which reveals, say, the horrors of racial prejudice or the truth about Auschwitz, can have very salutary effects—as vivid documentaries rather than as imaginative literature. For example, I don't see how any one who has read Elie Wiesel's vivid and terrifying autobiographical novel *Night* could ever tolerate for one moment the uniformed prancings of a neo-nazi.

But the exposure of youngsters to contemporary accounts of

modern horrors is hardly to be recommended on general educational grounds. The experience may be traumatic or it may have quite unexpected psychological effects. On the whole American education at the pre-college level has gone in the other direction and presented schoolchildren with a benevolently de-natured picture of the world. Textbooks written by teams of authors to bland formulas suggested by publishers have come in for considerable criticism in America recently. 'The author-team seems to insist there are two sides to every story, yet it tells neither. Instead it leads the child into a queer, antiseptic no-man's-land where nothing vital ever happens—a land where bees buzz but do not sting and where dogs bark but do not bite. In short, an intellectual wilderness.' This charge is made in an article in *Teachers College Record* for May 1965. The author, the distinguished journalist Richard Margolis, quotes Henry Steele Commager on American school textbooks: 'The whole purpose seems to be to take out any ideas to which anybody might object and to balance all sections and interests.' At the lowest level, there is the doctoring of nursery rhymes and folk-tales for young children to prevent them from learning anything about any unpleasantness in human affairs. Thus the three blind mice are not really blind, and the farmer's wife wouldn't think of cutting off their tails with a carving knife. This is rather different from turning the ten little nigger boys into ten little Indians, because the original version does indeed reflect a view of negro children as comic *objects* which is part of a wider pattern of unthinking race prejudice that requires to be fought against in American (and not only American) schools today. But the change is part of the bland world that the schoolchild finds provided for him.

That world is created by humane and intelligent people who want to keep children happy and make them good. But it is not the world of great literature. In Professor Siegel's article on the educational uses of Shakespeare today, to which I have already referred, one of the points made is that Shakespeare's tragic universe relates suffering to 'a heightened sense of life' in such a way as to help to redeem the modern member of the lonely crowd from the value-world of mechanized hedonism in which he normally lives. 'No marriage counsellor', he remarks, 'would approve of the conduct of Romeo and Juliet, who fall in love at first sight, immediately get married despite their short acquaintance, incur grave dangers, and then commit suicide.' He might have added, since the difference between Shakespeare's tragic

world and the world of the modern marriage counsellor is what is involved, that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are one of the few really happily married couples in Shakespeare.

Are we to say, then, that literature is used at the higher levels of American education to fit students for the complexities and paradoxes of life which have been deliberately concealed from them by the bland material which they were fed at the lower levels? One does indeed get this impression when one looks at some of the better annotated anthologies of English and American literature produced for American high school pupils. The selection of American literature edited by Mark Schorer and others and presented with historical introductions, critical interpretations, topics for essays and discussions, and a descriptive list of further works for the pupil to read on his own, is not only academically respectable and responsible but it seems specifically designed to force on the reader a confrontation of some of the insoluble problems, the permanent paradoxes, of American life and of experience generally which the protective optimism of textbooks in social studies too often ignores or denies.

> The novel exists [writes Professor Schorer in his introduction to the section on the modern American novel] at the point of intersection of the stream of social history and the stream of soul, or, to change our figure of speech from streams to roads, where the two roads cross and form a square in which each seems to disappear into the other. Yet, paradoxically perhaps, the most memorable American novels of the twentieth century show these forces not as amalgamating but as clashing, at odds with each other. Over and over again, the interest of the individual is defeated by the power of his institutions.

I am not citing these words as representing ultimate profundity or wisdom—and we must remember that they are addressed to sixteen-year-olds—but they do represent an attempt to use literature to increase maturity. The anthology to which Professor Schorer contributes is one of a series of four published by Houghton Mifflin which seems to me to represent the very best kind of aid to the teaching of literature to American schoolchildren between the ages of fifteen and seventeen. I must declare an interest here. The fourth volume of this series, on English literature, contains introductions on each period written by myself; but I had no hand in the selection of the material or in the planning of any of the volumes. I agreed to write the introductions because I was impressed by what the books were doing and how they were doing it. The first of the four volumes, entitled *Values in Literature*, is a selection of English and American

stories, poems, essays, and plays accompanied by critical and explanatory essays by Mary Ellen Chase and annotated reading lists. Among the plays is *Romeo and Juliet*. The next volume, for use a year later, is entitled *Insights into Literature* and the critical and explanatory essays are by Mark Van Doren. The object of all these volumes is to educate the pupil in how to read by providing him with good and interesting literature provocatively discussed and explained and at the same time including historical and other information which will help him to feel at home in the world of letters. Such anthologies can do little or nothing with novels, so all we can get there is a guide for further reading. I am not saying that this Houghton Mifflin series is the best of its kind; I know of other series as interestingly and imaginatively designed; I cite it only because I know it best, and because it is a good representative of a growing class of textbooks.

The annotated anthology of literature is, of course, a characteristic American educational device, as much used in colleges and universities as in high schools. In this country we tend to shy away from this kind of anthology, at least at the university level, because we believe that students should be encouraged to build up their own individual libraries and discouraged from relying on other people's selections. And it is true that, for example, an American student who takes a course in eighteenth-century English literature and uses (as he almost certainly will) one of the standard anthologies covering the period (and there are some excellent ones) will find all the material he needs within the covers of that single anthology. Only the exceptional student will be tempted to go beyond the selection of the learned editors and browse in the library to discover works of the period not included. And the student may well be tempted to believe that the eighteenth century, or the nineteenth century, or whatever period it is, is contained within the covers of the particular anthology he is using. He will of course be wrong, and any dampening of his enthusiasm for roaming the library stacks and reading the more eccentric works of the period is to be deplored. Nevertheless, the anthology he uses will certainly include important and interesting works that are not easy to find and which most British university students of English literature will never read at all. Thus Wylie Sypher's anthology of eighteenth-century English literature entitled *Enlightened England* includes extracts from Uvedale Price's *Essays on the Picturesque*, Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses*, Wesley's *Journal*, and Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* as well as more conventionally

accepted literary works of the period from Pomfret's *Choice* to Crabbe's *Village* and *Parish Register*.

It might be conceded that anthologies of this kind are very helpful in studying a limited period, but argued that they are positively harmful when they take the form of massive two-volume anthologies purporting to cover the whole of English literature of the kind put out by every reputable American publisher with any interest at all in the college textbook market. Yet the fact is that if British students got hold of the anthology put out by Harcourt Brace or by W. W. Norton (to name only two out of a large number) they would find in it much more material than they ever in fact get down to reading (apart from novels) together with a mass of scholarly information and critical, biographical, and bibliographical discussion. When I gave a course of lectures in Cambridge some years ago on 'The American Tradition in Literature' I was immensely grateful that I had brought back from America Norton's anthology with that title, for it provided in two handy volumes all the material I wanted to quote and almost all the references I wanted to use. No; the *usefulness* to both students and teachers of the American kind of anthology of literature can hardly be disputed. More relevant to my subject is the concept of the place of literary study in education that underlies them.

Perhaps a generalization could be ventured here. While at the high school level the best of such anthologies seem to aim at introducing the pupil to imaginative literature and giving him some awareness of the kinds of satisfaction it can afford, at the college and university level the function of anthologies seems more to be that of providing a professional body of knowledge. Intermediate between the two are those general anthologies of English literature aimed at the college student who is not specializing in English but taking a single pretty solid course in it. These tend to combine the aim of an introduction to the study of literature with the provision of basic knowledge of selected literary works and of information which will enable the student to read the works with proper understanding and appreciation. Thus they are really more advanced models of the high school anthologies, and like the high school anthologies are to be differentiated from those period anthologies which, often aimed at graduate students, are designed to enable a student to 'get up' a period of English literature. In other words, the former are meant to be 'how to read' books as well as collections of texts to be read, while the latter have the more sober scholarly

aim of presenting the major literary documents of a given period together with the relevant facts about the social and intellectual context.

At this point it becomes necessary to say something about the philosophy of the university teaching of literature in the United States, for this philosophy has much affected the nature and the use of anthologies and other literary textbooks. The attack on the old-fashioned 'survey course' in American universities began as long ago as the 1930's. It was argued that the *mélange* of literary biography, history of ideas, lists and descriptions of works, and generalizations about the development of literary genres that made up the majority of such courses quite obscured the true nature of the individual literary work, and that to provide the student with *information about* works of literature he was not expected to read closely himself was not only educationally useless but positively harmful. Literature was not a part of intellectual history, but a series of particular works of literary art, which can only be fruitfully discussed before an audience which either has the text before it or has recently read the text carefully. The attack on the survey course was overdue and well argued. It had the effect of replacing the survey course by the 'author course' in many universities, and at the more advanced levels this did nothing but good, because it gave professor and student the opportunity of working closely and at length on particular writers. I myself have had wonderful times at American universities conducting classes or seminars in Yeats or Joyce in which, with a group that met three times a week for twelve weeks, I could really discuss the works in detail. On returning to Britain I missed—as I still do—the opportunity to do this. This is all right for the advanced student who is specializing in English. But what about that large majority of American students of literature who take one or perhaps two literary courses without specializing in the subject? It is for such students that the large general anthologies are devised, to enable the teacher both to train them in critical reading and to see that they read a reasonable selection of important literary works. These students are not studying literature professionally, but as part of their general education. To put it crudely, the object of their being taught literature is to make them better people—more interested and more interesting. When I was professor of English at Cornell some fifteen years ago one of my colleagues produced a report to the Dean on the function of literature teaching and the points he made were precisely those: the study

of literature enlarged the sympathies and made one both more interested and more interesting.

No doubt Matthew Arnold would have agreed with this. 'More and more', wrote Arnold in *The Study of Poetry*, 'mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us.' The trouble with this view is that it tends to subsume literature in ethics or at least to blur the distinctive nature of literature as a unique form of discourse. This is a point made much of by modern criticism, which has concerned itself to preserve the individuality of literature and prevent its study being confused with historical or philosophical study. A sort of uneasy compromise between the old survey course and the course that demands the rigorous analysis of a few chosen texts has frequently been achieved by using a general literature anthology both as a source of specific texts for analysis and as a source of useful 'background' information. The pedagogical implications of the so-called New Criticism (for many years now no longer new) are not hostile to the anthology, even the historically arranged anthology, as a source of texts of works of literary art. Indeed, this movement has brought its own anthologies, the most famous and most widely used being Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*. But the pedagogical implications of this movement are hostile to the informational aspects of the teaching of literature, to the idea of the historical spread of works studied to enable the student to know something of the history of literature. I suppose that, ideally, some influential American critics of the last thirty years would have to believe that the chief function of the teaching of literature is *methodological*. If you are taught *how* to approach and analyse a literary work, if you acquire the requisite 'discipline' (which is of course quite different from any historical or philosophical discipline), it shouldn't matter how much or how little you read.

While it is true that American academic critics have often talked as though methodology is all and as though the educative function of a course in literature consisted in its developing in the student an understanding of the unique kind of structure of meaning that is a work of literary art, American universities have on the whole never really abandoned the view that the study of literature involves the acquiring of information about important elements in the history of civilization—information which is culturally valuable in itself. And of course they are right not to abandon this view wholly. It is right that we should

expect educated people to know what the Parthenon is even if they have not been lucky enough to see it, or to be able to distinguish between a photograph of St. Mark's, Venice, and one of St. Peter's, Rome, even if they have been to neither city and examined neither building. There is no reason why this should not be applied to literature too: I myself, for example, have never read the Babylonian epic Gilgamesh, but I would be ashamed to know nothing at all of its nature and its importance. In one of its aspects literature is part of history, of cultural history, and knowledge about it and its development is helpful to an understanding of the past and so of the present. But of course such knowledge does not in itself bring any direct awareness of the real individual meaning of a given work of literature, and it is only the direct experience of the individual work that can do that.

Americans in a sense are an unhistorical people. Their nation was founded in an attempt to escape from history, and this fact has deeply bitten into American consciousness. In my years of teaching in the United States I found again and again the feeling, rarely fully articulated but often hinted at, that the study of history was somehow reactionary and Old World: America belongs to the future not to the past (or certainly not to the past before 1776). One result of this is that even able and interested students of literature had a tendency to regard the past as a single amorphous period, a pre-American shadow world, in which Isaiah and Homer and Plato and Dante and Queen Elizabeth and Louis XIV and Dr. Johnson lived contemporaneously. The sorting out of the past, the relating of works of literature to the society and the ideology that lay behind them, is thus more necessary (or so I believe) for American students than for British. Yet it is America which was hit hardest by the revolt against the historical teaching of literature.

One result of this is the fluid way in which so many of the general humanities courses are taught in the United States. The avowed object of such courses is often to give the student a knowledge of the development of some of the basic ideas of Western culture and of some of its basic works of literature and philosophy. The works are often so selected that some can be used to help train in the student a critical methodology while others can be used as a means of illuminating the background, while others again can, in greater or less degree, be used for both purposes. While I was at Cornell I taught a section of the course in European classics—which was, incidentally, not taught

from an anthology but from a considerable number of individual paper-back editions of specific works. We discussed the Book of Job, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Thucydides' *History of the Peleponnesian War*, Dante's *Inferno*, Montaigne's *Essays*, a tragedy of Shakespeare's, and half a dozen other European classics. Back in Cambridge, I found myself wishing that my pupils there, all of them reading English, had read Job and Thucydides and Montaigne: almost none of them had or would. These 'Great Books' courses or general humanities courses, often imaginatively devised and brilliantly taught, are sometimes sneered at in this country, on the grounds that they represent a naïve exercise in the provision of basic 'culture' of which we on this side of the Atlantic stand in no need. It is untrue that the exercise is naïve and it is equally untrue that we stand in no need of it. What is true is that, properly taught (as it often is), such a course can kill two birds with one stone; it can be a course in the appropriate *disciplines* of reading works of literature, philosophy, and history, and it can be an introduction to the European cultural past. That it should serve both functions, and that those functions should be seen in their differing relations to each other, provide its real claim to educational distinction.

The enormous proliferation of paper-back editions of classics and of works of historical interest or importance whether or not they are classics in the full sense, has made easier the task of organizing critico-cultural courses (if I may use this ugly term to denote courses which both teach a critical methodology and provide knowledge of the past). In any case, the battle between criticism and history which once raged so hotly in America is now over; both sides now concede that they are doing different but related and sometimes mutually illuminating things. An important function of literary education at the less specialist level in America is the discovery of the Western cultural heritage (an *historical* search given contemporary meaning by *critical* insights). The tools for this discovery are being produced in the United States in abundance. They are of course often translations. We may deplore the fact that American students (and for that matter British students) are unable to read Sophocles in Greek or Dante in Italian. But it is surely better that they should be read in good translations than not read at all. One result of the Greeklessness of American students of literature has been the turning of American poets to the study of Greek and the production of some impressive versions of Greek tragedies. Modern translations of the classics are as a rule better in America

than in Britain in spite of and in a paradoxical sense sometimes even because of the much smaller amount of classical scholarship in America.

Some years ago, when I was Visiting Professor at Indiana, I talked to one of my graduate students about a humanities course that she was teaching to freshmen. It included the reading of the *Odyssey* in translation. One naïve young man, she told me, had got up in class to make the point that Odysseus could not really, at his deepest level of consciousness, have wanted to go home to his wife Penelope, or he would not have lingered among all those other girls and got involved in all those dangers. He was subconsciously fighting having to go home. 'If he'd really wanted to go right back to Ithaca, he could have found a boat going there and got passage on it.' This sounds naïve and anachronistic—and in a sense it is—but it reflects a real response to the *Odyssey*, an immediate relating of it to the student's own life and interests. It can be argued that this is better than knowing the *Odyssey* (as for some years I did) only as a source for set books for examinations or as a repository of Greek unseens.

There is, however, one danger attendant on this often imaginative and effective devising of literary courses. That is that American students seem to feel that literature is something you get up in a course and that unless you read it in a course you never read it. Many times, when I asked an American student whether he had read such and such a book, he would reply 'No, I never had a course in X' (naming the particular author or period). When I went on to say that I was not asking whether he had a course in the author, but whether he had read the book, the response was one of surprise that I should consider the two questions separate. This business of acquiring culture is serious; the better American student is enormously keen and hard-working (more hard-working than his British opposite number) and he is prepared to apply himself vigorously to obtaining the requisite knowledge and understanding. But I never seemed to find many Americans who read their 'great books' outside the classroom, for pleasure. Even modern literature was read mostly in connexion with specific courses. The magnificent efflorescence of American paper-backs, which has produced and continues to produce a splendid assortment of admirably edited works from the whole range of Western literary culture, does not seem to have led many American students to build up their own libraries independently of course

requirements. Of course some graduate students buy books not directly related to courses they are taking. But the ordinary student seems to be tied by the habit of mind first bred, I assume, by the mammoth anthology: it's all done for you in the textbook, in the course, and that's that. With very few exceptions, and in addition to the now standard range of paper-backs, American college bookstores sell only required 'texts' ordered in advance, some best-sellers, stationery, and greeting cards. Does this mean that using the study of literature as a means of teaching a critical methodology and also of learning about the cultural past does not lead the student to want to read on his own any *more* literature? It can't be as simple as that. There are obviously social and economic factors at work here. My impression is that our own students here in Britain read much less outside their required work than they used to. This may not be a purely American problem.

I have said something about literature in American secondary education and also something about literature as presented to the non-specialist college student. The enormous academic industry of advanced literary study, with its training of Ph.D.s to train Ph.D.s to train Ph.D.s *ad infinitum*, its proliferation of learned articles, critical analyses, new interpretations, and all the other paraphernalia of literary scholarship, presents quite a different problem. I have given my views on that, and of other aspects of the American academic achievement in literature, in a book on the subject I recently wrote in the series of Princeton Studies in Humanistic Scholarship in America; I do not propose to repeat all that here. For that really represents quite a different problem—the training of the professional academic. My interest this evening has been in the more general aspects of literature in American education. I have only touched the fringes of the subject: America is a large and varied country and the few examples I have been able to give are obviously incapable of suggesting the total picture. But I hope that I have said enough to convince you that the function of literature in education is a topic that has been and is still being fruitfully discussed in America, and that it would not do us any harm if we paid some attention to these discussions. More and more, America's educational problems are becoming ours, and American experience will therefore have more and more to teach us.