

LITERATURE AND TECHNOLOGY

Between 1970 and 1980, the number of college students majoring in English dropped by 53 percent; in philosophy by 36 percent; and in history by 57 percent, according to a report last year by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Undergraduates believe that science, engineering, or business will do them more good in the job market. But leading corporations and medical schools, such as IBM and Johns Hopkins, are now recruiting students with liberal arts backgrounds. This turnabout is no surprise to Cleanth Brooks, the noted scholar and literary critic. He contends that the humanities provide "the necessary complement" to our technological prowess. If literature cannot replace religion as a source of values, he says, the service it does render is great: "It lets us observe and overhear men and women as they choose, make decisions, or express their inmost hopes and fears."

by Cleanth Brooks

A technological age—especially an extremely brilliant and successful one—has difficulty in finding a proper role for literature. Such a society sees literature as a diversion, as a mere amusement at best; and so it is classed as a luxury, perhaps an added grace to adorn the high culture that the technology itself has built. Yet such homage obscures the real importance of literature and all of the humanities. It classes them as decorative luxuries, whereas in truth they are the necessary complement to our technological and industrial activities.

For over a century the problem of the real relation of literature to science, theoretical and applied, has been with us. In fact, the very development of an industrial society raises the question of the value of literature.

In a famous poem, Matthew Arnold tells us how, on Dover Beach, he had listened to the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the outgoing tide, and in it had found an emblem of the ebb tide of religious faith. Science was clearly destined to become technician-in-chief to civilization, but what about the values by which mankind lived? What was there to take religion's place? Arnold prescribed literature, and especially poetry. Poetry was invulnerable to science, for it had no factual underpinning for science to sweep away. It was fictional, a creation of the imagination.

More and more [Arnold wrote in 1880] mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete, and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.

With such a concept as this, no wonder that Arnold could claim that "the future of poetry is immense," for in effect he was entrusting to poetry the direction of the whole human enterprise.

How has Arnold's prophecy fared? Not so well, I should say. Though our intellectuals are still influenced by poetry, the ordinary citizen is hardly aware of it, and if he were, he would be puzzled by its specifications. He wonders why science, this beneficent magician, cannot tell us what to do as well as how to do it. In any case, he would be utterly baffled by the notion that fictions conceived by the imagination and not tied to the facts of this world could possibly interpret for us the facts of life.

I myself believe that, in asking poetry to replace religion and philosophy, Arnold laid upon poetry a burden it cannot possibly bear. As we should expect, the religious intellectuals of our time, such as T. S. Eliot, Walker Percy, and Flannery O'Connor, reject the notion altogether. At the other extreme, the fundamentalist man in the pew also instinctively rejects it just as roundly. Yet we owe Arnold a debt for having located the problem rather accurately and for assessing the strain that it had already set up in industrialized Great Britain by the middle of the 19th century.

In any case, his suggestions about the role of poetry in modern culture are worth further exploration. They have, I would point out, a peculiar relevance to culture in the United States. Let me indicate why. In the first place, we are a pluralistic society encompassing a number of religious faiths and cultural

backgrounds. In the second place, our constitutional separation of church and state forbids the teaching of institutionalized religion in state-supported schools and colleges; yet the problem of the inculcation of ethical standards and ultimate values becomes more and more urgent. It is intensified by such matters as the general breakdown of various traditions, the erosion of the family, the cultural rootlessness of much of our increasingly mobile population, and the growing secularism generated by a highly technological civilization.

So even if Arnold was wrong in believing that poetry could alone supply our culture with the proper goals, ends, and purposes, it may well be worth considering what poetry, and literature in general, can do. We are scarcely in a position to reject any available help from whatever source. Literature at least focuses attention on mankind's purposes, wise or unwise, and upon values for which men and women have lived and died.

In fairness to Arnold, his task of analysis was more difficult than ours, for in his day the boundaries of science were not so clearly marked out as they have since become. One of the best concise statements on the limits of science appeared last year in an article entitled "The Frontiers and Limits of Science," written by Victor F. Weisskopf, a distinguished physicist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He sums up as follows:

... important parts of human experience cannot be reasonably evaluated within the scientific system. There cannot be an all-encompassing scientific definition of good and evil, of compassion, of rapture, or tragedy or humor, or hate, love, or faith, of dignity, and humiliation, or of concepts like the quality of life and happiness.

In short, it is impossible for science to define for us the quality of happiness that Thomas Jefferson declared was the right of each of us to seek to attain. To have that choice taken away from us either by peer pressure, by the brainwashing of a totalitarian

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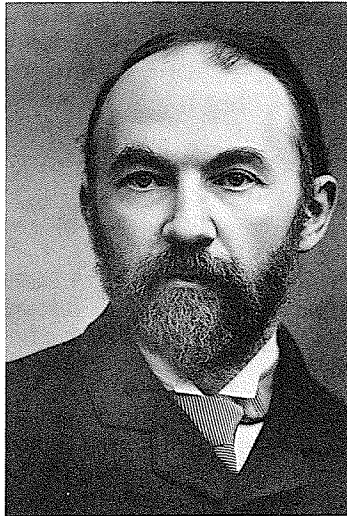
regime, or even by the seductions of our immense advertising industry is to lose some part of our humanity. Computers are programmed by human beings; but human beings move toward the state of computers when they allow themselves to be programmed by other human beings. Accepting, then, the fact that we cannot expect guidance from the hard and objective sciences such as mathematics and physics, what do the humanities offer in the way of guidance? And in any case, how can they make any impression on a society that prides itself on being practical and getting down to the hard facts?

An answer to the second question might run like this: A world reduced to hard facts would thereby become a dehumanized world, a world in which few of us would want to live. We are intensely interested in how our fellow human beings behave—in their actions, to be sure, but also in the feelings, motives, purposes that lead them into these actions. The proof is to be found even in the situation comedies of the TV shows or the gossip columns in the magazines and newspapers. We want to know the facts, but we crave the whole story too—its human interest and what we call its meaning.

For example, consider a celebrated incident, the loss of the White Star liner *Titanic*, which sank in the North Atlantic when she struck an iceberg. How did the poet Thomas Hardy deal with the incident in a poem which he called "The Convergence of the Twain"?

Of many of the facts Hardy makes no mention at all. He does not tell us that the date of the disaster was April 15, 1912, and that it happened on the *Titanic's* maiden voyage; that she was, at 46,000 tons, the largest ship afloat; that over 1,500 lives were lost; that the ship, though warned of ice ahead, was traveling at high speed; or that she was regarded as unsinkable, with double bottoms and 16 water-tight compartments.

Hardy does refer to some of these facts early in the poem but only obliquely—by references to the pride that the *Titanic* excited and men's confi-



Thomas Hardy

dence that they had at last conquered the sea itself with this mighty craft. What evidently caught Hardy's imagination was that the ship and the iceberg had, with precision timing, arrived at the same spot at the same instant, just as if destiny had employed a split-second timetable for the whole affair; and he reminds his reader that while the liner was being built in the Belfast shipyard, nature had all along been preparing the mountain of ice far away on the coast of Greenland. Here are the closing stanzas of the poem:

And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

Alien they seemed to be:
No mortal eye could see
The intimate welding of their later history,

Or sign that they were bent
By paths coincident
On being anon twin halves of one august event,

Till the Spinner of the Years
Said "Now!" And each one hears,
And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.

I remarked earlier that as human beings we want more than mere information. We want meaning and we want wisdom, but those elusive commodities are always in short supply. In the Book of Proverbs we learn that "wisdom crieth . . . in the streets," but it goes on to imply that "no man regardeth." If this was the situation several millennia ago, it remains so today. Secretly we may hunger for wisdom, but our overt craving nowadays is, of course, for information. Data banks are much in vogue and they are highly useful, but they are not equipped to pay off in the currency of wisdom.

A recent *New York Times* editorial matter-of-factly referred to ours as "the age of information." The poet T. S. Eliot, in choruses from *The Rock*, makes much the same point, but with a rather different implication.

Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word. . . .
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

The first line quoted involves a serious pun. "Endless" invention and experiment means, of course, unceasing invention and experiment, but "endless" also means "without purpose, goal, or end,"—experiment conducted for its own sake, invention carried out merely to be inventive. In Eliot's verse the two diverse meanings actually support and emphasize each other. In this way, poetry is often packed more richly with meaning than is prose.

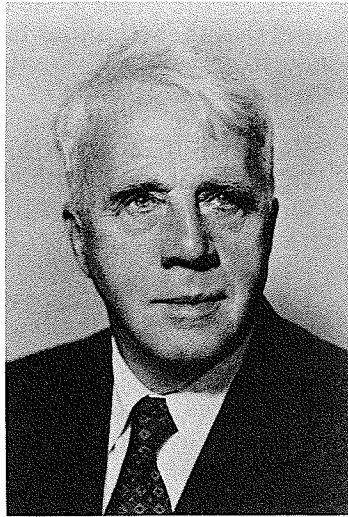
Yet it is important that we understand how wisdom is mediated to us through literature. It had better not be presented didactically. In my boyhood days, as I recall, our scornful retort to an exorbitant demand was "You must want salvation in a jug." Salvation does not come in a jug, nor is wisdom a bottled essence. Of all people, the literary artist must not seem to be running an old-fashioned medicine show, entertaining us in order to persuade us to buy a product. John Keats, that remarkable poet and very wise young man, put it well: "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us."

In an all-too-well-known poem, "A Psalm of Life," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow tells his reader that

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
"Dust thou art, to dust returnest,"
Was not spoken of the soul.

Such moralistic doggerel is not poetry, and it obviously does have a palpable design on us. Whatever the merit of that palpable design, the verse is tired, limp, and insipid. Jefferson was wise in these matters. He once remarked that "a lively and lasting sense of filial duty is more effectually impressed on the mind of a son or daughter by reading [Shakespeare's] *King Lear* than by all the dry volumes of ethics."

In a poem entitled "Provide, Provide," Robert Frost has



Robert Frost

used a cunning device to remove any taint of the didactic. On the surface the poem seems to be giving his reader the same counsel that the villainous Iago gave to his dupe, Roderigo: "Put money in thy purse." Wealth will solve all problems. Frost's poem begins:

The witch that came (the withered hag)
To wash the steps with pail and rag,
Was once the beauty Abishag,

The picture pride of Hollywood.
Too many fall from great and good
For you to doubt the likelihood.

A former movie idol has squandered or perhaps been bilked of her fortune and now ekes out her existence as a scrub woman. Such things do happen to screen beauties, former heavyweight boxing champions, and even rock stars. But why does Frost name this woman Abishag? With a certain grim humor, Frost went to the Bible for his movie star's name. When King David grew old and ill and, even when covered with bedclothes, could not get warm, his servants and courtiers scoured the whole land to find a beautiful maiden to put into the royal bed to warm the poor old fellow up. The beauty's name was Abishag. But King David still "gat no heat" and was soon gathered to his fathers.

The poem continues with Frost's advice to the reader on how to avoid this modern Abishag's fate. But we had better take the whole poem into account for a proper understanding of just how seriously Frost is speaking when he says to his reader:

Die early and avoid the fate.
Or if predestined to die late,
Make up your mind to die in state.

Make the whole stock exchange your own!
If need be occupy a throne,
Where nobody can call *you* crone.

Some have relied on what they knew;
Others on being simply true.
What worked for them might work for you.

No memory of having starred
Atones for later disregard,
Or keeps the end from being hard.

Better to go down dignified
 With boughten friendship at your side
 Than none at all. Provide, provide!

"Go down dignified," "boughten friendship"—these very phrases are instinct with Yankee folk wisdom. Boughten friendship—store-bought friendship we would say in the South—is cold comfort indeed on one's death bed. Not much warmth in that; still, it's better than nothing at all.

In spite of this outward show of worldly wisdom, the poet has hinted of other ways out. He reminds us that some have relied on "what they knew" and other on "being simply true"—on knowledge and integrity. Yet why does he throw into his poem this allusion to the philosophers and the saints only as a kind of afterthought—almost like a man saying: Oh, by the way, I'll just mention this for the sake of the record, though I assume you wouldn't be interested? He does so because the cunning old artist knows that no emphasis often constitutes the most powerful emphasis of all.

Poems that nourish the human spirit can be dry and witty like this one rather than exalted and sonorous like the poems of Aeschylus and Milton. The house of poetry has many mansions.

William Butler Yeats's "Prayer for My Daughter," a very different kind of poem, also contains wisdom, and even a strain of prophecy. But true to its title, it is content to be a troubled father's prayer for his child. Because of its prophetic character, it may be interesting to put it beside John Maynard Keynes's celebrated book, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. Keynes's treatise and Yeats's poem were, by the way, both published in 1919, the year after the end of the War to End All Wars.

Keynes foretold the disastrous consequences of the Treaty of Versailles, predicting what would happen under the peace terms to the economy of defeated Germany and the consequent ruin of the rest of Europe.

Yeats's focus is on the future of his infant daughter, and he envisages the troubled years through which she must live. Yeats could not and did not specify the terrible happenings ahead, but he correctly sensed the dangers, and now in 1985, it is easy for us to name them: the Great Depression, the rise of Hitler, the Second World War, the Cold War, and the threat of nuclear destruction.

The poem tells of a stormy night in the west of Ireland. The wind is howling in off the Atlantic, past the medieval tower in which the poet was then living. As he paces beside the cradle that holds his sleeping child, he tells us:

I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour
 And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower,
 And under the arches of the bridge, and scream
 In the elms above the flooded stream;
 Imagining in excited reverie
 That the future years had come,
 Dancing to a frenzied drum,
 Out of the murderous innocence of the sea.

In this context, we are likely to associate *innocence* with the infant daughter, but the poet speaks of the "murderous innocence" of the sea. The phrase may be startling, but it is accurate. When we have in mind the destructiveness of a hurricane or a great earthquake, "murderous" seems a proper adjective, yet we know that there is no murder in the heart of nature—no motivation at all, mere senseless indifference. Indeed, the Good Book itself tells us that the rain falls upon both the just and the unjust, and so apparently do the showers of volcanic ash. We have to acquit all of them of guilt. They are innocent by virtue of their sheer mindlessness.

Yet we have not done with the word *innocence*: Late in the poem Yeats will set forth a third kind of innocence, the innocence that is not at all mindless, but the product of love and self-discipline.

What are the gifts that the poet prays his daughter may receive? Beauty, yes, but not so much as to make her vain and haughty. He wishes for her a "glad kindness" and courtesy. These hoped-for endowments are summed up in one concrete image:

May she become a flourishing hidden tree
 That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,
 And have no business but dispensing round
 Their magnanimities of sound,
 Nor but in merriment begin a chase,
 Nor but in merriment a quarrel.
 O may she live like some green laurel
 Rooted in one dear perpetual place.

So, as a counter to the destructive wind, the poet proposes the laurel, hidden and sheltered from the blast and firmly rooted in its own "perpetual place."

Yet likening his daughter's thoughts to the songs of the linnet perched in the tree, especially when coupled with the father's petition that she may "think opinions are accursed," is

probably calculated to affront every woman. Does Yeats want the girl to grow up to be a pretty little charmer without a thought in her head—to possess no opinion of her own?

By no means. Yeats knew his Plato well, and he is here following Plato's distinction between an opinion and an idea. An opinion can claim at best to represent no more than a probability. Absolute truth is to be found only in the divine ideas implanted in the soul, to be recovered by the deepest self-discovery. The later stanzas confirm that such is his meaning, for the poet will declare that the worst of evils is the "intellectual hatred" characteristic of an aggressive, opinionated mind, and that if the soul can rid itself of all hatred, it "recovers radical innocence" and finds

... that it is self-delighting,
Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,
And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will;
She can, though every face should scowl
And every windy quarter howl
Or every bellows burst, be happy still.

Here the earlier figure of the laurel tree, "rooted in one dear perpetual place," is still very much alive in the poem. Consider the phrase "a radical innocence," for *radical* comes from the Latin *radix*, a root, and a radical innocence is not merely a basic or essential innocence, but one that is rooted deep in the soul.

Why the poet's reference, however, to "bellows" in the last line of the stanza? "Or every bellows burst, be happy still"? Because the poet wants here to give the scourging wind a human reference. The aggressive, opinionated person imitates the destructive wind by pumping his own malice out of a mind full of hate.

Earlier in the poem, the poet had remarked that he had himself seen the "loveliest woman born / Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn"—that is, out of



William Butler Yeats

the very cornucopia of richness—a woman dowered with all the gifts that nature could give her, “because of her opinionated mind” exchange them “for an old bellows full of angry wind!” This is a bitter lament for what Yeats believed had happened to Maud Gonne, the woman he had loved so passionately earlier in his life.

In the concluding stanza of the poem, Yeats turns his thoughts to the kind of bridegroom he could wish for his daughter. He prays that whoever he may be, he will

... bring her to a house
Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;
For arrogance and hatred are the wares
Peddled in the thoroughfares.
How but in custom and in ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?
Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,
And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

We miss the point and vulgarize this noble poem if we read the last stanza as a prayer for a wealthy son-in-law. The authoritative words are “accustomed” and “ceremonious.” These qualities have nothing to do with conspicuous display, or even the possession, of wealth. A word to which I would call your attention once more is *innocence*. Beauty and innocence, which we usually assume are the random gifts of nature, are in fact, so the poet insists here, born out of ceremony. Ceremony is the true horn of plenty, and the laurel tree, which can withstand the storms of history, is custom. This indeed is to invert our usual notions. For bodily beauty—Yeats again is borrowing from Plato—is the outward reflection of a beautiful soul. Innocence here is the fruit of the disciplined soul that has come truly to understand itself. Such a person is incapable of harming anyone. So the term *innocence* is here neither the babe's lack of experience nor the blind indifference of nature, but the soul's clear-eyed mastery of experience and of itself. Perhaps this is the kind of wise innocence to which great literature may return us if we can learn how to read it.

In this magnificent poem every word plays its proper part, and every image breathes life into an idea. For the poem is also a powerful humanistic document: not the bare skeleton of an abstract argument, but that argument fleshed out into an entity that possesses a life of its own.

Yeats's prayer for his daughter may not be at all your prayer. You are not asked to accept it as the truth, the whole

truth, and nothing but the truth. But who of us could not find mind and imagination stimulated by it? The poem is not didactic in any schoolmasterish sense. Perhaps this is just the value of poetry and of literature in general: It lets us observe and overhear men and women as they choose, make decisions, or express their inmost hopes and fears. That in itself is a service of the utmost importance, for we can learn from the experience of others.

Such is the service rendered by great literature throughout history. It provides dramatic accounts of men and women in conflict with nature and with other human beings, and often with themselves. This last conflict William Faulkner regarded as the greatest theme possible—the “human heart in conflict with itself.” But though the phrasing is Faulkner’s, the theme itself is found as early as in Homer’s epics.

The conflict within the heart—the tug between two loyalties, two evils, or what appear to be two equally precious goods—is probably the most instructive of all. Sophocles’ *Antigone* and his *Oedipus*, Shakespeare’s *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Mark Antony*, are only a few of an illustrious company. They are not properly called role models, for they represent failure as well as triumph, and for most of us any direct imitations of them would be out of the question. But an acquaintance with them through literature provides something far better than simple imitation. The way they live and choose to die tests the human spirit to its limits. Through the magic of language, their creators can pass on something of their experience to us.
