

LITERATURE AND EXAMINATIONS

It happens on the average once every three or four months. The postman drops into my letter-box an envelope addressed in an unfamiliar writing and postmarked anywhere from Oslo to Algiers. Opening it, I find a letter, sometimes in strange English, sometimes in one of the foreign languages with which an ordinarily cultured person is supposed to be familiar. The writer begins by an apology. He (or as often she) is sorry to trouble me, but the fact is that he or she is a student at the university of X or Y or Z, and that, in order to obtain his or her Doctorate of Letters, Diploma of Pedagogy, Bachelorship of Modern Languages, Aggregation to the University, or whatever the thing may happen to be called, he or she is writing a thesis about my books—or more often about some particular aspect of my books, such as their style, their construction, the influence upon them of other books, the idea of God in them, their Weltanschauung or Geschlechtsphilosophie.

This being so, will I kindly furnish biographical material, a bibliography of all the reviews and criticisms written in every language, together with copies of such books as the writer happens to have been unable to obtain. In many cases the letter ends with an appeal to my better feelings: will I please do everything that is asked of me, because, if I don't, the writer will be unable to obtain the coveted post at the local University, Lycée, Gymnasium, Preparatoria, or what not, and will have to be content with a job as a teacher in an elementary school.

My feelings when one of these letters arrives are extremely mixed. That I should be treated as though I were a classical author of some earlier century, simultaneously amuses and depresses me, tickles my self-esteem and at the same time punctures it. I like very naturally to think that I am being read; but the idea that I am being studied fills me, after the first outburst of laughter, with a deepening gloom. There is something extremely disagreeable about being treated as though one were dead when one supposes—perhaps (and this is the really disquieting thought) mistakenly—that one is still very much alive. Nor is the anticipation of posthumous Fame any compensating satisfaction. For to be sufficiently famous to deserve elaborate study in a modern university is quite humiliatingly easy.

Merely to have published is now a sufficient claim to academic attention. As time passes and the numbers of aspirants to diplomas and doctorates continues to pile up, it becomes increasingly difficult to find any significant aspect of a good writer's work which has not already formed the subject of a thesis. The candidate for academic honours has no choice but to study the insignificant aspects of a good writer's work or else the work, not yet explored, because universally deemed not worth exploring, of a bad writer. Universities do me the honour of treating me as though I were defunct and a classic; but it is an honour, alas, that I share with Flecknoe and Pixéricourt, with Hofmann von Hofmannswaldau and Nahum Tate.

Walter Raleigh used to say that the teaching of literature always verged on the absurd. He understated the case. The teaching of literature often oversteps the verge and tumbles headlong into the most grotesque absurdity. It is absurd, for example, that students should be forced to spend months and years of their lives on the study of writers who are, by universal consent, of no importance whatsoever. It is equally absurd that they should spend months and years on the study of unimportant aspects of the work of good writers. Very many of the scores of theses produced each year in the various universities of the world are totally pointless.

But the teaching of literature produces other absurdities no less monstrous than the learned thesis about a trivial theme. Comparatively few students aspire to specialized learning. For every doctor there are hundreds of bachelors. These

obtain their degrees by retailing at second hand a little of the learning and a good deal of the literary criticism of others. Fashions in criticism change, and the candidate must be able to regurgitate the judgment in vogue in academic circles at the time of his ordeal. Success in literary examinations comes to those who know, among other things, what formulae happen, momentarily, to be correct.

What applies to literature applies also to the fine arts. For there are now academic institutions which actually give people degrees in art—minor degrees for those who know a list of dates and can repeat the proper ritual mantras about pictures and churches and statues; higher degrees to those who undertake profound original researches into the work of the deservedly neglected artists of the past.

The ultimate cause for this on the whole deplorable state of things is economic. Degrees have a definite cash value. The possession of a given diploma may make all the difference (as my correspondents so often point out in their appeals to my better feelings) between low wages and a low social position in an elementary school and good wages, with considerable social prestige, in the hierarchy of secondary education. Literature and fine arts figure in most curricula at the present time; men and women aspire to teach these subjects; headmasters and education authorities want to be able to distinguish between those who are 'qualified' to teach them and those who are not; universities oblige by creating faculties of literature and fine arts, complete with all the apparatus of diplomas, degrees and doctorates.

Now it is obviously necessary that, for examination purposes, literature and the fine arts should convert themselves, at any rate partially, into parodies of the exact sciences. Literature and art appeal as much to the affective and conative as to the merely cognitive side of man's being. But if you are going to give people marks for literature and art, you must ask them questions that can be answered correctly or incorrectly, you must set them tasks which can be performed only by dint of persevering industriousness. Candidates for the lower degrees will be required, like candidates for the lower degrees in chemistry, say, or biology, to read text-books and do 'practical' work. (In the case of literature, this practical work consists, like the theoretical work, in reading. But whereas theoretical reading is a reading of text-books, practical reading is a reading of the original texts.) Candidates for the higher degrees are expected, like the prospective doctor of science, to do a piece of original research and record their discoveries in a thesis. Even the laboratory methods of exact science are parodied. Literature does not lend itself to being weighed or measured; but at least its material embodiments can be minutely observed and accurately reproduced. The editing of texts has become a branch of microscopy.

It is quite true, of course, that literature and the fine arts have non-literary and non-artistic aspects. They provide important documents in the fields, for example, of social and economic history, of psychology, of philology and the philosophy of language. Moreover, writers and artists employ techniques of expression which profitably lend themselves to scientific analysis. Thus, the *alchimie du verbe*, as Rimbaud called it, can be made to yield some at least of its strange secrets; the geometry and optics of picture-making are worthy of the most serious study. In so far as they are not literature and not art, literature and art can be subjected most fruitfully to the methods of science. And, in effect, much excellent work in history, psychology and so forth has been done by the writers of supposedly literary and artistic theses.

All would be well if universities would insist that such work is frankly historical, psychological and the rest, and that it has little or nothing to do with literature as literature, or with art as art. But unfortunately this necessary distinction is not drawn. Under the present dispensation, absurd pseudo-scientific research—into the date, shall we say, of John Chalkhill's second marriage, into the indebtedness of Shadwell to Molière—is as freely encouraged as genuinely scientific research carried out for the purpose of establishing significant relations between one set of facts and another.

Moreover, the scientifically treatable, non-literary and non-artistic aspects of literature and art are kept hopelessly mixed up with their purely literary and artistic aspects. Candidates are given marks for displaying symptoms, not merely of knowledge, but also of sensibility and judgment—other people's sensibility, in general practice, and other people's judgment. Perfectly good scientific work has to be accompanied by the repetition of the mantras of fashionable criticism. The aesthetic heart must be worn, all through the weary hours of the final examination, palpitating on the sleeve. Every candidate for the bachelorship or doctorate is expected to overflow with the pious phrases of 'appreciation.' The present examination system is calculated to produce the literary and artistic equivalents of Tartufe and Pecksniff.

That men should hypocritically pay the tribute that philistinism owes to culture is greatly to be desired. The tendency to be realistic and hard-boiled is as dangerous in the sphere of culture as in that of politics. You cannot appeal to the humanitarianism of a fascist who starts out with the realistic assumption that because, in fact, might generally prevails, might is therefore right and should never make any concessions at all. Similarly you cannot appeal to the cultural piety of a low-brow who thinks that, because most human beings are like himself, low-browism is therefore right and ought to triumph over high-browism. Without moral hypocrisy and intellectual snobbery, the decencies of life would lead a most precarious existence.

Intellectual snobbery, I insist, is an excellent thing; but, as of all excellent things, there may be too much of it. An examination system that encourages the candidate for a degree to adorn his non-literary and non-artistic knowledge of literature and art with a veneer of 'appreciative' cant is calculated to produce an excessive number of cultural Pecksniffs, each convinced, on the strength of his diploma, that he is always right. Under a more rational system of education, degrees in literature and art would not be given. Literary and artistic documents would, however, be used as the material of scientific researches in other fields. Feats of mere industry for industry's sake, such as the compilation of theses about writers valueless from a literary point of view and of no particular historical, psychological, economic or other interest, would be discouraged.

The application of exact scientific methods to the typography of old books could safely be left to the voluntary enthusiasm of Nature's philatelists and crossword puzzlers. Meanwhile, of course, efforts would be made to encourage students to read and to look at works of art. Groups would be organized for the reading of papers and the discussion of literary and artistic problems. There would also be exercises in the art of writing clearly and correctly. In this way the natural sensibilities of the students might be developed, and the tendency, so much encouraged by the examination system, to mug up other people's judgments and repeat them, mechanically and without reflection, severely discouraged. At the same time students would be able to feel that their scientific work—the study of the significant non-literary and non-artistic aspects of literary and artistic documents—was genuinely valuable and enlightening, not the mere parody of scientific work that, too often, they are expected to do at present.

As things stand at present, it would be very difficult to make the kind of changes I have indicated above, for the simple reason that there are very many people who, for economic reasons, want degrees in literature and the fine arts. The employers of academic labour regard such degrees as qualifications for comparatively well-paid posts. It will be impossible to change the existing examination system until they have been educated to think differently.

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