Literature as a Necessity of Life

By ALFRED KAZIN

EVERY now and then I meet people — they tend to be physicists, psychiatrists, theologians — who are well read in English and European literature, well read in a thoroughly cultivated, old-fashioned way, who have managed this steadily from childhood while perfecting special knowledge of a wholly different field. These people don’t know what it means to major in another field. These people don’t know what it means to major in another field.

Universities, too, used to be this old-fashioned. Until well into the 19th century, there was no special chair for English literature at Oxford or Cambridge. Literature was classical literature, the great tradition of Greece and Rome which was supposed to have descended from the great tragedians, poets, moralists, rhetoricians and sages.

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right down to the latest British Prime Minister — Gladstone still translated Homer and could still put down a critic in Parliament with a quotation from Horace. There was a tradition — classical, Christian, humanist, aristocratic — that embodied the humanities of Christian Europe as against those outsiders from Asia whom the Greeks had called barbarians.

This tradition was founded on the metaphysics of Plato, on the truth of Christian revelation, on the Renaissance code of the gentleman, on theology as the queen of the sciences. In the days when science was still called natural philosophy, the proper study of man was man, which meant moral philosophy — questions of value that depended on the right interpretation, in some immediate human context, of the great tradition. Because there was a great tradition, literature in the universities meant the preservation and transmission of classical literature — and this included classical politics, history, philosophy and ethics as well as tragedy, epic and lyric.

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There was no need for courses in Shakespeare when Shakespeare, whose religious views were ambiguous anyway, could be read for oneself, seen in the playhouse, enjoyed in private precisely because he was so much more robust and bawdy than Cicero. Like the contemporary physicist or psychiatrist who reads great novels for pleasure, 19th-century statesmen, bishops, scientists, and political revolutionaries found the great books simply necessary. Maxim Gorky says that in 1919, amid the frightful cold and hunger of war Communism, he found Lenin in the Kremlin reading “War and Peace.” One remembers the devotion of Marx to Balzac, of Freud to Dostoevsky, as one remembers John Quincy Adams translating German Romantic poems, Lincoln shockingly quoting from “Macbeth” when he had a vision of his end. Even General de Gaulle, whose family sponsors a Victorianism of official taste that is one of the many reversals that the French have had to bear, wittily quoted Villon when one of his ministers spoke of censoring Sartre.

There are still people, there used to be many more such people, to whom literature is familiar and necessary, a personal tradition in the van of a still greater tradition. To these people, literature, among other virtues, embodies the great past; it is the storybook of human experience; through its past move forever, as in the other-world of Dante, the great heroes, thinkers, sages, saints and villains.

Recall how absurd the teaching of one’s own literature once seemed to the best literary scholars, to cultivated people generally. Compare that confidence with the extraordinary effort and concern that we now put into the teaching of modern literature, American literature, contemporary literature, freshman composition, public speaking, remedial reading, elementary grammar. Put into the picture, too, the extraordinary number of people, extremely intelligent, highly competent, perfectly civil and humane, to whom great literature means absolutely nothing, who manage to get along without Shakespeare and Tolstoy. When Napoleon asked Pierre Laplace how God figured in his theory of the universe, the great astronomer replied that he had no need of that hypothesis. There are now many intelligent people, active in the professions and sciences, who have no need of imaginative literature.

Not for them the raptures of Lenin.
Before "War and Peace," the emotion Lincoln displayed at a single speech from "Macbeth," the shocker of the word was that Goethe thought man's greatest experience and that Robert Oppenheimer felt one morning in 1944, in the New Mexican desert, when he saw the first atom bomb explode. So far as the world's rulers, everywhere, are concerned, Shakespeare was Bacon and Bacon Shakespeare.

There was a time in the early 1920s when young Communists in Russia gave up smoking so that Tolstoy could be printed on cigarette paper, but when Andrey Sinyavsky and Yuri Daniel were sentenced to hard labor for the crime of sending their honest stories and essays where they could be published, most Russians, it is safe to say, were as unconcerned as most Americans are concerned when the poet Robert Lowell declines an invitation to read at the White House as his way of testing our part in Vietnam.

Literature, which used to be the queen of the arts, is, so far as many people now are concerned, simply the field where the world's ambition and experience, and above all its future, felt to lie.

Yet, to use the word, it was, at any rate, the only experience through which the writer, the reader, the thinker, the analyst, the artist, could be prepared for the future, and the thought of the writer being unable to prepare his reader for the future was a thought that filled his soul with the hope that his art was not only a mirror but also a sword.

Many a German professor who was moved by the perfection of a Rilke sonnet had no feeling for the many so-called inferior beings whom his countrymen slaughtered in their racial pride. It is my experience of people skilled in literature, either as writers or scholars, that professional concern with literature is by no means a guarantee of unusual intelligence or moral imagination; literature for them is professional, a skill as technical and self-sufficient as any other, especially for those who possess this skill.

Yet no matter how much one insists on the autonomy of literature, one knows that this is only a half-truth, the truth about literature seen from the side of the creator or the specialist, not from the broad response to literature made by human experience through the ages. For when we ask why there have always been scientists to whom literature is of the highest importance, why Darwin found his consolation in good novels, why so many of the world's greatest thinkers have felt, as Freud did about Dostoevsky, that before literary genius analysis lays down its arms, we recognize that, until our day, great literature never had to make any claim for itself.

To all educated people, which meant people with a sense of history, literature was the word, the sacred word of all great tradition — religious, philosophic, moral and scientific. Great literature was mimesis and poesis — it was the image of life, the image of human action and, as Coleridge said, of the soul in activity. It was the making of a thing of beauty, evident and sufficient unto itself, that afforded man, in his fullest esthetic capacity, a sense of ultimate elevation, of the highest truth captured in the greatest possible enjoyment. Matthew Arnold, on his journeys as a school inspector, would read over to himself in his pocket diary, as from a brevity, the famous quotations he had collected from Homer and Sophocles and Dante — perfectly sure that we needs must know the best that has been thought and said in the world.

Arnold was just as aware as we are today that science was progressing by leaps and bounds, where literature, it may be said, has no need to progress, for it is concerned with the permanent elements in human nature, with what Faulkner in Stockholm was to call "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself . . . the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed — love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice . . . ." But Arnold still believed that Europe represented a great humanist tradition, that even when supernaturalism succumbed to skepticism, the memory of Europe's tradition, embodied in its greatest works of literature, would serve as a consolation, a mediator of the many single facts being discovered by science. The thoughtful individual would always possess literature as his key to the great tradition. Arnold called his quotations touchstones.

The great tradition no longer exists. It is because the greatest experience of all contemporaries, more than the anguished cries for social justice of the oppressed, is some sense of absurdity involved in the almost complete de-sacralizing of all intellectual activity, that our students now turn so eagerly to humanities and great books courses, to those 19th-century novels that people used to read for themselves. It is because literature is not part of their tradition, had not entered into their lives before they came to college, that our students have to
said what literature is and why literature is great.

is because the question of ques-
tion—what is our destiny, how
shall think of our own death—
ever been more open than it is
now that our students encounter
astonishment, with rapture, un-
conscious gratitude, and who
is with how much unconscious
grit, the dialectic of Plato,
nobility certain of Moses and
, the vision of Dante, the Heav-
and Hell of Milton, the torrents
rage in Shakespeare, the pen-
ion of Pascal, the irony of Jan
ken, the revolutionary passion of
re. Intellectually and spiritually,
students do not know that the
is has been invented, and try to
it themselves. That is how de-
has been invented, and try to
students do not know that the
en, the revolutionary passion of
thoven at the end of the 18th
century, that seedtime of revolu-
tion, one looks to the works of
the thirty million dead of the
Second World War, the savage
destroyed in man's minds by
the horrors of 1914-18.

But the particular mark of the
greatest modern literature is that it
sees man as unaided—a stranger
and afraid," said A. E. Housman
"in a world I never made"—face
to face with what Conrad in "Heart
of Darkness" called "the horror," and
in "Lord Jim," the "destructive
element." The great thing about
modern literature—one sees its
beginnings at the end of the 18th
century, that seedtime of revolu-
tions—is the attempt to put man
himself, his real self, his creative
nature, squarely into his imagina-
tive picture (Continued on Page 30)

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of the world—to have him con-
front his destiny, unaided and
even defenseless as he is, and
so give his culture, which he
alone makes, the strength now
exerted by his fear of death.

People who are easily dis-
mayed by change, who do not
see man in a long enough per-
spective, often think of modern
and contemporary literature as
nihilistic. But there are always
fewer nihilists around than one
thinks, and in literature they
are especially rare; it requires
an original mind, like Nietz-
sche's, even to conceive of a
fundamental heresy in man's
spiritual orientation. The great
20th-century writers, like T. S.
Eliot, who naturally began their
careers by trying new forms,
now seem to us, as thinkers,
wholly traditional. But what no
one who knows Eliot's petr
y and criticism can miss is the ex-
traordinary effort that this man
put into re-establishing the lit-
terary tradition and the moral
insights of the church when the
unity of the continent and the
integration of the past had been
destroyed in man's minds by

So wild, so deep in us—to
know
Whence our lives come and
where they go.
And many a man in his own
breast then delves,
But deep enough, alas! none
ever mines.
And we have been on many
thousand lines,
And we have shown, on each
spirit and power;
But hardly have we, for one
little hour,
Been on our own line, have
we been ourselves—

In only literature can man
express the full paradox of his
condition, the urgency of his
private symbols—and above all
else, the directness, the unique-
ness, the concreteness of his
being man, this man, and no
any one else. As against the
many empty claims to know
edge that fill the air, the poet

can say, with E. E. Cummings—
when skies are hanged on
oceans drowned,
the single secret still will be
man.